



Reading America, Reading Rodriguez: Exploring American Literature at an English Prison Book Group

JOSEPHINE METCALF* AND LAURA SKINNER**

This article details a cutting-edge Knowledge Exchange initiative which advanced the ongoing partnership between the University of Hull and HMP Hull, and stemmed from the annual BAAS conference, held in Hull in April 2022. The purpose of the article is to explore the value of critiquing US culture in a nonacademic setting and the extent to which a prison reading group presents a productive opportunity for so doing. Our research analyses the reception of a number of texts discussed in an American-themed book club hosted in HMP Hull, with a particular focus upon the responses of prison learners to the literary works of gang-member-turned-best-selling-author Luis J. Rodriguez.

AN INTRODUCTION: THE VICISSITUDES OF UNIVERSITY–PRISON PARTNERSHIPS

At the 2022 British Association for American Studies (BAAS) annual conference, hosted at the University of Hull, a significant number of academics gave permission for their papers to be recorded and then screened on in-cell television at HMP Hull as part of an innovative new university–prison partnership.¹ Follow-up questionnaires conducted with people in prison at HMP Hull signified that there was demand for a subsequent American studies book club focussing on twelve literary texts relating to the content of the screened academic papers.² As American studies academics in the North of England,

* School of Criminology, University of Hull. Email: j.metcalf@hull.ac.uk.

** Department of Humanities, University of Hull.

¹ HMP refers to “His Majesty’s Prison.” Please note that when we refer to “HMP” in this article, this includes facilities in just England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own prison systems.

² Note our use of “people in prison” here. The authors have observed, and certainly endorse, the move away from stigmatizing language and toward person-centred terminology as best practice when referring to incarcerated persons. See David Breakspear and Philip Mullen, “The Dangers of Labelling,” *Russell Webster*, 8 September 2021, at www.russellwebster.com/the-importance-of-person-centred-language (accessed 29 August 2023).

we are all well versed in making a case for studying the global significance of the US and our “Americanized” world; at campus recruitment days we attract university applicants who wish to join us in dissecting the US as a global cultural force. University students choose American studies because they want to look at the history and society of a country that is often violent and deeply problematic, and yet is simultaneously celebrated and “enjoyed.” We had assumed that HMP Hull members of a prison book club might think in similarly complex and enthused ways about exploring America through a series of texts; after all, as one of them told us, “everyone has something to say about America.” And indeed, while the participants sometimes downplayed the American “themes,” elsewhere the conversation regularly returned to a sophisticated understanding of the divisions and tensions at stake in the US, as well as in England.

The purpose of this article is to explore the relative value of critiquing US culture in nonacademic contexts and the extent to which a prison reading group can facilitate meaningful debates concerning potentially divisive issues such as gun control and feminism. As we anticipated, prison book groups can become political entities; we can use discussions about America with people in prison to probe wider transatlantic conversations regarding the neo-liberal state and attitudes to imprisonment, gender, race, class, and university agendas. Our research thus recognizes and advocates the value of increased reading opportunities for incarcerated people, in order to support both prison education pedagogies and policy practice. The article begins with a summary of the unique Knowledge Exchange partnership between the University of Hull and HMP Hull, our approach to the pilot book group, and our rationale for the textual selections. We then briefly consider the ways in which US prison book groups have led the field for subsequent scholarship and influenced systems of prison education (including reading groups) on the European side of the Atlantic. We focus upon the first six of our book group sessions, analysing the responses of prison learners in HMP Hull to the literary texts selected and the broader transatlantic issues the books spoke to. These transatlantic issues are apt given that as Americanists in England, we exist in “the wake of the so-called transnational turn” in American studies.³ We contend that whilst, among this select group of UK readers, the concept of “America” (or “American”) was at times exposed as redundant (with little sense of nostalgia or empathy for the US), book club discussions often complicated this viewpoint by revealing a critical view of, but nevertheless interest in, American culture and history.

³ Isabel Durán, “What Is the *Transnational Turn* in American Literary Studies? A Critical Overview,” *Atlantis*, Vol. 2 (Dec. 2020), 138–59, 138.

We were particularly curious to find out what this group of readers “did” with texts by Luis J. Rodriguez, a former street gang member turned award-winning memoirist, poet, and activist, who was the focus of several papers at the 2022 BAAS conference in Hull. Though Rodriguez’s best-selling memoir *Always Running* (1993) has long been a popular choice amongst prison readers, and though Rodriguez himself has an established history of prison activism, no previous study explores the reception of Rodriguez’s literary works in prison.⁴ This article thus advances enquiry both in terms of Rodriguez’s life and legacy being of interest and importance to academics, and in terms of burgeoning attention to prison book groups in the UK, drawing two previously separate scholarly spheres into conversation with one another.⁵ Note that rather than study the responses of people in prison to Rodriguez’s work across the academic divide, we wanted to encourage the critical practice of prison learners as commentators. In other words, the academic researchers here wanted to learn from people in prison as researchers themselves, not simply as passive objects of study.⁶ A book group was a useful context in which to do this; we encouraged all opinions to be taken seriously, and for all participants to speak up. The reader will observe that we subsequently refer to ourselves herewith as “facilitators” rather than “tutors” or “leaders” as we embarked on our journey to discuss Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892); Rodriguez’s *Always Running* (1993); Brian Vaughan’s *Y: The Last Man* (2002); Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (2017); John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971); and Rodriguez’s *From Our Land to Our Land* (2020).⁷

⁴ The extensive correspondence between people in prison and Luis J. Rodriguez that is held in his personal papers speaks to the popularity of *Always Running* among prison populations. See Luis Rodriguez Papers, CEMA 204, Department of Special Research Collections, UC Santa Barbara Library, University of California, Santa Barbara. Rodriguez details his extensive work in prisons in *From Our Land to Our Land: Essays, Journeys, and Imaginings from a Native Xincanx Writer* (New York, Seven Stories Press, 2020), 118–19.

⁵ The work of Rodriguez as being of interest and importance to academics is further demonstrated by an upcoming anthology. See Josephine Metcalf and Ben Olguin, eds., *The Life and Legacy of Luis J. Rodriguez* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2024). It was contributors to this anthology who spoke at the 2022 BAAS conference.

⁶ This speaks to an emerging body of work along these lines, for instance Stephanie Perrett and Benjamin Gray, “Exploring Health and Wellbeing in Prison: A Peer Research Approach,” *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 16, 1 (2019), 78–92; Justin Thrasher, Eric Maloney, S. Mills, J. House, T. Wroe, and V. White, “Reimagining Prison Research from the Inside-Out,” *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 28, 1 (2019), 12–28.

⁷ Please note that the order in which the books are listed is the order in which we read the books in the reading group. The authors of this article would like to thank all the academics whose papers at the BAAS 2022 conference inspired our book club choices. These include Matt Thorne, “Representing Thugs: Angie Thomas and ‘Trends’ in Racial Commentary”; Paula Serrano, “Grief as a Political Matter: An Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The*

A BRIEF METHODOLOGY; FROM BAAS TO BOOK GROUP

Between 21 and 23 April 2022, the University of Hull hosted the 66th Annual British Association for American Studies (BAAS) Conference. This hybrid event saw over 150 scholars from a range of international institutions deliver papers covering a vast array of topics, such as the art and craft of American biography, presidential legacies, and the politics of memorialization in the United States. As well as showcasing the richness and breadth of American studies research and pedagogy, the conference posed a unique opportunity to promote Knowledge Exchange. We already had a well-established relationship with HMP Hull, a Category B local male prison that first opened in 1870 and is situated two miles outside Hull city centre. It has a capacity of just over a thousand and is currently a remand jail (holding those awaiting trial or sentencing in the local courts) as well as detaining those serving sentences for crimes varying from drug dealing to sexual offences.

Staff at the prison, including the learning and skills manager and the head of reducing re-offending, were keen to extend the educational content available on their pioneering in-cell television service, Hull TV. Hull TV was invaluable during the pandemic, offering updates from the prison governor on COVID numbers and regulations inside the prison, as well as screening films and popular television shows when prison wings were put on full lockdown because of outbreaks. Due to the varied, interdisciplinary nature of American studies, the research team, along with prison staff, felt that the conference papers delivered at BAAS 2022 had the potential to engage prison learners. In advance of the conference, all BAAS presenters were informed of this innovative university–prison partnership and we sought permission for a recording of their papers to be screened on Hull TV. Of those who agreed (and the majority did), we then shortlisted approximately thirty papers to screen, choosing a range of topics and literary texts. Those thirty-plus delegates were also asked to provide information of any additional materials (including films, documentaries, novels, and television series) that would further engage people in prison in their respective academic areas of interest. Feedback provided by BAAS attendees displayed enthusiasm for the project, with one commenting that it is “surely admirable and well overdue,” whilst another expressed that they would be “happy to adapt” workshops and resources for future use in HMP Hull.

Yellow Wallpaper”; Susan Mary Grant, “Anger Nation: Two Moments in American Emotional Time”; and Foteini Antoniadi, “Maid in the USA: Motherhood, (Pro) Creativity and the American Dream.” We would also like to extend our thanks to each of the scholars on the three panels at the BAAS 2022 conference which focussed specifically upon the life and literary works of Luis J. Rodriguez.

To gain a sense of both the quality of previous content screened on Hull TV and an insight into the interests of the prison population (including potential academic pursuits), we conducted a survey in HMP Hull in advance of the BAAS conference. The research questionnaire was divided into two distinct sections: Section A interrogated current levels of engagement and satisfaction with Hull TV, whilst Section B focussed upon the prospect of screening BAAS conference talks on Hull TV and the topics respondents would find most beneficial to their educational development. Nearly two hundred completed questionnaires were returned to the research team and we collated a report summarizing the feedback. Key findings of the report – which we shared with the prison governor – included that, whilst those incarcerated in HMP Hull generally did engage with Hull TV, content tended to be overly repetitive. Interest in the provision of academic materials by the University of Hull was notable. Respondents who specified that they would watch recorded conference talks commented that “it’s important for people to be motivated, to find interest in different subjects and educate one another,” that “education is important to help you on the outside,” and that “it would help with mental health and other issues people may have.” Furthermore, a general desire to participate in follow-up activities and a clear passion for reading was expressed, with 43 per cent of respondents stating that they would like to participate in a book club discussion of Luis J. Rodriguez’s memoir *Always Running* alongside other American texts.

Thus we discussed the formation of an HMP Hull American studies book group with prison staff, who were enthusiastic about the prospect of furthering the educational provision delivered on-site. We secured funding from the University of Hull and BAAS to run two book groups, each consisting of six fortnightly sessions. This funding purchased personal copies of the books selected for discussion, as well as a notebook, for each participant. The selection of books was a complex process. Initially, the research team watched recordings of each BAAS conference panel and noted down any literary works associated with the academic papers which presented opportunities for interesting book club discussion. Following a subsequent conversation with the prison’s librarian regarding reading trends and literacy levels amongst the population in HMP Hull, this list of potential texts was tapered, and we then shared our shortlist with the prison security team, who cleared all of our suggestions for use.⁸ We made a conscious effort to ensure that the books ultimately selected for use as part of the reading group aligned with topics of interest highlighted by people in prison in

⁸ A “BAAS bookshelf” was originally set up by the HMP Hull librarian in line with information we fed about the conference screenings on Hull TV as well as the book groups.

response to the initial research questionnaire. For instance, sixty respondents expressed an interest in psychology and mental health. Therefore we chose Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* for the final list.⁹

The book club was advertised in the prison and fifteen applicants of varying ages were selected to participate in the group.¹⁰ Each book club meeting lasted two hours and the initial session began with an icebreaker activity in which participants were asked to introduce themselves and explain the books and genres they habitually read. We then devised a collaborative ethos for the book group which included participants ensuring that they had read the book in advance of the session, allowed others to speak, and challenged views which opposed their own in a respectful manner. At the outset of each group, we always facilitated a discussion of the contextual information pertinent to each text, be that the sociopolitical situation in America at the time of publication, relevant elements of the author's positionality that may have influenced their literary work, or the reception the texts received. The remainder of the sessions involved semi-structured close textual analysis but were predominantly guided by the prison learners themselves and the elements of the texts they found most interesting. Each session then concluded with an independent creative-writing activity that we linked to the weekly text under discussion.¹¹

As previously discussed, we were particularly keen to explore the reception of Luis J. Rodriguez's literary works amongst people in prison in the UK. Anyone wishing to conduct research in HMP settings must apply for ethical approval from the National Research Committee (NRC). In order to capture the responses of book club participants to *Always Running* and *From Our Land to Our Land*, we were granted ethical clearance by the NRC to audio record the two Rodriguez reading group sessions. We also received informed consent from each of the prison learners prior to the recordings. None of the participants had read anything by Rodriguez before these

⁹ With *The Yellow Wallpaper* in particular, and its themes of mental health, we were careful not to veer into anything "beyond our scope of practice." We are not trained therapists and wanted to avoid a "missionary mode" of engagement with prisoners, which we did by flagging our boundaries to the group in the very first session with Gilman's book.

¹⁰ There are numerous reasons why a person in prison may not be able to undertake additional "purposeful hours" at any given time, but we were pleased to be able to offer a second set of book groups for those who had not been able to attend the first cohort.

¹¹ It is worth rendering our use of "we" visible here, as we start to discuss the actual groups. We are two white middle-class women, one an academic and the other a research assistant (and PhD student). We are not deliberately presenting ourselves as "invisible," perhaps in line with the ethnographer or anthropologist; rather we were always aware, for example, of our presence as women in an all-male facility. We had some interesting discussions during the course of the groups, including our surprise at the number of female prison officers on site and the respect that was shown to them from the prison population.

two sessions (in fact only a couple of them were familiar with his name as an author). Upon completion of the final book club session, the facilitators each listened to the recordings of the two Rodriguez sessions and noted down recurring discussion themes as well as particularly insightful or controversial remarks made in response to Rodriguez's work by participants. We then met to compare and consolidate findings.

Whilst, on the whole, the book club sessions were fruitful and members stated that if the University of Hull was to run a further reading group they would like to participate, due to the nature of working in a prison there were issues to be mitigated. Managing differing opinions amongst group members was occasionally challenging and technological glitches meant we were unable to screen a short video that Rodriguez had filmed specifically for the book group. Elsewhere a faulty security alarm which persistently sounded in the final book club session made it difficult to hear – particularly for one elderly participant who relied on a hearing aid. On one of our meeting days, we experienced a delay when passing through security and consequently found, when we finally reached the room, that half of the prison learners had been sent back to cells or to work as it was assumed the session had been cancelled. Due to protocol, the book club participants could not be moved around and so, in conjunction with prison staff we decided to cancel the session as only three participants remained. However, this actually had a positive outcome, as whilst the issue was being managed by one facilitator, the other spoke to the three members who had arrived for the session about what they were currently reading and writing. One had been reading an eight-hundred-page fantasy book and the other had written the prologue to his own novel about the Egyptian god Anubis which he allowed one of us to read. The unexpected discussion clearly demonstrated the passion of book club participants for reading and creative writing.

PRISON EDUCATION; UK CONTEXT AND US INFLUENCES

Prison education has long been a contentious and highly politicized issue on both sides of the Atlantic. When we embarked on the book groups following the BAAS conference in 2022, the UK government had recently published their review of reading education in prisons. Undertaken jointly by HMIP (then Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons) and Ofsted, its key finding was simply that "reading education is not given sufficient priority in the prison regime."¹² Perhaps this was a little unfair given the problems that COVID

¹² HMIP, "Prison Education: A Review of Reading Education in Prisons," at www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons (accessed 9 March 2023).

had posed for prison educators. Nonetheless, the report came five years following the Coates review, the groundbreaking independent appraisal of education in prisons that made the case for “putting education at the very heart of the prison regime, and for making prison governors both accountable for and able to choose the education that best serves their prisoners’ needs.”¹³ It seems stunning that just a couple of years prior we were privy to the Conservative politician Chris Grayling’s infamous – and short-lived – book ban for people in prison with its dangerous implications that reading is an exclusive privilege.

In all of this, there are ongoing questions concerning the objectives of education in HMPs. Clare Taylor of the Prisoners’ Education Trust flags the dilemma:

the purpose of learning in prison can be unclear. Is prison education all about making prisoners employable and improving their employment prospects? Is it about changing attitudes and behaviours? Is it about promoting desistance? Is it about reducing reoffending? Is it about helping people cope with their sentences? Is it simply about keeping people busy? Or is it about all of the above?¹⁴

Taylor’s quotation points towards the ideological complications at stake with prison education: while some people in prison may perceive themselves as fighting to challenge a failing justice system, many just want skills to secure a job, alongside dignity and opportunity. Perhaps before we even consider its function, we need to clarify what actually constitutes “prison education.” Journalists, commentators, and scholars alike have noted that prison education can refer to “respectable” qualifications in plumbing or bricklaying. Nevertheless, for some these aptitudes may be boring, which supports the argument that we should simultaneously offer education as a “lifestyle” that means “getting into the notion of learning and of transforming your thought patterns by reflecting on other people’s experiences and reaching for the wealth of knowledge available to us through books.”¹⁵ Qualifications and reading aside, we need to furthermore acknowledge the over nine hundred arts practitioners currently working across prisons in England and Wales who situate their creative projects (writing, drama, artwork, sculpting) under the prison education umbrella. Likewise in the US the term “prison education” may include creative programmes, vocational qualifications, high-school diplomas,

¹³ Dame Sally Coates, “Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison,” at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf (accessed 9 March 2023).

¹⁴ Clare Taylor, “Prison Education in the UK: A Review of the Evidence by the Prisoners’ Education Trust,” *Prison Service Journal*, 223 (Jan. 2016), 44–52, 44.

¹⁵ Vanessa Thorpe, “George the Poet,” *The Guardian*, 7 Nov. 2021, at www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/nov/07/george-the-poet-its-easier-to-change-the-lives-of-offenders-in-prison-than-it-is-outside (accessed 9 March 2023).

higher-education degrees, and a range of nonaccredited pedagogical endeavours that are delivered by volunteers and universities and colleges.¹⁶

That our book group was inspired by an academic conference certainly provides it with an air of formal pedagogy (and perhaps makes it more “palatable” for prison authorities). But this may also function with detrimental effect. Scholars like Dylan Rodriguez in the US have voiced concern that “higher education in prison is just one more orchestration of a neoliberal government.”¹⁷ Similarly, Atif Rafay recognizes that “the neoliberal impulse to use education behind bars as credentializing programs risks treating students who are incarcerated as a separate class, rather than students whose critical mindfulness is best cultivated through exposure to critical reading, writing, and thinking practices.”¹⁸ In this way, does prison education oblige the need of the prison itself more than people in prison? Here in the UK, the KEF and REF are frameworks that have led to Knowledge Exchange and Impact Case Studies being prioritized among UK researchers.¹⁹ Such assessment exercises in turn are driven by the government and carry significance for universities in terms of funding and prestige. This arguably means that we need to be conscious that the “need” of the educator does not replace that of the person in prison.²⁰

A book group can be significant in light of such neoliberal contexts. As American scholars Kate Drabinski and Gillian Harkins emphasize in a special edition of *Radical Teacher* (2013), in a site where space is so restricted there is an ever more urgent need to “support critical thinking about a range of topics not limited to one political position or situation” and so “create space for intellectual exchange.”²¹ A book group, with care, can play a crucial role

¹⁶ For further information about prison education in England and Wales see Helen Nichols, *Understanding the Educational Experiences of Imprisoned Men* (New York: Routledge, 2022). For further information about prison education in the US see Kenneth Mentor, “Education,” in Mary Bosworth, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities*, Volume I (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 273–78.

¹⁷ Michelle Ronda and Ragnhild Utheim, “Toward Abolition Pedagogy: Teaching Social Justice in Prison Combined Classrooms,” *Dialogues in Social Justice*, 5 (Fall 2019–20), 64–80, 64.

¹⁸ Quoted in Kate Drabinski and Gillian Harkins, “Introduction: Teaching Inside Carceral Institutions,” *Radical Teacher*, 95 (Spring 2013), 3–9, 6.

¹⁹ In the UK’s higher-education system, academics are expected to adhere to the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) and the Research Exercise Framework (REF), the latter of which includes impact case studies (ICSs). See Steven Hill, “Know Your REF from Your KEF,” *UK Research and Innovation*, 4 March 2019, [ARCHIVED CONTENT] Know your KEF from your REF – UKRI (nationalarchives.gov.uk) (accessed 18 October 2023).

²⁰ Ben Olguin speaks to the difficulties academics face when doing “prison work” in *La Pinta* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 233–34, asking, “How could I capitalize a career, salary, benefits, and even more social status by writing about human beings, prisoners, whose existence was defined in terms of their deliberately diminished material and social status?”

²¹ Drabinski and Harkins, 6.

here, despite the fact that the book choices – for practical reasons – tend to be made by those who are most empowered. Perhaps this is not unfounded; Russ Litten, a former writer-in-residence at HMPs in the UK, contends that the “sad reality is that most prisoners borrow ‘puffed up’ true crime autobiographies or fantasy tales of dungeons and dragons.”²² Litten believes too many people in prison “do not readily reach for books that could widen their frame of reference or illuminate their thinking in new and challenging ways.”²³ Yet he talks of his own powerful experiences of watching incarcerated people “devour” Charles Bukowski poetry and Raymond Carver short stories in his workshops. Litten summarizes in simple terms his years of experience working in prisons: “Books can change lives. It’s been proven. What better way to rehabilitate than to read?”²⁴ Rodriguez has echoed Litten’s sentiment in a number of different interviews and articles, noting that books can “save lives.”²⁵

Himself an American studies graduate from the University of Hull, Litten speaks regularly about being inspired by Mary Stephenson’s Changing Lives through Literature programme that was established in the US in the 1990s.²⁶ In the UK, Stephenson introduced an amended version called Stories Connect, exploring how people in prison may examine the mistakes of their own lives through fictional characters and think about their own actions, and why empathy may be a life skill. The gist of the project is that reading – alongside creative writing – can rehabilitate. Over the past twenty years, scholars in the UK have also responded in positive ways, exploring reading for people in prison from a variety of angles. Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey have documented the Prison Reading Group which they founded in 1999, and which at its peak would flourish in sixty prisons across England and Wales with numerous volunteers.²⁷ They critically reflect, among other things, on the ways in which book groups can satisfy the Ministry of Justice’s imperative for incarcerated people to spend “purposeful hours.”²⁸

²² Russ Litten, “What Better Way to Rehabilitate than to Read?”, *Serpent’s Tail*, at <https://serpentstail.com/what-better-way-to-rehabilitate-than-to-read> (accessed 9 March 2023).

²³ Ibid. ²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See, for example, Luis J. Rodriguez, “Pages of Power,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 Nov. 2003, at www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-nov-23-op-rodriguez23-story.html (accessed 9 March 2023).

²⁶ Anna Barker, “Novel Approach: Reading Courses as an Alternative to Prison,” *The Guardian*, 21 July 2010, at www.theguardian.com/society/2010/jul/21/texas-offenders-reading-courses (accessed 9 March 2023).

²⁷ See Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey’s *Report on the Work of the Prison Reading Group 1999–2013*, at <https://prisonreadinggroupscouk.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/what-books-can-do-behind-bars.pdf> (accessed 9 March 2023).

²⁸ HMIP, *Purposeful Hours*, at www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/our-expectations/prison-expectations/purposeful-activity (accessed 9 March 2023).

As Hartley and Turvey note, “books and reading have always been important in prisons: for comfort and solace, instruction and good cheer,” dating back to the days of Elizabeth Fry – the “Angel of Prison” – reading to people in prison in the early 1800s.²⁹ Meanwhile Josie Billington has addressed reading groups as a vital “intervention” to support the mental-health needs of prisoners.³⁰ Most recently, the Prison Research Centre at Cambridge led by Alison Liebling (2022) evaluated how a model of shared reading led by the Reader Organisation could support people in prison with a variety of personality disorders in PIPE (psychologically informed planned environments) units. Outcomes identified included “increased well-being, social participation, self-worth, flexibility, agency, and hope, and a sense of connected life and identity.”³¹

Scholarship from the US has been similarly enthused by the “power” of reading in a range of incarceration contexts. Megan’s Sweeney’s *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in a Women’s Prison* seeks to help us understand “the women who fill our nation’s prisons,” as well as making sense of how the women themselves negotiate their past and present through reading.³² Sweeney provides a comprehensive review of reading and education in US penal history, concluding that it “remains a site of contest and struggle.”³³ She documents the bibliotherapy trend that swept the US – and its prisons – in the 1950s, citing Brown’s 1975 *Bibliotherapy and Its Widening Applications*. Ideological threads of bibliotherapy still run through academic discussions of book groups in prisons on both sides of the Atlantic. David Coogan, in *Writing Our Way Out*, reflects on his reading and writing workshops in the US, noting that “everyone taps their diverse experiences and modes of expressing themselves to negotiate meaning about a shared social problem.”³⁴ Such academic accounts in the US have been complemented by a number of poignant narratives that lean towards documenting the writing rather than the reading conducted in groups, but which should still carry weight in discussions of prison

²⁹ Jenny Hartley, “Twenty Years behind Bars: Reading Aloud in Prison Reading Groups,” *Changing English: Studies in Culture & Education*, 27, 1 (2020), 100–8, 100.

³⁰ Josie Billington, “‘Reading for Life’: Prison Reading Groups in Practice and Theory,” *Critical Survey*, 23, 3 (2011), 67–85.

³¹ Alison Liebling, Katherine Auty, Judith Gardom, and Elinor Lieber, “An Evaluation of the Experience and Meaning of Shared Reading in Psychologically Informed Planned Environments in Prisons,” HMPPS, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1110547/evaluation-of-shared-reading-in-pipes.pdf (accessed 9 March 2023).

³² Megan Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in a Women’s Prison* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 258. ³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁴ David Coogan, *Writing Our Way Out* (Richmond, VA: Bradlyane Publishing, 2010), 2.

education, not least Mark Salzman's *True Notebooks* (2004) and Carole Glasser Langille's *Doing Time* (2019).

READING AMERICA: FROM YELLOW TO BLACK

Each book club session began with a preliminary enquiry into the “reading experience” of the assigned text. By this, we mean *how* they read it (in one sitting? Early morning? Late at night?), whether it was “accessible” (especially compared to other texts), and whether it was “enjoyable” (though we acknowledge that enjoyment can be marked in different ways). *The Yellow Wallpaper* was chosen as a logical opener, partly because it was chronologically our earliest text, and also because it was the shortest. We wanted to ease participants into a heavier reading load moving forwards. Drabinski and Harkins argue that “prison pedagogies which focus on race and class must inevitably engage with gender and sexuality, or else run the risk of reinforcing hetero-patriarchal norms articulated as the vanishing point of anti-racist and anti-classist pedagogy.”³⁵ Perhaps we also took a risk in putting *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the spotlight first; opening with potentially controversial or sensitive discussions concerning women’s rights – and mental health – before everyone in the group had established a working relationship. The story follows the descent into madness of a young mother who has been prescribed “rest” for her anxiety but feels trapped by a patriarchal society that stifles any creativity or form of self-expression. In fact, all attendees read *The Yellow Wallpaper* in full and proved astute and considered in the conversations about women as “possessions” and the character of John (concluding he was simply a “male product” of societal gender norms and expectations of that time).

The debates around patriarchy and domesticity in *The Yellow Wallpaper* were never rooted by these readers in a particularly American context. This was despite the facilitators initially flagging its publication date in the US at the turn of the century and the role of women’s rights at that time. Rather, the readers were more preoccupied with probing the narrator’s experiences of solitude. Time and again discussion returned to the sense of isolation the protagonist must have felt being sequestered in a single room with no real stimulation and the resultant impact on her mental health. The group spoke at length about the need for human interaction and conversation (the ironies of their own current experiences were not lost on them). Interestingly, this paralleled feedback provided in the initial questionnaire at the time of the BAAS conference which showed demand for a book group following lockdown restrictions for twenty-three hours a day under COVID.

³⁵ Drabinski and Harkins, “Introduction,” 8.

If *The Yellow Wallpaper* was not read as an inherently “American” text, then, by comparison, the dialogue around gender rights in the week we studied the graphic novel *Y: The Last Man* was situated within “American” boundaries by participants themselves. We read the first in the *Y* series, about the only man to have survived an apparent global androicide. Engaging with *Y*, we discussed *Roe v. Wade* through to the “problematic” representation of the female group of ex-prisoners. Perhaps this was not surprising given the character of *Y*’s mother as a leading Washington politician, prompting an interesting discussion about the role of women in real-life American politics. The US government is still predominantly male, with 126 women in Congress out of 435, and at the time the book was released in 2002 it was sixty-two women; such statistics were met with notable criticism. Members of the group regularly identified the text as an actual critique of US society in graphic-novel form, and there was certainly a sense that this might have contributed to the popularity of the text among the group.

The Hate U Give (*THUG*), too, was situated in meaningful deliberations of existent America. The novel follows an African American sixteen-year-old girl who is inspired to become an activist after witnessing the police shoot her unarmed friend. In any given week, the facilitators would provide a brief historical and social context to situate the publication of the text. *THUG*’s session began with attention being drawn to the author’s note at the back of the book where she cites Oscar Grant and Emmett Till. A number of the readers knew who both of these figures were, while others referred to further factual scenarios involving white-on-black violence (often state-initiated). If *THUG* was read most voraciously, *Grendel* was the only one to not be completed by a number of the participants and there were suggestions that this was because it was the most removed from “real-life” America (alongside being the most “convoluted” book). At the outset of the *Grendel* session we gave a nod to its *Beowulf* inspiration – Grendel is the monstrous creature in the Old English poem and in the contemporary novel of the same name we now track his existential and lonely existence. Participants were interested to join us in comparing the first page of the Seamus Heaney translation with the original. Moreover, we brainstormed what people knew about America in 1971, including Nixon, Charles Manson, Vietnam, nuclear testing, and Native American protests. Interestingly, all age ranges in the group contributed to this list, not just those who perhaps lived through the 1970s. We then dissected select quotes that may arguably be read as Gardner’s direct criticism of the US government and society at that time, quotes that captured the nihilistic or existential crisis facing many Americans in the early 1970s.³⁶ When we did

³⁶ John Gardner, *Grendel* (London: Gollancz, 2015; first published 1971), 86–87.

so, the text seemed to take on new meaning, with a couple of participants suggesting that in hindsight they may then likely read *Grendel*.

Despite the fact that several in the group had not completed *Grendel* prior to the meeting, it was a productive discussion given that a number of choice excerpts could be analysed in their own right. Similarly, we had some edifying conversations about the role of comedy in *Grendel*. We explored the Monster's nihilistic quote when he counts his blessings, or the way in which he copies the swear words that he picks up from the village men in their rages.³⁷ Again, participants tended to focus on the US – and the Americanness of a text – when it was made more available or obvious to them. We probed our comedic response to *Y: The Last Man* too, and whether in Freudian terms it was “nervous” laughter at all. Once more with *Y: The Last Man*, the discussion digressed into American frames, in part because several members of the group did routinely read graphic novels or comics, which often boast a sense of humour. This in turn sparked a memorable debate about the history of comic books as (initially) an *American* art form and the arguably dominant US market for such visual texts.

A colleague from the university joined us as a guest facilitator in the *Y* week to share their American history expertise. After the session, they were complementary of the group, noting their intellectual engagement with feminist, globalist, and structuralist approaches, if not necessarily consciously. In the session on *Y: The Last Man*, readers were keen to talk about the ubiquity of guns in the novel (drawing links to female Democrats in Congress supporting gun regulation laws). They also enthusiastically contemplated how the fairly binary representation of political opinion in the novel echoes the bitter polarization of American political discourse today. Indeed, in the evaluation questionnaire at the end of the first set of book club sessions, one of the participants identified *Y: The Last Man* as their favourite text because of the way in which it “is an all-encompassing reference to the divisions in our society.” During the group itself, perhaps curiously, many of the participants did not like this “black-and-white” presentation and contended that the characters at both extremes were exaggerated. We had a detailed dialogue about the American political system, the formal structures and chains of command (how the three branches of government interact with one another), and returned again to how it is still (even more so in the early 2000s) dominated by (white) men. Towards the beginning of the group we had flagged the publication date of Part One of *Y: The Last Man* in 2002, and the idea that the events of 9/11 had impacted American culture (even Spider-Man's enemies in the Black Book were at a loss for words when the Twin Towers were hit). The

³⁷ Ibid., 36, 40, 48, 51, 64, 66, 92.

group was unanimous that American culture could so explicitly reflect real-life fears about catastrophes. Contributors were perceptive in noting the ways in which we could read the novel as a post-9/11 text, with its depiction of apocalyptic events. Though participants did not espouse the conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11, they did imply that the US may have to accept some responsibility for the overall contexts leading to the attacks.

Nonetheless it was *THUG* that acted as the most “talkative” text, stemming from its *Americanness* but lending itself to discussions of contemporary British society and culture. At the time of reading, the UK was undergoing Black History Month (BHM) and there were some vast differences of opinion among the group concerning the significance and need for identifying Black history and the prevalence of racism more broadly. In particular there were notable instances in the novel, including Hailey’s version of racism, which showed how difficult and subtle racism can be and how tough it can be to purge.³⁸ However, others interpreted her behaviour as “innocent” and “unintentional.” Just as guns – and gun control – had been a talking point during the session for *Y: The Last Man*, they were also popular topics for our *THUG* week. We had a detailed exchange about the gun violence in Thomas’s young-adult novel, and specifically the ways in which Khalil’s death mirrors that of the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. It was notable that one reader who had previously not fully supported the rationale for BHM had a particularly impassioned response during our discussion of Brown and was the most critical of police violence against young Black men.

While some participants did put forward contentious ideas about the significance of celebrating BHM and argued that “racism doesn’t exist in the same way in the UK as it does in America,” we did not as facilitators necessarily have to step in to mediate this discussion. Instead, other prison readers respectfully challenged such observations, citing examples of police brutality and institutional racism in UK contexts, and encouraging those with controversial views to put themselves in the shoes of the parents of Emmett Till. This reflects the skills we hoped that prison learners would (further) develop as part of the book group: for instance, being able to effectively communicate their views on the literature and provide justification for their opinions, respectfully challenge others with opposing views and encouraging peers to rethink if their ideas were exposed as unfounded. This was also emphasized on one of the evaluation questionnaires; when we asked what participants gained from the book club, someone responded, “Gaining confidence in my ability to correctly articulate my own views to a group of people that may have opposing views.” In the actual group, the conversation remained focussed

³⁸ Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (New York: Balzer & Bray, 2017), 113, 181.

for some time on whether racism in the UK “functions” in the same way as in the US. Regardless, *THUG* proved to be a useful lightning rod for participants to think about British society, that we should not be complacent in looking at US society from across the Atlantic and assuming we are more “cohesive” than the “conflicted and divisive US.” There was certainly a clear tendency to criticize the US, perhaps arguably easier when we are so far removed from it.

READING RODRIGUEZ, QUERYING *ALWAYS RUNNING*

Rodriguez’s renowned memoir, *Always Running. La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA* (1993) is an apt choice for a prison book club given the narrator’s lively tale of transformation from ignorant gangbanger through to award-winning author and activist. This is alongside Rodriguez’s personal commitment to the incarcerated. As he explicates in his 2020 collection of essays, *From Our Land to Our Land: Essays, Journeys, and Imaginings from a Native Xincanx Writer*, he has been going into prisons and jails to do poetry readings, healing circles, and writing workshops for over forty years across the US and internationally.³⁹ *From Our Land* and *Always Running*, in particular, have regularly been used in prisons and with at-risk youth in the US in order to encourage and develop reading and writing skills, as well as generating discussion around issues such as rehabilitation and desistance.⁴⁰ We anticipated that *Always Running* would be of particular interest to people in prison in the UK and would generate debate around “converting” oneself. We explained the 1960s and 1970s historical context that Rodriguez covers, including the Chicano movement alongside Black civil rights. We also noted its publication in 1993 as worthy of note (post-Rodney King and the War on Drugs). We asked readers to probe, among other themes and topics, the author’s preface and afterword (dedicated to his incarcerated son Ramiro), the structure (a conversion narrative), the epigraphs (from gang members as well as famed revolutionaries), the idea of being “too far gone”, structural violence, authority and institutions (notably the police), and the genre of autobiographical writing.

Always Running provided a number of logical connections to other texts in our book club series (we actively encouraged participants to compare and contrast across different weeks). The recognition that *Always Running* has regularly been banned was linked to *The Yellow Wallpaper* being deemed

³⁹ Rodriguez, *From Our Land to Our Land*, 118.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Antonia Darder’s “Latino Youth: Pedagogy, Praxis, and Policy,” *Latino Studies*, 4, 3 (2006), 302–4; and J. Singer and R. Shagoury’s “Stirring Up Justice: Adolescents Reading, Writing, and Changing the World,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49, 4 (Dec. 2005), 318–39.

“perilous” and “dangerous” upon release, along with *Grendel* having been regularly restricted despite – like *Always Running* – being popular among high-school audiences.⁴¹ Like the discussion of *THUG*, conversations on Rodriguez’s memoir organically gravitated towards an exploration of UK society, exploring the job insecurity, derelict housing, and lack of education that are cited by the narrator as fuelling the gang lifestyle during his East LA childhood.⁴² Nevertheless, we were a little surprised that participants were not more enthused by the memoir. Perhaps this speaks more about us as practitioners, indicating that we were naive to assume that people in prison would respond positively to the conversion structure, rather than picking faults with it. Though scholars and critics have suggested that *Always Running* still resonates in the US some thirty years after its publication, it seems as if a tale rooted in a particularly American experience (the Chicano street gang) perhaps does not hold as much sway for incarcerated people in the UK in 2022.

Participants were adamant that Rodriguez *had* had choices, including his own decision to join the gang. This is despite *Always Running* detailing at length the structural violence (including inadequate schooling and racism) that Rodriguez contends led him to the gang in the first instance for protection. Certainly, the word “choice” was often stressed throughout the session, for instance with participants noting that “it was down to the choices that he makes,” and that “it is always made out that these kids don’t really have a choice because it’s in the school, it’s where they live, it’s on the streets. But everybody has a choice.” Such choices were often simplistically framed: “lead or be led, it’s your choice,” and “are you a sheep or a wolf?” Scholars have noted Rodriguez’s literary dedication to the working classes and the poverty-stricken, regardless of race and ethnicity, and we flagged this to the group, exemplified by both the preface and the epilogue of *Always Running*. Yet while there was some brief agreement that “the poor Mexicans and the Blacks, they were at the bottom of the ladder,” socio-economic context was not generally accepted as a justification for gang crime. As one participant noted, “I grew up in the 60s in poverty, but I didn’t become a gang member. And where I grew up, there were gangs.” In this moment, any sense of the US as a distinct society with its own exceptional history of racism

⁴¹ See the introductory essay by Maggie O’Farrell to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper and Selected Writings* (London: Virago Press, 2009); and John Gardner’s *Grendel* (London: Gollancz, 2015): xviii.

⁴² Luis J. Rodríguez, *Always Running. La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 133. The original hardback edition of *Always Running* was released in 1993 by Curbstone.

and structural issues was displaced by holding ourselves accountable for decisions we make.

Despite a seeming lack of empathy as far as choice was concerned, participants were quick to show compassion in other ways, for instance towards Rodriguez's tumultuous relationship with Ramiro (who was on a "rapidly declining roller coaster ride into the world of street-gang America").⁴³ As the prison readers noted, "you have difficulty sometimes between father and son," and "it can be difficult to get through to a son." Familial relationships became an identifier for these readers more than relationships rooted in any national sense. And despite the repeated implication that Rodriguez was self-determining when joining the gang, participants were more sympathetic or attuned to Rodriguez's plight once he was *in* the gang. Thus: "Anybody who becomes a member of a gang, you're basically not being yourself at that point. You're no longer yourself. You're no longer absolute. You're just part of it." The readers were also conscious of, and commiserative about, divisions in the city of LA that Rodriguez repeatedly highlights during the course of the narrative. They pointed towards the "normal people in LA who live on the other side of the tracks" (ironically the use of the word "normal" here sought to reinforce the very stereotypes that Rodriguez was arguably trying to dismantle). "Division(s)" became a word used as often as "choice" throughout the two hours, with suggestions that divisions in the city of LA (for example between police officers and gang members) "still goes on today." Such divisions were presented as being somehow "more dominant" in American society than in the UK, whether in terms of police or gangs, housing or racial divisions. Again, participants were ironically inadvertently drawing attention to the very structural issues that the narrator blames for fueling gang violence.

If these readers were not always entirely convinced by the content of *Always Running*, by contrast they were enamoured with Rodriguez's "way with words" and his respect for the power of language in general. We read a poem by Rodriguez called "Words" from his recent stint as LA's Poet Laureate ("The thing is I wanted to be a writer / even before I knew what writing was about / I wanted to carve out the words / that swim in the bloodstream"), which resulted in a compelling conversation about the act of writing being so "potent" that it could literally "save" the reader of this memoir from a life of crime (just as it did the narrator).⁴⁴ Along these lines, words could be used "as a deterrent" or "alter everything." These prison participants were

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁴ Luis J. Rodriguez, *Borrowed Bones: New Poems from the Poet Laureate of Los Angeles* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 1.

inadvertently picking up on some of the key traits that have run throughout Rodriguez's work since the earliest days of his career.⁴⁵ Academics in the field of autobiography studies have long espoused the idea of life writing benefiting both authors and readers. The self-directed process of using language to construct one's own autobiographical narrative may function to restore lost agency, as well as to rebuild a shattered sense of self-identity. Writing out and working through one's troubled past may also serve as a powerful form of "scriptotherapy."⁴⁶ Such benefits are especially pertinent in social contexts within which uneven power structures exist (for instance in a gang or in a prison).

For readers, the confessional power of language employed in life writing often encourages identification and inspires empathy. Rodriguez's emotive use of language certainly seemed to be the element of his memoir that resonated most profoundly with book club participants. That said, contributors were also plainly aware that such narratives also need to be treated with caution (following a discussion that *Always Running* and other gang memoirs such as Shakur's *Monster* have often been distributed to "reluctant readers" in LA high schools). Our readers acknowledged that words can also "be dangerous" and "we need to consider how the person who is reading it interprets it." But even for younger readers, our book group felt that they could see how Rodriguez "puts his heart and soul into everything he writes ... always lyrical and poetic" (this from someone who confessed to not particularly enjoying the content of the book) and "he was almost revolutionary in the way that he writes."

READING RODRIGUEZ: CELEBRATING *FROM OUR LAND*

If our UK prison readers remained a little unconvinced by *Always Running*, they revered *From Our Land*, in terms of both its writing style and its content. In hindsight, given how fruitful this discussion was, it would have been wise to situate the text earlier in the series rather than leaving it until the final week – there were many facts and ideas presented in this collection of essays that could have logically fed into subsequent discussions and provided a useful point of comparison for exploring different styles and techniques of writing. The anthology covers a range of topics – from low-riding car culture in Tokyo, to being a Poet Laureate, to working with "Monsters of

⁴⁵ Rodriguez's first books were poetry: *Poems across the Pavement* (Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1989); and *The Concrete River* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1991).

⁴⁶ Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 12.

Our Making” (people in prison). On the other hand, it was a constructive way to close the sessions given that so much of the discussion stemming from *From Our Land* brought our previous deliberations full circle. We probed themes and topics including the title of the book, the intended audience, our “favourite” and “least favourite” essays (with justification), slam poetry, masculinity, humanity, and “global [indigenous] healing.”

Scholars have recognized that while Rodriguez has been respectful of his indigenous roots and traditions for many years, his work has become ever more detailed and lucid in documenting his journey down the Red Road.⁴⁷ *From Our Land* speaks to this with numerous references – most notably the chapter titled “The Four Key Connections” – which highlight the importance of indigenous heritage and spirituality in all aspects of life and for all Americans. The book group was fascinated by a brief history of indigenous cultures in Mexico and the fact “it has always been ‘their’ land,” and responded to Rodriguez’s plain wish to repeatedly draw the reader’s attention to his indigeneity. His contention that “we need to get back to the ancestors to move forward” was a particular stimulant notwithstanding that no one in the group referenced Celtic roots or other European tribes and traditions.⁴⁸ One comment on the evaluation questionnaires offered particular praise for *From Our Land*: “It contains so many profound statements about the realities of life that follow my own beliefs.” The participants were also loquacious in their coverage of “Nemachtilli,” a word that Rodriguez explains is the Nahuatl word for the “spirit of learning” (Nahuatl being the language of many Aztecs and Mexican tribes), something which is arguably missing among many teachers who also need the “spirit of teaching.” While one reader summarized their experience of the book by simply stating, “I enjoyed the spiritual side of it all,” we also had a fascinating converse by considering what Nemachtilli means to each of us individually. Did we all have a memorable teacher at school or elsewhere? One contributor was keen to underscore “the importance of listening to people who are trying to teach” when the “right” educators are in place.

In this session participants were more willing to concede socioeconomic and structural weaknesses in the US than they had been in their discussion of *Always Running*, which arguably puts forward a more immediate critique. We already know that this had been compromised in *Always Running* because of the group’s belief that Rodriguez had chosen to join the gang. But in *From Our Land* the participants responded to the author laying bare

⁴⁷ See for example, Natalia Toscano and Kristian Vasquez, “Red Road Traveller: The Xicanx Humanism of Luis ‘Mixcatl Itztlacuiloh’ Rodriguez” in Metcalf and Olguin, *The Life and Legacy of Luis J. Rodriguez*.

⁴⁸ Rodriguez, *From Our Land*, 31.

the need for (indigenous) healing. They now flagged his childhood (“he came from a background of poverty, right?”) and conceded that “the environment and poverty are intrinsically linked.” Memorably, one reader suggested, “Poverty has no conscience. And that’s why people do what they do.” This was an interesting point in comparison to previous discussions of choice and the verdict that, despite his difficult background, it was ultimately Rodriguez’s decision to join the gang.

Penguin Random House, who distribute *From Our Land* on behalf of Seven Stories, promote the text as being about “race, culture, identity, and belonging and what these all mean and should mean (but often fail to) in the volatile climate of our nation.”⁴⁹ We were intrigued that the group seemed to respond to a collection of essays in more judicious ways than to a “true-to-life” memoir. Their recognition of racial dynamics, for example, was more explicit this week than during the discussion on *Always Running*: “Because of their social position, many Hispanics and Black people have been at the lower end, and generally they are hated because they are forced into crime.” It was seemingly as if they took Rodriguez more seriously as a socioeconomic commentator when writing a collection of short pieces than when he wrote as a memoirist.

The conversation turned to an exploration of societal divisions, just as it had done in the week on *Always Running*. But while the earlier session had focussed on localized divisions, the final session meandered into discussions of “bigger” boundaries and did so in more restorative ways. An exploration of racial and ethnic divisions led into a dialogue concerning the tensions between religions, tribes, political parties, and wealth, which in turn was seen to be peculiarly American: “This division between people in America has always been constant.” But Rodriguez was seen as keen to reveal the benefits that could emerge from such social partitions in the contemporary US, as illustrated in *From Our Land*. As one reader noted, “he shows us that we all need respectful and meaningful relationships with others ... even though you have your own religion and spirituality you still need to be able to work with other religions.” The group were also once again mindful of Rodriguez’s own indigenous identities and the ways in which he celebrated each of us for being unique. In this manner, another participant tried to summarize the “essence” of *From Our Land*:

Generally, we are all one, but we have to have our own identity because if we are all the same and stay the same, the world can quickly become boring and just uniform. It is all

⁴⁹ See www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/609196/from-our-land-to-our-land-by-luis-j-rodriguez (accessed 15 March 2023).

of these unique cultures and identities that make the world what it is ... with different cultures, we can all mesh together peacefully and in harmony.

As a result, participants felt that Rodriguez “wrote this book for all Americans.” They contended that he was “trying to open people’s eyes,” but that he did so in very divergent ways to *Always Running*.

Rather than trying to guide the reader to make sense of the gang lifestyle, someone from our group contended that *From Our Land* could help encourage people to ponder “cultural or different perspectives,” and simultaneously understand that “we are all citizens of the world ... we’re all one species.” This is not to say that the participants felt that the book was “flawless,” and by the final week they were ever more confident in their critiques of each text (and, in the case of Rodriguez, of the author). One member was quick to highlight that “for so many people like Luis who do write and preach about the evils of capitalism, they sure do benefit from it” (this speaks to the commonly assumed view that writing is a profitable occupation). Someone else was slightly apathetic towards Rodriguez’s insistence that “we are one species” (where no one single class or race can be identified as more significant than others) given that he “unequivocally” continued to lay emphasis on his identity as a Xincanx and indigenous figure. A third reader suggested that perhaps Rodriguez was being too idealistic: “we’re never going to be a post-racial world ... because race does play a part.”

But as with *Always Running*, for these readers of *From Our Land* the text held importance in communal ways in terms of its “politics of writing.” We discussed at length the chapter called “Constant State of Pregnancy” in which Rodriguez documents his “journey” to becoming a writer, including the frustrations he faced persuading his family of his intended vocation (“What kind of a life is that?”) to his “three E’s” formula for writing: “Examine. Evoke. Express.”⁵⁰ In this chapter, Rodriguez proffers a memorable account of being caught in a tense confrontation in a Mexican prison, in which he quickly realized that poetry “was the only weapon I had.” Reciting poetry did successfully defuse the situation and led to another considered debate about the “power” of language and writing in our group. Even more so than *Always Running* (which was arguably intended to have pedagogical or redemptive sway), our reading group agreed with the colleague who felt that in *From Our Land* he is “telling his own story so someone else can get the inspiration from it.” There was certainly a sense that it was a book that elicited a particularly active engagement from its reader.

⁵⁰ Rodriguez, *From Our Land*, 46, 53.

IN CLOSING: NEOLIBERAL CRITIQUES AND CONTEXTS

Simpson, Morgan, and Caulfield, in their article “From the Outside In,” describe creative-art practitioners in prison as “change agents.” These agents might sometimes have “outlaw” status or “insider” status.⁵¹ But this book club puts us in a somewhat complicated position: in facilitating a book club we do not necessarily wear our academic hats, nor are we formal educators employed by the prison. Equally, being officially affiliated with a university restricts us from being arts “outlaws” who push boundaries to the extreme. Yet did the American content somehow enable us each to be an “outlaw” of sorts? Taken together as part of an American studies book club in HMP Hull, these sessions provided an opportunity for us to speak in constructive ways about potentially fraught topics – from gangs and gun control to abortion and Native American spirituality – that otherwise might not appear on more conventional prison education programmes in the UK.

It is important to give another nod to the neoliberal critique of prison education put forward by Dylan Rodriguez, among others. We respect the line of thinking that prison education programmes, no matter how well intentioned, may sometimes serve to support the dehumanization and institutionalization of people in prison. On the other hand, scholars like Michelle Ronda and Ragnhild Utheim do not suggest that we should end pedagogical programmes supplied by universities and colleges, but rather think about delivering pedagogy that “permits transformative, liberationist goals, including prison abolition, inside the prison classroom.”⁵² In an interview that Metcalf conducted with Luis Rodriguez for an upcoming anthology on his life and works, she queried the line of thinking that prison literature workshops might stunt revolutionary consciousness rather than fostering it in this current sociopolitical context. Luis’s response was noteworthy: “My intent is to offer keys of liberation in their minds so they can think about a world in which you don’t need keys to be liberated.”⁵³ Our American studies book club provided this UK group of people in prison the opportunity – as Ronda and Utheim have done – to discuss practices that lead to high incarceration rates and dehumanize people throughout the world, including poverty and classism, racism and sexism.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ella Simpson, Catherine Morgan, and Laura Caulfield, “‘From the Outside In’: Narratives of Creative Arts Practitioners Working in the Criminal Justice System,” *Howard Journal of Crime & Justice*, 58, 3 (Sept. 2019), 384–403.

⁵² Michelle Ronda and Ragnhild Utheim, “Toward Abolition Pedagogy: Teaching Social Justice in Prison Combined Classrooms,” *Dialogues in Social Justice*, 5 (Fall 2019–20), 64–80, 65.

⁵³ Josephine Metcalf and Ben Olguin, eds., *In the Long Run: The Life & Works of Luis J. Rodriguez* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2024).

⁵⁴ Ronda and Utheim, 65.

The American context provided a detached and therefore productive lens through which to discuss some of these “difficult” subjects. Along these lines, the prison readers were often disparaging of US society, but the texts acted as lightning rods for the group to critically reflect upon issues in their own society here in the UK (though notably they did not necessarily bring it back to their own individual predicaments). A number of the chosen books – specifically *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *THUG*, and both of Rodriguez’s works – encouraged the participants to acknowledge and consider their own positionality and relative privilege (all members except one were white men). Without hesitation, we would select these six books again to run a similar club in another HMP setting. But we might shift Rodriguez’s *From Our Land* from the final week to the “prized” opening slot given its broad range of issues and topics (that would offer a springboard for the focus of future texts) and its ability to “expand our minds.” Despite the researchers speculating at the outset of this book group that *From Our Land* was perhaps the last one these readers would pick up from a library shelf if left to their own devices, in fact it can be celebrated for most exposing readers to literature beyond their normal comfort zone.

The US neoliberal state, both in and out of the prison, has effectively led to a disconnected society in which people are left excluded, neglected, and isolated. Taken together, these six American texts offer a literal and symbolic opportunity for humans to reconnect and reflect using writing and reading to do so. Yet sadly the “comradeship” of this particular prison book group splintered and stumbled as we reached the end of the twelve sessions in their entirety. Despite our hopes that the group might continue to meet informally, and a similar enthusiasm for the book club’s continuation expressed by several of the group members in our final session, some were sentenced and moved on whilst others opted for more practical education options that “tick the boxes” of their sentence requirement. Nonetheless, prison staff recognized the value of these groups having listened to the observations of participants, and enthusiastically supported us when we brought Luis J. Rodriguez and his wife, Trini, to the prison to deliver a guest talk in August 2023. Luis and Trini were visiting Hull to deliver a keynote talk as part of the city’s annual Freedom Festival and made time in their schedule to talk to thirty or more men at the prison. Though sadly none of those who attended the original book group could now meet Luis in person, we distributed a brief questionnaire at the end of his talk asking whether people would be interested in an American-themed book group inspired by the annual themes of the Freedom Festival (isolation and loneliness); all but two respondents said *yes*.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Josephine Metcalf is a Senior Lecturer in American Studies and Criminology at the University of Hull, UK. She is the Cofounder and Codirector of the Cultures of Incarceration Centre and Programme Director for the MA in Incarceration Studies. Her research focusses on the representation of prisons and street gangs in literature and other pop culture forms, and the ways these have been received by audiences. Jo is currently working on a monograph about contemporary US prison literature and was recently a Visiting Scholar at the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where the Luis J. Rodriguez personal papers are held.

Laura Skinner is a doctoral candidate in the Cultures of Incarceration Centre at the University of Hull, UK. Her research interests include life writing, gender studies, representation of social justice issues in literature, with a particular focus on contemporary Afghan diasporic fiction and memoirs published post-9/11. Laura's PhD thesis explores British modern slavery memoirs in terms of both their content and their production. She recently worked as a Research Assistant in the Cultures of Incarceration Centre to facilitate reading groups and creative-writing sessions at HMP Hull.

The authors would like to thank Dr. Rachel Williams, Dr. Stewart Mottram, and Jamie Smith, learning and skills manager at HMP Hull, for their assistance in the facilitation of book groups. Many thanks also to the BAAS awards team for supporting this project.