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## Introduction to Writing Beyond the Prison, A Special Issue of Survive and Thrive

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Introduction to *Writing Beyond the Prison*,  
A Special Issue of *Survive and Thrive*  
by Robert Chase, Zebulon Miletsky, and Susan Scheckel

Writing is more than simply the production of the written word as a final product. Rather, it is a *process* that involves successive stages of creation and conceptualization, organization, expression, reflection, and self-realization that can be truly transformative. When shared with the wider world, writing moves beyond an act of individual consciousness and self-expression to become a communal exchange that creates knowledge, compassion, empathy, recognition of shared conditions, and analysis of social dilemmas. A deep belief in the transformative power of writing was the driving force in the creation of “Writing Beyond the Prison,” and it is the impetus for sharing these writings by incarcerated authors with the readers of *Survive and Thrive*.

The origin story of this project offers an example of how opening channels of communication--between universities and communities, between those within and beyond the carceral system—can open exciting new possibilities for the expansion of knowledge, understanding, and impact. In 2018, the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook (HISB) partnered with Herstory Writers Network to create a credit-bearing internship that encouraged students to participate in Herstory’s story-based movement for change by connecting their personal experiences and academic pursuits to larger social issues. As the Herstory partnership was growing (from an initial six to over seventy students), faculty in several departments at Stony Brook University (SBU) began an initiative (sponsored by HISB and the College of Arts and Science Dean) titled “Abolitionist Futures” to explore the work that remains to be done to abolish barriers to a just and equitable democracy. For over two years, sixteen faculty and graduate students gathered weekly to examine historical and theoretical perspectives on carceral systems and began to build a network of scholar-activists to address structural inequalities and systemic racism within the carceral ecosystem. Through these efforts, SBU developed a partnership with the United Black Family Scholarship Foundation (UBFSF), a non-profit founded by the incarcerated activist Ivan Kilgore with the mission “to create a culture of higher learning within these [incarcerated] communities.”

When the pandemic struck in March 2020, it brought an end to Herstory’s in-person writing workshops in jails, reentry groups and among prison families. The work of UBFSF to publish and disseminate the writings of incarcerated authors was also severely impacted. With limited access to formal education under the best of circumstances, incarcerated authors found even fewer opportunities to further their writing when the pandemic shut down most prison education programs. In this discouraging environment, the American Council of Learned Societies (with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities) stepped in with the Sustaining Public Engagement Grant to shore up public initiatives damaged by the pandemic. HISB, Herstory, and UBFSF worked together to create the interdisciplinary, university-community project “Writing Beyond the Prison.”

With support from the ACLS grant, a team of faculty and graduate students at SBU worked closely with UBFSF to edit over 100 manuscripts by incarcerated authors, a sampling of which is included in this special issue. These writings, and many more to come, will be preserved in an ever-expanding, open access “[Living Archive](#)” at Stony Brook University, where they are available for use by scholars, teachers, activists and policymakers. The ACLS grant also supported Herstory in adapting its unique, empathy-based memoir writing curriculum to an online format ([Herstory Beyond Bars](#)) for use in carceral settings behind and beyond bars. This online writing curriculum will nurture new writers, community organizers, and leaders. Our interactive website [Writing Beyond the Prison](#) places writings by incarcerated and system impacted individuals in cultural, historical, and pedagogical contexts.

Our hope is that “Writing Beyond the Prison” and initiatives that grow from it (including this special issue) will enable incarcerated authors, and all those impacted by the carceral system, to have a voice in shaping the scholarship, policies, and social attitudes that directly affect them. In the words of our partner Ivan Kilgore, we hope that this initiative will “advance education, not in the strict sense of ‘credentialism,’ rather education as it pertains to empowering men and women to participate in the transformation of their world.”