

THE THREE FOLLOWING CONTRIBUTIONS DESCRIBE A STUDENT PRESS Initiative writing project at Horizon Academy, the Department of Correction/Department of Education high school at Rikers Island Jail in New York City. The project has published two collections of oral histories to date, entitled Killing The Sky, vol. 1 and 2. Student Press Initiative (SPI) is a professional development organization committed to teaching and learning through publication. SPI is a program of the Morse Center for the Professional Education of Teachers (MCPET) at Teachers College, Columbia University.

THE RIKERS ISLAND SPI PROJECT

Speaking Writing

Publishing Oral Histories with Incarcerated Students

ERICK GORDON

“**B**oom, boom, boom! In comes Triple-Dog-Murder-Killer. Two-guns-up, straight outta ‘bama, locked in the slamma’, silver nine, hamma’.” Saint postures as he enters the room where we are seated in grey folding chairs. “Where’s that tape recorder? I wanna talk about some crazy gun-tottin’ gangster shit. Pop, pop, pop!” he says, sounding self-satisfied. He bangs out a beat on Formica tabletops, shifting the rhythm from desk to desk until he collapses into a chair so low that his thighs nearly touch the ground. He chops at the air with two fingers held together, then looks at me and says, “So what you want to know about this straight-up O.G.?”

And so the challenge is posed: how do I, the writing teacher-cum-interviewer, get beyond his affect and attitude to elicit the insights this young man tagged Saint has to offer? The context of our meeting looms large: we have come together for ninety minutes of Saint’s daily academic instruction at Horizon Academy at Rikers Island Jail in New York City, the school jointly run by the Department of Education and the Department of Correction. Rikers houses as many as 15,000 inmates awaiting trial, release, or sentencing. The youngest of this population of incarcerated men must, by law, be given access to a public school education (a right they sued for in 1996). School—once a source of boredom and contempt—is a now a place of refuge: a brief respite from the daily routines of the institution. Still, school is not typically a place where Saint and other inmates like him have excelled. The resulting tensions and resistance were sure to assert themselves in our interviews.

For this reason, the Student Press Initiative (SPI) consultants, in collaboration with the Horizon Academy teaching staff, established an interview protocol based on oral history’s biographical approach, which we found to be an ideal medium to engage

these students in the writing process. While language is alive in the classrooms at Horizon—in stories, discussions, and even highly skilled rhyming—reading and writing skills vary greatly. Letting the men begin by telling, rather than writing, their stories allowed us to value all forms of literacy the students brought with them to the classroom. Oral history is, after all, the familiar stories we tell at our dinner tables and on the stoops of our buildings. More formally, it is the collection of primary sources archived to help us hear, read, and understand the past through the actual words people speak. Oral history, as it lives both in the street and in the archives, grows out of the belief that we interpret the world—make meaning of our experiences—with and through story.

The SPI team began by interviewing students with broad questions about growing up, family, and home—the simplest, most accessible means to get students talking. With the help of Amy Starecheski, from Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office, we devised a series of questions—simple probes for powerful elements and details—intended to help structure narrative. Many questions were scripted but much of the interview relied on un-scripted follow-up questions.

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Within the first few minutes of our interview, Saint is sharing intimate stories about growing up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn—stories of family, friends, and associates. These stories complicate his initial description of himself as a “straight-up” gangster. In them, Saint gives us astute

insights about the shifting power at play in his home and neighborhood, revealing complex sides of himself—his persona on the street, with his mother, and even who he might be when he leaves jail. He articulates grievances about the urban schools that have ill served him and his community. He describes coming to crime and violence in order to protect himself—an irony not lost on him. Violence had become so commonplace in his life that shots fired right outside his window did not even call him away from watching movie on television.

By the close of this first session with Saint we have developed our most important tool for engaging him in the writing process: his own words. This taped interview will become a verbatim transcript. We can then begin the formidable task of working with the transcripts as living documents.


Oral historians commonly collaborate with their narrators and share drafts as they seek feedback, approval, and ideas. In this project, however, the storytellers themselves led the process of shaping their raw transcripts into narratives. Students entered into the drafting process as writers, editors, and proofreaders simultaneously. We taught informal lessons on narrative structure, verb tense, and clarity—all within the context of their own written words.

At our next session, I bring the raw transcript (a first draft) to show Saint. He takes hold of it tentatively, surprised by its weight: it is fifty-two pages in length. “Wow,” he says simply before settling in for a long, intent read. He scarcely looks up for

more than two hours. When he does, I hand him a pencil and suggest that he start again at the beginning, this time looking to mark recurring themes in the stories he has told.

What is significant about this way of working is that we start with success. We offer a text that is accessible to Saint because it is his own. Working with a population of students with widely varying literacy skills and largely unsuccessful academic experiences requires a teacher to meet students where they are. It is our foremost concern to find what “works” in a student’s literacy repertoire before we explore what is lacking.

The Killing the Sky Project, as it is known, focused in its second year on the theme of education as a way to buttress our literacy objectives. Our interviews and subsequent transcripts elicited detailed accounts of students’ educational experiences both in and out of school, the latter being as important as the former: It was our secondary objective to validate the wealth of knowledge students had acquired in their experiences outside of the classroom—in the hallways, on the street, and at home.

Saint, whose classroom persona at first seemed so singular and defined, seemed more dynamic in our revising sessions. And as his draft began to take shape, as he began to see the weight of his words in print, an interesting thing happened. He began to play with another persona, that of writer. I witnessed similar reinventions when Phat Boi said, “I got something to say here. I ought to be a journalist or something like that.” The simple fact that Saint and Phat Boi could go public as published authors opened their eyes to new possibilities, new potential paths. For Saint, his language takes a new form; sometimes it is more formal, and sometimes a bit stiff, but also cogent, moving, and effective. He plays with this new language experimentally, even jokingly, but he plays nonetheless. The reading and celebration of the second edition of *Killing the Sky* was punctuated by moments of laughter and also poignant silence. Perhaps it was in these silences that imaginings of possible selves were at play. 

Excerpt from *Killing the Sky*

(published by Student Press Initiative, June 2005)

SAINT

Y'all Too Young

Our block was known for shootouts and a lot of gang activity and stuff like that. So my mother ain't want us outside, so we just had to stay in the house; that's why she moved. She would tell us, "All right, well y'all can't go outside." And as kids, you know we'll always be like, "Aw, we want to go outside." I was about seven, my brother was like nine. We was old enough to realize that, yeah, everyday when we sit in our apartment there's always gunshots. Shots probably came through our window before. So we would be mad, but she would never give us a reason like, "Well, people getting shot outside." But we basically knew, we look at it and be like, "All right, we know what time it is."

I remember one time, I was younger than seven at the time, I think it was like '89 when we was living over there, in '89 or '90. And we was all in the house, we was watching *Leroy The Last Dragon*. It was about a black guy who was a Kung Fu artist and he was actually in his neighborhood practicing Kung Fu. And then there was a bad guy who used to beat people up and do stuff like that, rob the stores, and he did Kung Fu too. And at the end they had to fight each other and everybody thought he was gonna beat up Leroy, and Leroy ended up beating him up. Crazy movie, but now it's kind of corny when I look at it, but back then it was a good movie. Everybody was hyped, *Leroy the Last Dragon*.

It was me, my brother, my mother, and my aunt. We was all watching *Leroy The Last Dragon* and we just heard mad gun shots, the gunshots sounded like they were coming from real close. So my mother just told everybody automatically, "Just get on the floor," because we were already used to it. So everybody just got on the floor, we stayed there, and it was like, we're so used to it that I was still watching the movie. I'm on the floor laying down with my head down and all that, and I'm just watching the movie. The gunshots went on for about five or ten minutes. It just kept going and going.