

# Transcribing Inmates' Stories

The Truth is in the Details

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There is a passage from the “Spring” chapter of *Walden* wherein Thoreau slows and crystallizes language down to a literal halt so that he may appraise the beauty and delicacy of each letter. He exalts the way they leave his mouth, the shape they take on the page, and their organic resemblance to seeds which, like letters, grow from near-nothingness to figures of imposing elegance and strength. In the fall of 2005, I undertook a task that required a similarly devoted attention to linguistic detail, though in a setting quite different from Thoreau’s verdant locale.

As a masters student in the Columbia Teachers College Teaching of English program, and a newly hired employee of the Student Press Initiative (SPI), I was asked to audit the transcripts of fourteen interviews recorded for SPI’s oral history project at Rikers Island Jail. The interviews were to be collected and published in a sequel to an earlier such collection, called *Killing The Sky*. The project placed a high value on capturing the undiluted language of the men who were recorded, and my task was to review the accuracy of the typed transcriptions, correcting anything that may have been misheard, mistyped, or initially deemed to be inaudible.

My first experience with *Killing the Sky* was as an assigned read for my Teaching of Writing class. I ventured into the book somewhat indifferently, thinking that it would be a text-version of the Scared Straight programs one might see featured on *Maury*. I read it on a sunny afternoon, sitting on the rim of Central Park’s Bethesda Fountain—a perversely ironic setting considering the subject matter. It grabbed me immediately. Somewhere between the unsettling truths and the unadorned voices composing the stories lay shades of inner-city discourses that previously I had declined to confront in a sort of suburban-bred xenophobia. I shared a city but not a world with these men. As I read, nascent understandings of their choices, needs, and challenges took root in me. This inspiration led me to SPI, and SPI led me to an even deeper relationship to the project—it led me to my first true sense of constituency in my burgeoning career in education.

Prior to actually beginning the work, it was my assumption that I would work most directly with passages marked by the transcriber as “inaudible.” It was with this in mind that I opened Michael’s transcript file and donned my studio-grade headphones

(a panacea for the mumbles, to be sure). I began to comb the transcript. At first, the task was almost glibly corrective—changing “my mom” to “my moms,” dropping the ‘g’ off of gerunds when they weren’t enunciated. It can be difficult to remember, keeping in mind the subject matter of the work, that these are young men—not a one yet scraping twenty-three years—so it was not without a certain charm to find Michael unsure of himself

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on the tape: Michael’s pauses and reconsiderations reflected a wealth of youthfully self-conscious concerns—the desire to be heard and interpreted correctly, the need to present himself sympathetically, the cautious stutter-step around the more self-damning material.

Further into the text, though, a pattern began to appear. A transcript before auditing is almost necessarily blurred at the edges. Yet the unique potency of these stories lies in their sharpness of focus about these edges, a focus which helps us see more clearly the lives of men who belong to society’s blurred edges: The truth, as they say, is in the details. Inevitably, transcribers will make small errors that reflect their own understandings of the subject matter. This is not to say that these inflections are introduced intentionally: Just as a quick reader moves through a text by skating over small words and unconsciously predicting the ends of sentences, so will a transcriber. Still, to read a sentence transcribed as “I remember when I was being bad,” when rewinding and reviewing that passage several times in fact reveals it to be “I remember when I was doin’ that,” shows how easily such small errors can lead us far from the speakers’ actual meaning.

The stories in *Killing the Sky* are notable for the access they provide to an alternative moral code—these men have a presence of mind and a clear understanding of conscience, but these understandings are not necessarily aligned with those of the book’s likely audiences. To insert ideas of guilt or self-reflection where none exist is to despoil what makes this project so useful—the absolute clarity of presentation of a point of view rarely manifested in written form. If we, the audience, are to gain insight about the distinct cultures and ideologies producing and produced by these authors, then it is paramount that their personal conceptions of morality are left intact.

I think of myself at Bethesda, treating the book as a quick read. I think of myself now, treating the project as a fundamental step towards dismantling the fear and misunderstanding between the parties linked by the book. I think of Michael, poring over his copy of the transcript, crossing out lines that he thought made him sound unintelligent or repetitive. And while we agreed to take out a line here and there, I would be damned if I was going to let anyone, even Michael, try to change his own words into anything other than what they actually were. My constituency, essential to my growth and identity as a teacher, was the absolute and utterly fragile truth recorded on those fourteen purple and pink minidisks. Sun, rain, and soil in good measure—Thoreau and I are for the seeds. 