

Teaching the  
**Arts**  
behind Bars

*Rachel Marie-Crane Williams*

with a Foreword by Buzz Alexander

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*For Jack J. Williams, the first person who told me I could paint*

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## Foreword

When those of us who have done cultural work in prisons and youth facilities gather, we are full of talk, of stories, of outrage and laughter and confusion, of the need to share with others who have left "America" or "the world" to enter these foreign places. We know that the obscene policy of over-incarceration we have seen close up must be reversed. We can talk far into the night. In the essays in this volume we hear each other talking, and as always the talk resonates and provokes. These essays are for us.

The essays are also for those who are beginning or thinking of beginning a workshop or class in a prison. You spring up everywhere on your own initiative. You are in new territory and feel isolated. Here you find colleagues who know the people you are coming to know. Here you find instruction, ideas, reflections, illustrations, and hauntings, as well as stories of oppression and resistance, of denial and growth, of creation, of witness.

And so these essays are for you, also, who seek knowledge of the human condition and who seek your brothers and sisters who have disappeared from our communities.

As I close these pages, I am most haunted by James Thompson's description of the dark Loire Valley dungeon cell where a long time ago an artist, perhaps self-taught, kept his spirit lit with religious images, countryside landscapes, fantastical animals, a self-portrait. That story about the transformation of prison space is at the heart of this book. It is about what we in the Prison Creative Arts Project call the "clearing of space," about what Carol Becker, in the epigraph to Rachel Williams's first essay, calls "a demilitarized zone, a place of safety." It is about what is at stake.

Thompson's essay pulls up so many memories—Hollis-El, for instance, a hulking fierce man who could play a great comic drunk, telling us that in the yard he is like "this" (a clenched fist), that in the theater workshop he is like "this" (he opens a tiny space between thumb and forefinger, the other fingers still closed), and then back in the yard he is again the clenched fist.