Doing Time in College: Student–Prisoner Reading Groups and the Object(s) of Literary Study

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Abstract

Taking stock of ten years of a service learning project that brings together small groups of college students and prisoners in jailhouse classrooms to discuss literary representations of crime and punishment, this essay finds in project participants' reading journals some remarkable trends. Complex dynamics of authenticity and authority emerge in the groups’ weekly meetings, as participants negotiate their own and their groups’ identities and commitments with respect to each other and to the literary texts, in the absence of professors, corrections officers, or other guardians of discipline. These dynamics are investigated in light of participants’ discussions of a range of works, before looking in greater detail at responses to Sherman Alexie’s 1996 novel Indian Killer, which are found to complicate stable notions of pedagogical authority and the object(s) of literary study.

We filed into the classroom and set up the tables. The two minutes we waited for the inmates were the most anxious, apprehensive two minutes of the whole afternoon. Finally they walked in. The door slammed and six men entered. I was a little intimidated. Anthony came over, introduced himself, and sat down next to me, I could breathe again.

We went around the room and introduced ourselves. A couple of the inmates told us they had college degrees already. I couldn’t help but wonder why they were in jail. They said they were doing this programme because they liked to read and wanted something to pass the time. It made me think of how it seems like such a chore to do the reading for some of my classes, when to someone else it can be such a huge privilege to even have access to books.

– Student, 2002
I look at these members of the book club and wonder if I am a guinea pig in their classroom experiment. As we introduce ourselves my feelings change, I began to get a sense of why I joined this class, and what it is all about. It was about the book, my perception of it, though I still have all these feelings going on. I guess I can say envious feelings because they can walk out those doors at any time to freedom.

– Prisoner, 2006

Each spring semester for the past ten years I have arranged for groups of students at the college where I teach to meet with groups of prisoners from the local county jail, to discuss literature and its relation to their lives. Both groups enter into the experience warily, as these two excerpts from participants’ journals suggest, for the reasons described here and for many more, mostly derived from cultural and media stereotypes both of U.S. prisoners and college students. In addition to being wary of each other, participants are often wary of the books they gather to discuss – suspicious of the relevancy of literary texts to their experience and dubious of their own abilities to derive pleasure or meaning from them. This essay will trace the process by which participants in this decade-long project have frequently overcome those boundaries and preconceptions to develop significant connections to each other, the meetings, and sometimes the texts. In so doing they suggest a re-framing of the closing phrase in my title, as it is not only the texts that can be seen as objects of study (as the above-quoted prisoner’s ‘guinea pig’ comment reveals) and not only the prisoners who may feel objectified by the process of literary study (as the above-quoted student’s ‘such a chore’ comment suggests). Having described the genesis and basic structure of the reading group project and some of its theoretical preconceptions, I will turn to its outcomes in terms of participants’ shifting perspectives on the U.S. criminal justice system and the texts that represent it. Finally, I will address the project’s consequences for participants’ and my own notions of literary study by attending in greater detail to participants’ responses to one text, Sherman Alexie’s 1996 novel Indian Killer.

Doing Time in College: Institutional Contexts

I had been teaching an introductory literature class for non-English majors on crime and detective fiction for several years when in 2001
it became apparent to me that, although the assigned texts were more sophisticated than your average CSI episode in interrogating the social, cultural, and economic determinants of crime and its consequences, the structure of the course itself almost inevitably reproduced the broader cultural narrative, from the cop shows to the movies to the nightly news, according to which the slamming of the prison cell door is the solution to the problem and the resolution of the narrative. Given that then, as now, the U.S. was world leader in the use of incarceration as a tool of social control, with ever larger numbers of Americans locked up for ever smaller offenses, it seemed essential that my course challenge students directly to consider the consequences of a criminal justice system that is ideologically underwritten by such narratives. So I broadened the syllabus to include prison narratives and worked to develop a project through which small groups of students enrolled in the course could, in lieu of writing an essay, opt to attend weekly meetings in a classroom at Monroe Correctional Facility (MCF) with the same small group of prisoners, to whom we provided the books for the course through a grant from the college’s Center for Service Learning. The prisoner groups are gender segregated, like all programmes at MCF; the student groups are gender mixed, though predominately women, like the student population overall. I attend the first few minutes of the first meeting of each group, to help the students through security the first time, give an introduction to the project to the students and prisoners together, and answer questions, then I leave and they get to work. After that it is just the students and prisoners, in a room, with a book to discuss, until the last few minutes of the last meeting, when I return to present certificates to the prisoners who have completed the project and collect the journals, in which we ask all participants to record their impressions of the experience, which I photocopy and return.

Projects like this, in which students leave the college or university campus as part of the requirements for a credit-bearing course, to work in what are usually less-privileged settings than the college community, have become fashionable in American academia, under the banner of ‘Service Learning’. This is an unfortunate label for what is mostly a salutary trend, as the name implies a highly asymmetrical relation in which students learn by serving the less fortunate, rather than the reciprocal collaboration of individuals from different communities and backgrounds, with different needs and resources,
that has always marked the best of such projects. However, for all 
that I understood that principle of reciprocity as I launched the project 
at the jail, my notion of the distribution of resources was static and 
stereotype-driven: the students would bring academic experience and 
knowledge; the prisoners would bring lived experience of the criminal 
justice system. Such assumptions have been repeatedly upended, 
as students frequently encounter prisoners with college degrees, 
prisoners occasionally encounter students who have done time, 
and both groups almost universally find their group-mates from the 
other side of the razor wire to be more diverse in their backgrounds, 
interests, and abilities than they (and initially I) had expected. 

To be sure, the subset of prisoners who apply for the project 
and are approved by the Educational Coordinator at the jail are not 
representative of the overall prisoner population at MCF, which 
seems to reflect the broader educational demographics of American 
incarceration (nationally, nearly 50% of prisoners in local jails have 
no high school diploma). 
Ironically, however, the more formally 
educated prisoners at MCF may actually have greater need for 
outside programmes, since the only consistently provided educational 
programmes at the jail are federally mandated high school equivalency 
classes, a phenomenon also reflective of a national trend. 
In a further 
irony, the paucity of individual and programmatic opportunities for 
prisoner growth may be worse in the lower security setting of MCF 
than it would be in a state prison setting, where, as one MCF prisoner 
said to me, ‘at least they have a weight room and a decent library’. 
It is commonly said that the universal conditions of incarceration in 
the U.S. are violence, noise, and boredom. While violence may be 
less prevalent at MCF than in other settings, noise and boredom are 
almost certainly worse in a ‘mod’ (modular housing unit of one large 
room), with sixty prisoners locked in a space designed for thirty, often 
for twenty-three hours per day, with a single central television at 
bloaring volume for about twelve of those hours. On several occasions 
over the past ten years, MCF prisoners have told me that they asked 
to be locked into ‘the box’, the Segregated Housing Unit used for 
disciplinary infractions, in order to have enough quiet to read the text 
for one of our meetings. 

On campus, I present the project we offer at the jail as an 
educational opportunity for students and prisoners; however, it is 
often described in slightly different terms at MCF, both by facility 
staff and participants, as a ‘book club’. This suggests an interesting
dynamic, one with a long history in U.S. incarceration. As Megan Sweeney demonstrates, reading, primarily religious reading, was a foundational element of the early nineteenth-century shift to the penitentiary model of criminal rehabilitation, and even after prison libraries ceased to be exclusively religious in nature, the agenda of moral instruction and ‘bibliotherapy’ persisted well into the twentieth century – giving way, it should be noted, not to a broader and more secular understanding of rehabilitation but to a carceral philosophy focused only on the punishment and warehousing of ‘criminals’.

However, as Sweeney also suggests, incarcerated people have always used reading for other purposes, particularly aesthetic and political, including a tradition of unsanctioned radical education behind bars that she limns in U.S. history and that is equally evident in prison narratives across time and world cultures, especially during anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century. This fierce dynamic in prisons, between reading as a tool of reform and pacification and reading as a tool of radicalization and activism, seems far removed from the apparently genteel world of the ‘book club’. However, as Elizabeth Long shows, one can find quite similar tensions between, say, the ideologies of gentility and ‘improvement’ in nineteenth-century literary clubs and Shakespeare societies and those of class consciousness and mobilization in the mechanics’ institutes and other working-class self-education movements.

That same spectrum of ideologies obtains in the reading group project my students and I conduct at the jail. When the jail administrators who must approve the project each year discuss it, one hears praise for its offering opportunities for education and individual improvement and for its creation of incentives for good behaviour. While I certainly do not discount the value of at least the former set of goals, I am hopeful that the latter may be more... temporary – that in fact the project may be radicalizing for all participants in ways that might lead to ‘misbehaviour’ and resistance, not against the local jail itself but against the broader U.S. carceral logic of which the jail is a small manifestation. At a minimum, the project should lead students and prisoners to question together the social and economic conditions that produce their relative positions within the project and within the society at large. And, as suggested in both Sweeney’s work on reading practices among women prisoners (the majority of whom are poor people of colour) and Long’s work on reading practices in Houston book clubs (the majority of which serve middle-class white women),
much of that transformation in awareness happens as a result of the social reading practices that arise when the emphasis shifts from an academic ‘project’ to a ‘club’.

As Long argues, critical theories of reading have generally focused on a solitary, idealized reader, with the effect that groups of readers have ‘been rendered all but invisible to academic analysis’. Long builds on Janice Radway’s work on communities of romance readers, as does Henry Jenkins in his analysis of TV fan communities’ reading strategies, and ultimately all three critics are responding to Michel de Certeau’s characterisation of reading practices in opposition to the stifling dictates of official culture. De Certeau argues that if the reader’s expression of his freedom through the text is tolerated among intellectuals..., it is on the other hand denied students (who are scornfully driven or cleverly coaxed back to the meaning ‘accepted’ by their teachers) or the public (who are carefully told ‘what is to be thought’ and whose inventions are considered negligible and quickly silenced).

However, the process of unofficial meaning-making that de Certeau famously describes as ‘poaching’ is in evidence in all the subcultures these critics investigate, and it is understandably still more evident in the prison reading groups described by Sweeney and by Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey for the English context. While of course these are highly diverse groups with varied individual and collective practices, in every instance these unauthorised readers violate the academic/high cultural proscription against the affective and the personal as categories for meaning-making. In the carceral context this process of taking the books to heart, of what Sweeney calls ‘develop[ing] relationships at the level of the imagination’, might seem to fit comfortably within the biliotherapy model; however, as Hartley and Turvey suggest, reading groups shift the context, creating ‘a way to combine this exploration of the private self with the outward-facing, social elements of identity’. Similarly, Long argues that in reading groups ‘people can use books and each others’ responses to books to promote insight and empathy in an integrative process of collective self-reflection’. As Long shows, reading groups thus create spaces of freedom, and of intellectual and aesthetic play, for participants. This is confirmed by the experience of the students and prisoners meeting at MCF, with the added factor that, unlike all the reading groups described in these studies, their ‘collective’ bridges gulfs of race and class privilege, of educational and other social markers of
success, of even the most fundamental social categories of ‘good’ (law-abiding, productive, upwardly mobile) and ‘bad’ (criminal, unproductive, gone wrong).

‘[A] whole other world than what I live in’: Identity, Difference, and Community

Typically, the reading list for the groups at MCF, which is preset to align with the material the students are reading for the class on campus, begins with Sherlock Holmes, which I use in the course to illustrate the conventions of ‘golden age’ detective fiction, especially the super-efficient hero, evil villains, and tight narrative closure. As the two journal entries already quoted suggest, this first meeting is anxious for both groups, and the themes evident in those entries appear consistently: relief on the part of the students that the prisoners are not as ‘bad’ as they expected and on the part of the prisoners that the students are not there to study them, that the meeting ‘was about the book’ and the participants’ ‘perception of it’. Another frequent response from students is surprise at the preparation and insight of the prisoners: ‘several of the inmates had read all six stories in the book’, writes one student, ‘it never occurred to me to read more than the two you assigned’. Another common theme in student journals is a new attitude toward the assigned reading for the class, as this writer suggests:

Well I must say that my new motive for this class is no longer my personal interest (or the grade), and it is now the inmates. I am going to read and write thoughtfully with lots of insight so I have ideas to share with them, so I don’t let them down.

After Sherlock Holmes, the reading list then shifts to the American hard-boiled tradition, usually first with Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* and then with Chester Himes’ novel *The Real Cool Killers*. Himes, an African American former prisoner rewriting the hard-boiled narrative to present an indictment of racism in 1950s America in general, and in the processes of crime and policing in particular, is a crucial figure in the reading list, and these group discussions are often among the most intense of the project. A typical student account emphasises the ways in which this text often leads to
open questioning of police tactics, as well as the complex negotiation of individual and collective identity described above:

A couple MCF students shared with us that they have also been beaten by cops and also that many of them have never heard Miranda rights read to them, they have only heard that on TV and in movies. This sounds so crazy to me and so unjust and it is hard to believe that maybe some of the stuff in *The Real Cool Killers* does really continue today. It seems like these guys are from a whole other world than what I live in. But at the same time [a prisoner] shared that he is from Penfield which is also where I grew up. He graduated from the same high school as me two years before me. How could his life be so different than mine? It is so crazy and makes me wonder what he is in for.

In a similar vein, from a prisoner’s perspective, we see an account of a different group’s discussion of the novel that also emphasises its relation to the world he comes from and the group’s evolving collectivity:

We had a good discussion on how the system is today, compared to the time of when *Real Cool Killers* took place. It was interesting to find out that people really don’t think things like what happened in the book still happen. We (the other inmates) told them stories about how corrupt the deps [i.e., deputies] can be sometimes and even more we shared our personal stories and things that we have witnessed while being here in jail. Don’t get me wrong, there are good deps too; there are ones who would break their backs for you and there are those who would rather break your back. I am very grateful to have this programme, but more importantly I am glad to have good conversations with good, honest people who are not afraid to come to my ‘house’ to talk.

Of course, the downside to using texts like Himes’ novel in a reading group setting, in which participants are likely to relate characters and events to their own experiences, is that even as prisoners may have more and better context for that discussion, they may purchase that authority at the price of further objectification. This prisoner’s nuanced response to the problem clearly illustrates this danger:

We talked about the book and how we could relate. Surprisingly it was quite realistic. A lot of the girls started talking about their experiences on the streets or in prison. How they could relate to the book or just how street life is in general. I have my own stories and could relate yet found myself embarrassed of them. It was like I could read the faces of these college girls and they just listened on with shock. I know we all
have our own stories. Everyone (including young college girls) have their skeletons in the closet. But today I was ashamed of mine.

Given that prisoners on average are likely to have more and more negative experience of both life in the urban milieu that feeds the criminal justice system and the system itself, one might wonder after reading a journal entry like the one above, why use literary texts for the project that focus on crime and punishment? Does this thematic emphasis not lead prisoners, who are already more likely than students to feel alienated by formal education, to feel even more objectified?

First of all, it is important to note that it is not only the prisoners who often arrive with histories of alienation by scholastic literary study but also the college students, particularly those in general education classes like mine. In the U.S., English classes from elementary school on focus primarily on preparation for standardised testing; ‘Literature’ emerges simply as a system more opaque than most, a tougher code to crack in the quest for test scores that will enable students to advance through the educational system. By beginning with a narrative form, the detective story, with which both groups of readers are highly familiar and many enjoy, if not in textual form then at least on TV, I can lower the barrier of access to literary study and then lead project participants through works that challenge both the formal and thematic conventions of the genre, that ask increasingly complex questions about the socio-economic determinants of crime and the justice system. And paradoxically, because of the popularity of contemporary crime and detective fiction in jails and prisons, the prisoners often begin the project with greater familiarity with the genre and are more likely than the students to draw comparisons between Sherlock Holmes and inheritors like Alex Cross or Kay Scarpetta. The reading list seeks to make visible the conservative, law-and-order politics of most contemporary crime and detective fiction, in part by introducing texts that resist the oversimplifications of such works, like Denise Mina’s feminist crime novels, which insistently complicate the basic categories of detective, criminal, and victim, or Sherman Alexie’s Indian Killer, to be discussed in more detail below.

Another factor complicating the dynamics of authenticity and authority in the groups’ discussions of The Real Cool Killers is that Himes’ novels, in addition to being responses to the hard-boiled detective tradition, are important predecessors for another genre with which prisoners are frequently familiar, urban fiction (also called gangsta lit, street lit, or ghetto fiction). Sweeney has, with laudable
nuance, traced prisoners’ ‘writerly reading practices’ in response to urban fiction, as a complex dynamic of identification, ‘intuiting connections between their own and the characters’ behaviours and attitudes’, and ‘disidentification’, a phrase she borrows from José Esteban Muñoz, who defines it as ‘tactically and simultaneously work[ing] on, with, and against a cultural form’. That active process of ‘work on, with, and against’ Himes’ text is fully apparent in the two prisoners’ responses to The Real Cool Killers quoted above, and it also emerges frequently in prisoners’ responses to the end of the novel, a sudden and implausible twist in which a falsely accused shoeshine boy steps forward and proposes to the pregnant girlfriend of the now-dead gang leader. I present this in class as further evidence of Himes’ absurdist method, frequently prisoners read it differently, as one student reports: ‘The inmates thought the ending was optimistic, realistic, believable, and even hopeful’. Similarly, a prisoner from another group writes with touching sincerity, ‘It was nice to hear Sonny wanting to get married and father Sheik’s child… I hope all works out for them’.

The process of ‘disidentification’ is evident in the following response, in which a prisoner moves from the novel to its generic connections to Triple Crown publications (the primary publisher of urban fiction) to her own identification and differentiation from the Harlem underworld Himes represents:

I looked at everything about the book the author the title other books by different authors in the back. I noticed the publisher Vintage Crimes, I compared the publisher to Triple Crown. Oh! Don’t get me wrong. I somewhat enjoyed the books, but doing this little time my mind has yet to rest. Rest from the novels about crime in the five boroughs [of New York City]. All blacks are not drug dealers, prostitutes, killers, etc.

In this prisoner’s response, as in many others, one feels the implicit dialogue with the student group members – or perhaps explicit dialogue, since participants know that they will be sharing selections from their journals as part of the group meetings, and that all participants will be encouraged to allow me to make an anonymous copy of their journals at the end of the project. This particular prisoner’s journal makes that dialogue very explicit as it ends, after more than 100 pages of responses to the reading group and to life in jail more generally, with a thank-you note written while riding the public bus back to the jail from the women’s shelter where she was
living after her release, so that she could give a copy of her journal to her ‘girls from the book club’.

Without the bonds of trust and respect generated through the reading group process, it would be unwise to address racially charged texts like Himes’ novel, let alone the still more charged material in the anthology Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing. Here the prisoners’ responses are even more frequently marked by the complex, active process of identification and differentiation that Sweeney describes. One prisoner’s especially developed response will stand in here for dozens more that touch on similar themes:

Reading this [Doing Time] has made me think about the lives of people incarcerated. Everyone is not the same as some in the criminal justice system. Convicted criminal is another label placed upon me, but I am not like other convicted criminals and they are not like me. This makes me think about rehabilitation. How can I be rehabilitated through being incarcerated? These programmes, for the most part are not individualised programmes for rehabilitation. This book club group is an example of being able to analyse and express my own individual thoughts and ideas and look at my life in reference to the lives portrayed in these books.

In a few sentences this author moves from anxious differentiation from ‘other convicted criminals’, to active critique of the concept of rehabilitation through mass incarceration, to affirmation of the book club and the opportunity to write herself into the stories she is encountering. Her journal entry then moves to a political analysis of her own sentencing at the moment of a contested election for a local District Attorney, leading to a recognition that her previous view of prisoners was ‘biased’. The experience of the reading group leads her to see that not all prisoners are ‘uneducated street people who committed crime to beat the system or get over on people’. She concludes with some insights about her difficulty embracing the term ‘African American’ and decides that these considerations are ‘too lengthy to discuss here, but bottom line, my thoughts emerged from the open discussion in the book club. It felt good to know that every Wednesday for six weeks for at least an hour I would be able to discuss life, not self help themes of life but life as a whole’. This seems an apt conclusion to a journal entry that suggests this prisoner’s complex negotiation of individual and group identities through dialogue, first with the literary text and then with the members of the reading group.

As all the examples cited to this point reveal, the reading group discussions at the jail, like the ones described by Long and Sweeney,
are more personal and affective in their relation to the literary text than the discussions that take place in my classroom on campus, suggesting a different process of individual and collective meaning-making in response to literature. However, I have observed a pattern of responses to Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer*, often the last text on the reading list, that has complicated my thinking about student readers, prisoner readers, these discussion groups, and the object(s) of literary study.

**The ‘powerful force of anger’: *Indian Killer*, Indeterminacy, and the Object(s) of Literary Study**

Both students and prisoners tend to like *Indian Killer*, despite a narrative complexity greater than anything else on the syllabus – as one student reported, ‘everybody … was confused by it’ but still found it to be ‘fast, easy reading’. They are fascinated by Alexie’s canny deconstruction of the mystery genre in this crime story set in and around Seattle’s Native American community and by the idea that in the absence of a central detective character the reader is more than ever interpellated into that role. Tina Chen argues that there is an ethical dimension to Alexie’s implied critique of conventional mysteries, that in refusing readers the easy entry points of clearly specified villains and heroes, the novel insists on the true complexity of responsibility for, and impossibility of neat resolutions of, the racial conflicts at the novel’s centre.17 Alexie draws readers in by interweaving that critique of mysteries, as well as of American racial politics, with familiar generic elements like a series of gruesome, apparently racialized murders committed by a shadowy figure identified only as ‘the Killer’ and chapters written from the various perspectives of police officers, suspects, victims, and others interested in the crimes, but Alexie keeps readers off-balance by relating many events from the perspective of John, a schizophrenic Native American whom most readers assume to be the killer.

However, for all that my students tend to enjoy the novel, its ambiguous ending tends to leave them, as one student writes, ‘really angry at the end after 400 pages and not being told’ – told, that is, the identity of the killer. In the novel’s conclusion, John commits suicide and is blamed by the police for the crimes, but the final chapter features ‘the Killer’, depicted as usual in language that alternates between
gritty materiality and spectral spirituality, sharpening his knife for a new ceremony. Readers are then forced to rethink the assumptions that led them to believe that John was the killer and to reconsider the other characters, both Indian and white, who may have committed the crimes, since, we quickly realize, the ‘savage rituals’ that accompany the crimes are as likely to originate in a Hollywood Western as in some actual tribal practice. That rethinking process often produces lively discussions in the reading groups, as this student journal entry suggests: ‘There are so many clues to pick up on in this book and each person seemed to pick up on different things, like John’s knife for example. It was nice to see the group get so interested in the book this week’.

Of course, the identification of the bad guy, as students have learned from countless TV and film crime stories, is the central imperative and necessary satisfaction of these narratives, and so their dissatisfaction with Alexie’s ending is unsurprising. The prisoners, on the other hand, on the basis of student reports, my own conversations at the jail, and their journals, seem much more open to the novel’s ambiguous conclusion. And this openness may in fact enable them to reach conclusions about the novel’s central ideas that are much closer to the consensus position among literary critics than my students tend to reach. The prisoner whom a student paraphrases in a journal entry as believing that the killer ‘was not one central person, but rather one or multiple people who were driven by the words and powerful force of anger’ is quite close to Nancy Van Styvendale’s position that ‘the Indian Killer is all yet none of the novel’s Indian characters’, that the killer ‘gives an ineffable form to the pain and rage felt by Alexie’s Indian characters as individuals, at the same time as it gives shape to a collective trauma that is larger than any one of them’. A related view is evident in a prisoner’s journal entry that, in its open questions about the novel’s ending, seems to embrace that uncertainty:

This book was well written and made you pay attention with an earnest mind. But left the door wide open for debate. Was John Smith the killer? Probably not. Was this Owl Dance the cause for the deaths? Not really. But in the end the knife had three turquoise gems in the handle and was still in possession of the killer.

Another prisoner speculates that the novel’s conclusion may be left open ‘cause in the right situation anyone can be a killer’, and a third argues that the search for someone to blame for racial hatred,
within the novel, in our response to it and in our society, constitutes a desire to ‘personify an oppressive force’. In all these cases the prisoners seem to me to be getting much closer to the spirit of the novel’s indeterminate conclusion than do most students, and for that matter some literary critics who circle around and around the ‘clues’ provided in various scenes to try to pin down an individual whom they can blame.

You would think that critics like Arnold Krupat, at least, would know better than to persist in the belief that blame, and meaning, can be finally ascribed, not only because Alexie tells much of his story from the point of view of a delusional schizophrenic, but also because he provides an acute satire of murder mysteries with pat endings within the frame of his novel. A central character, Jack Wilson, is a white man who has convinced himself that he is part-Indian, and, based on that status along with his brief career as a police officer, he has written a successful series of murder mysteries starring ‘Aristotle Little Hawk, the very last Shilshomish Indian, … a practicing medicine man and private detective in Seattle’. The absurd wish-fulfillment generally evident in mass cultural representations of Native Americans and the popular consumption of them is vividly summed up by Wilson’s agent, who tells him: ‘Indians are big right now…. Publishers are looking for that shaman thing, you know? The New Age stuff, after-death experiences, the healing arts, talking animals, sacred vortexes, that kind of thing. And you’ve got all that, plus a murder mystery. That’s perfect’ (162–63). The first of Wilson’s novels takes an unsolved case he heard about as a police officer, in which an old woman seemed to have spontaneously combusted in her apartment and burned to death, and turns her into a beautiful fashion model who, Aristotle Little Hawk discovers, was murdered by a fireman she had spurned. And yet, despite this clear textual ‘clue’ warning us against murder mysteries with pat endings, along with the plethora of other textual ‘evidence’ about indeterminacy as Alexie’s primary mode, readers and critics keep trying to pin the story down, to make it clear and neat in its conclusion.

In place of the usual solution/resolution, Alexie provides historical context, both cultural and familial, such that the acts of the killer and the low-grade race war catalysed by those acts come to seem not the shocking result of individual depravity but the inevitable outcome of past and present structural inequality and the inexorable cycles of racial and class violence of which the novel’s present
events are merely a minor phase. Alas, if the criminal justice system is represented in the novel as incapable of solving this mystery, academic efforts at understanding, as personified by Dr Clarence Mather, Native American Studies professor and proud tribal adoptee, fare even worse, always both fascinated with and exploitative of this Other and its stories. Among readers, meanwhile, although prisoners are more likely to struggle with Alexie’s use of multiple, often unspecified and shifting narrative points of view (unsurprisingly, given their lower average literacy levels), they are also more likely to accept the unresolved ending as ‘the way things go’ and to understand the social contexts from which crime emerges. All too aware of the complex determinants of crime and the vagaries of the justice system, these readers are in many ways ideally situated, despite or even because of their frequently weak educational backgrounds, to reach a better understanding of the novel than my students do. That they are also frequently more successful in the jail classrooms than I am in the college classrooms at convincing my students that this is in fact a ‘good’ ending, that the novel ends the way it does for a reason, has then taught me a thing or two about indeterminacy – in texts and in lives – and about pedagogy.

All the difficult questions Alexie raises about appropriation, power, and positionality with respect to Native-American stories and lives in the novel must be asked and re-asked with respect to the prisoners, each time my students and I enter Monroe Correctional Facility. A prisoner once said to me, with a laugh that may have been a cover for something sharper, ‘You’re kind of like the professor in the book, right? Adopted by us criminals’. He was joking, I believe, but it stung and still stings, not least because of the dangerous potential for appropriation and exploitation in the process of doing the project and in making professional capital out of it (including through this article). We can resist that potential by attending carefully to all the voices in the room, student and prisoner, by representing them whenever possible in their own words, and by engaging thoughtfully with the variety of modes of reading and engagement with literary texts that emerge. This requires an openness to reading strategies that may seem sloppy, personal, ‘book-club-like’, that sometimes leak back into my classroom, despite my best efforts to build a dam of textual evidence and of literary analysis as a rigorous discipline. But, as any prisoner can tell you, discipline has its limits, and as the example of prisoners’ readings of Indian Killer suggests, there are
times when non-academic ways of knowing a text produce surprising literary insights and when the potential objects of knowledge in those jail classrooms become subjects of literary study – not the ‘guinea pig in [our] classroom experiment’ but the scientist.

Notes

1. Journal entries from group participants are quoted anonymously and by permission. Anonymity is legally required for prisoner participants and extended to student participants to give equal weight to the words of each group. I have corrected spelling and occasionally added punctuation for clarity, but otherwise journal entries are quoted as written.

2. In the US, the term ‘jail’ typically refers to facilities run by local municipalities (cities or counties), while ‘prison’ designates facilities run by state or federal authorities.

3. For simplicity’s sake I will in my text refer to the two groups as ‘students’ and ‘prisoners’. The latter term to describe incarcerated persons is more commonly used internationally than the American ‘inmates’, and, as Megan Sweeney argues, has a less pejorative valence even in the American context. See Megan Sweeney, Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women’s Prisons (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 271. While conducting the project I encourage participants to use ‘MCF students’ and ‘Nazareth students’, though, as the journal entries quoted here reveal, both groups of participants often revert back to using ‘students’ and ‘inmates’ to describe themselves and each other.

4. At present, 2.3 million Americans are incarcerated in jails and prisons; adding those on probation or parole, there are 7.2 million Americans under correctional supervision. The former number represents a 500% increase over the past three decades. See Pew Center on the States, One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008, <http://www.pewcenterontheestates.org/report_detail.aspx?id=35904>, last accessed 19 October 2011. For an important account of incarceration as a tool not of criminal justice but of social control and ‘class struggle from above’, see Christian Parenti, Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 214.


14. Sweeney also notes the popularity of mysteries and thrillers among the prisoners at the institutions where she conducts her study (60, 67). Alex Cross is the hero of a highly popular mystery series by James Patterson; Kay Scarpetta is the main character in a series of novels by Patricia Cornwell.


19. To be fair, Krupat ultimately acknowledges the indeterminacy of the ending, but not before spending many pages detailing the clues by which one might decide ‘which Indian might be the killer’ (99). See Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).


21. The ethics of the project also depend crucially on avoiding representing it as offering anything more to the participants than it does. I have addressed the complex dynamics of educational opportunity and hope, and the dangers of false hope, in an earlier essay. See Ed Wiltse, ‘Hope Across the Razor Wire: Student-Inmate Reading Groups at Monroe Correctional Facility’, in *Hope Against Hope: Philosophies, Cultures, and Politics of Possibility and Doubt*, ed. Janet Horrigan and Ed Wiltse (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Press, 2010), 207–221.