

["Damascus James on Witnessing, Letter Writing, and Solitary Confinement"](#)

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PEN America, Prison and Justice Writing



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Music transition

Malcolm Tariq: You are listening to PEN America's *Works of Justice* podcast. I am Malcolm Tariq, senior manager of editorial projects for Prison and Justice Writing, which for over fifty years has amplified the voices of thousands of writers who are creating while incarcerated. *Works of Justice* spotlights key figures, writers, and artists who are reshaping the conversation on mass incarceration, advocacy, and justice in the United States.

In this episode, I speak with Damascus James, editor of *TEXAS LETTERS*, an anthology series revolving around lives spent in solitary confinement in the state of Texas.

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Malcolm Tariq: So today we're joined by Damascus James, editor of *TEXAS LETTERS*. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Damascus James: Thanks for having me, Malcolm.

Malcolm Tariq: I'm really excited to talk to you about this project, when the book came into the office, we were all very excited. I think it's a very big book. And you have the original letters in there, the transcribed letters. And it just seems like a really dope project and a lot to learn about, an immersive experience almost. So, thank you for all of the work you did to bring this book to life and to bring more attention to solitary confinement.

Damascus James: Thank you. No, thank you for having me and for helping, you know, bring awareness to it and to showcase these letters that are very, very important to me, but will hopefully become a catalyst for something down the road as well.

Malcolm Tariq: So, I think. Maybe getting started, if you can tell us what *TEXAS LETTERS* is.

Damascus James: *TEXAS LETTERS* is an anthological work, revolving around life sentences and solitary confinement in Texas specifically—at the heart of this journey. It's really the notion of the misuse of power. It's a collective work, which explores loss of sanity, humanness, and oftentimes hope through the

personal writings of a diverse and growing ensemble of people who have spent months, years, and sometimes decades, within the bowels of these harsh run relenting conditions. That's the basic overview, but it's really so much more than that. It's an ever-evolving project, really.

Malcolm Tariq: Right. And to just paint a picture for listeners, I have volume one. *TEXAS LETTERS* is almost a 400-page book. Exclusively black and white. How many letters are included?

Damascus James: It's around 30. There's 21 contributors in the book. And, and yeah, 31 letters, I believe.

Malcolm Tariq: And each letter there's a short introduction, there's the transcribed letter that the person wrote, and then we get a scan of the original letter. When it's available, there's a picture of the person. So, about 30 letters and 21 contributors. Some people wrote multiple letters, and it's in order of when they were written, correct?

Damascus James: Yeah, it's chronological. So the first letter was in June of 2021. By a person named Aaron Striz, who spent 20 years in solitary confinement. And then from there it was, you know, a consecutive series of letters by various people. And there was never any limitation on how many letters a person could contribute, it was as much or as little as they wanted to share about their experiences.

Malcolm Tariq: We'll talk later about some of the specific letters and some of the specific people that are included in the project later, but can you tell us a bit about how this project started? What was the inspiration? What inspired you to do this?

Damascus James: Yeah, of course. Yeah. So, to backtrack a little bit, I myself grew up in Vancouver Canada. I moved to New York City in my early twenties to study film and theater, and in my early thirties, I moved to Houston where my wife is from. While there, I started writing to and visiting people, throughout the TDCJ, which is the Texas Department of Criminal Justice System, primarily people in solitary confinement and on death row. The first person I wrote to was in the general population. You know, people often ask why. Was I incarcerated? Did I have family members affected by the system? I didn't. Rather, it really came from an indwelt interest in getting to know people that are in communities that are hidden away, far removed from society, and often in these rural regions.

It was curiosity, really, at the outset. A natural impulse to know and learn about those who are hidden away, and that was really kind of the catalyst for it. From there, it became, you know, an over-pen relationship. It turned into the opportunity to go and visit in person. Living in Houston, Houston's kind of at the center of the Texas prison system in many ways. A lot of the larger units are within an hour to two-hour's drive from the city itself. I would, you know, drive out to Livingston, which is where the Polunsky unit is that houses death row. They also have a large solitary confinement population as well.

After time, it just became a realization that there was a need here, in terms of people wanting to express themselves, and vouch for themselves. I think for the vast majority of people, myself included, who haven't spent time in prison, your understanding of prison is based primarily off of media, news, film, television, and you're not usually getting the entire picture. And this is what I quickly discovered after meeting these people in person and becoming friends with them, was that there was...there's so much more to the story than meets the headlines or, what you're taught. So, from here, it became a collective process and ideation period of, you know, how can we shed light on what's happening?

I started to learn about their grievances and their, their personal trials and tribulations with, you know, the torture that is solitary confinement. I began to learn how it's euphemized, it's rebranded, and yet it persists, kind of, you know, abated really. So that was the catalyst for the beginning of the anthology. It was really with one letter and then it grew, spreading by word of mouth, within the prison walls, eventually evolving into this book that you mentioned, which is 392 pages. And really an unorthodox anthology that really covers the gamut from a web of violence and complicity to racism that's really entangled with this statewide system, which, you know, is the largest in America. And that's how it came to be.

Malcolm Tariq: That's amazing that you wanted to learn more about this subject and you just did it and it turned into this really thoughtful project and you've maintained connections with the people who are included in it. Who was the first person that you contacted and how did you go about that? Did you ask someone if they knew anyone who was inside or did you search your people on the internet?

Damascus James: Yeah, there's a large platform online called WriteAPrisoner.com, and that's where I started. And from there you can write to people incarcerated throughout the country in different states.

I specifically focused on Texas, being that I lived there and that's how it began. I wrote to a person named Mark to begin with, and then Mark was released. And, you know, I didn't hear much from Mark after that period. And from there, I connected with Aaron. And then from there, Paul. And it went on and on like that, over a series of weeks and months. It just began to prod me, if that's the right word, to ask the bigger questions of why do we have a system like this? What's propping it up? How am I, and are we, reflected in it? I got to know the human beings behind these walls and they were some of, and are, some of the most eloquent, smart, compassionate people I've ever met in my life.

So, it's been an eye-opening, you know, pondering deeply and beholding and bearing witness to this pain and suffering. It's, you know, it's not introspection for the sake of introspection. I've always been really interested in just civilization. And, also, Dostoevsky once said the degree of civilization in society can be judged by entering its prisons. And the more prisons I entered in Texas, the more I realized how true this was. And, the more I learned, the more it became apparent that silence becomes violence. And to not speak out about this, or somehow raise awareness, would be complicitness. And I just couldn't be a part of that.

So, by being inactive and remaining mute, that's in essence what I'd be doing. So I thought of a way, in tandem with these people, of how could we share. Because they would mention grievances they were filing through the TDCJ process to help their situations depending on what they're going through specifically, you know. Most of them in indefinite solitary confinement for a variety of reasons, which we can get into, and having no reprieve, no release from the suffering. And really just stuck in a system that's set up for failure really and I, honestly speaking with my, my wife who grew up in Texas, she was appalled and, and had had no idea that this kind of atrocity took place in, in her home state, to such a degree where people were locked in 6 by 9 cages for 22 to 24 hours a day for 20 plus years.

Which, in Texas you have over 500 people who have spent more than a decade in this type of environment. So, it's been, like I mentioned at the outset, an evolving learning thing for myself. So, it's been an evolution.

Malcolm Tariq: So, some of the letters are...most of them are dated, if not all of them, but some of them I noticed have titles on the scanned documents. And now hearing that you, your process for how you contacted these people and how you begin to talk about different things and learn more about each other, were you asking them to respond to a certain question? Or were you just telling them that you were putting this book together and if they wanted to contribute a letter, they could?

Damascus James: Yeah, oftentimes I didn't reach out about the project. I really...the initial reach out would be a genuine: Hi, how are you? My name's Damascus, I live in Houston. I'd love to learn more about your story, and I can share about mine, if you're open to it.

So, a lot of the initial approaches weren't necessarily about acquiring more contributors or more writers. It was about getting to know more people. I wouldn't reach out to prisoners solely on the basis of acquiring a letter or contribution to the project. It was really an intentional desire to get to know somebody, and then if it organically came to be that they wanted to share their experiences through the project, I welcomed any contribution at any time.

And again, there were no restrictions on word count or, or what they could say or what they could share. It was basically an open book, so to speak, and a blank canvas and they could paint with words.

So, yeah. I hope that answers your question.

Malcolm Tariq: Yeah, definitely. I'm gonna ask you to read a couple of the letters for us to talk about, but I now have a question. I imagine that this process of contacting a stranger—there's bound to be some distrust maybe, was that at all a part of the process? Gaining people's trust? Who, I mean, they don't know you.

Damascus James: Right.

Malcolm Tariq: And oh, I'm sorry. The second part of that question was were there people who did not respond so kindly to you?

Damascus James: No, I'd say for the vast majority, to answer your second question first, the vast majority of people that I wrote to, were honestly just so thrilled at the fact that a letter was coming through their cell door that there was nothing but gratitude in their response, which was fantastic. I was happy to hear that the gentle expression of a letter can mean so much to somebody. So, I never felt any animosity or had any pushback, that I can recall.

For the most part it was very respectful, thankful, and mutually curious. Again, human beings from maybe different walks of life getting to know one another. It was...yeah, I'd never had a bad experience with reaching out and then hearing back, or not hearing back. It's usually been mutually kind of, on the same page, which has been great and...really great.

Malcolm Tariq: So just to give an overview, with so many letters, and so many people, a lot of things are touched on here. Everyone is solitary, so that's definitely, of course, the underlying theme.

But also within that you get all types of health related things. So public health, mental health, physical health. As you mentioned earlier, a lot of the legal things. So people's court proceedings, the way they file a complaint or like a grievance. There's this one letter by Teddrick Batiste in which he describes his mom and his little brother coming to see him. She hadn't seen him in a while, and she likes to bring him food, but the vending machine was broken. And so the first thing she says to him was, "I'm so sorry I couldn't get you any food." And he is like, "I just wanna see you, I'm not concerned about the food," but it's a very sweet moment. And it's such a short letter that, you know...so we get things like that. And because as we mentioned earlier, the letters are in chronological order, and some people write multiple letters.

One of the writers, his letters are so clear and detailed and he writes about this hunger strike that he is about to embark on with other people. And the last letter in the book from him is a few days or a few weeks before the hunger strike is supposed to begin. And so he's talking about being eager about it, but also his anxiety about all of it.

So, I want to ask you what happened with the hunger strike? And, there's a history of activism within prisons in this country where people go on hunger strikes to advocate for themselves and the people who are around them.

Damascus James: Yeah. So there's been a series of hunger strikes since this project began. In volume one, a person who's incarcerated named Aaron Striz, who was in solitary confinement for 20 years, they were set to embark on a hunger strike beginning January of 2022. And they did, in fact, do that at the Darrington Unit, which is just south of Houston—it's now been renamed the Memorial Unit. Some seeming progress came from the hunger strike. And, you know, hunger strikes are a very strange phenomenon in terms of in order for someone to be heard, that person stops eating and so there's been a number of these hunger strikes throughout the project that have kind of flared up in an attempt to bring about change, to be heard. That first hunger strike, which is in the Volume One book brought about—for Aaron, at least—a move to a different unit, and with grandiose promises, to some degree of, changes that were going

to happen. I stay in touch with him quite regularly and unfortunately, a lot of those promises didn't pan out.

So, a lot of the times when these hunger strikes flare up, there's this reactive side of Texas Department of Criminal Justice that is starting to see the writing on the wall in terms of media attention. That people are going to such extreme lengths, to really combat this torture that's ongoing. And so there's little hints of reprieve that are thrown in to squelch or at least calm the storm temporarily but usually without any meaningful, long-term effect—up until now anyways.

The most recent set of hunger strikes took place these past few months throughout, again, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice system. So, it was various units throughout the system, including the Allred Unit, which is in Iowa Park in north Texas. And it's a prison where Roger Uvalle is and it's the largest, in terms of the most people in solitary confinement throughout that system in Texas. And Roger embarked on it with the intention of going until he couldn't go any longer and he ended up losing 20 pounds, getting very, very sick in the process. And during this time, you know, Texas Department of Criminal Justice was basically banning journalists from accessing the hunger strikers in an attempt, again, to suppress and silence the voices of those that were, you know, trying to be heard, at long last.

Now with the Texas legislative session in place, there's a variety of bills that are trying to be passed to bring about reform, specifically with regards to, you know, indefinite solitary confinement. For be it security threat group designations, so that means, essentially there's hundreds upon hundreds of prisoners in solitary confinement in Texas that are literally in there for no disciplinary infraction—no violent outbursts, or anything like that—but merely, because of having a gang affiliation of some sort, or what's called a security threat group. So, purely by policy, they're indefinitely in solitary confinement. So, a lot of the hunger strike revolved around that and this uprising to hopefully bring about some change there, and change is yet to be seen. The corrections committee has heard some of these bills be presented by different representatives, but, as of yet, nothing's been passed. So, time will tell at this point.

Malcolm Tariq: yeah. I'm glad you mentioned the gang affiliation piece. Reading this book, you learn a lot about the different policies and things people have to go through to get moved to different parts of a prison or to get a different status. And so in addition to getting people's personal stories, their opinions, their feelings, you also learn a lot about the Texas prison system specifically through everybody's letters.

So, do you wanna read one of the letters that are related to the hunger strike?

Damascus James: Yes, I'd, I'd love to. This is from Roger Uvalle. Roger's been in solitary confinement for 29 years and this is his letter dated January 18th, 2023.

I am on hunger strike as of 1-10-23, 8-days without eating and I'll be going till I get sick. I rather suffer this way than to continue in the Ad seg/restricted housing conditions that I've

been in the past 29 yrs; that has tortured me and caused irreparable damage physically and mentally. I'm classified as Chronically Mentally Ill (CMI) but still held in Ad seg/Restricted housing conditions; no other programs are not available for but GRAD, that was what classification committee told me the last 3 times I've seen them, and the reason for that they stated, is they have me tagged STG even though numerous times denied their claims. I've been case free for over 4 years. Since I've notified officials/medical of my hunger strike. Mental health has not come to check on my well being - nor do they do their mandatory checks on us being on psyche load.

I had made demands to Warden Smith here at the Allred Unit when I informed him of my hunger strike, I had demanded to be released to general population or to one of the mental health programs that is offered to others that are not labeled as STG. I have had no response from them concerning my demand. Medical is doing the daily check ups since after my 3rd day of hunger strike, taking my weight, and vital signs and urinalysis. I'm still struggling with depression, anxiety, hearing voices. Medication they are giving does not help. I've told that to the psyche doctor but tells me there's no other medication to give. This has been since March 2022.

I quit taking all meds and my mental illnesses have gotten worse. All I do is sleep all day, crying every other day, voices starting to get very bad with saying bad things that get me mad or more depressed. I'm shaky all the time. I hear the voices when I leave my cell. Anxiety attacks. Haven't been able to do anything.

I was struggling to write this letter. I haven't written much since I stopped eating. I know there's alot of people in this protest for prison reform to end this torture of being in isolation indefinitely. I pray for that reform and for a chance to regain a small portion of what I used to be before I was put in Ad Seg and have an equal opportunity to the programs, mental health treatment, and privileges as everyone else in general population, especially contact visits with my family.

*Roger Uvalle #625717
Allred Unit
2101 FM 369
North Iowa Park, TX 76367*

Malcolm Tariq: Wow. I've read the book, so I've read a lot of letters like this. Listening to you read it, it really sounds sort of like testifying or witnessing, like a declaring of what's going on. What is it like for you to receive letters like this? Like, so many of them?

Damascus James: Yeah. It's eye opening. Every time I receive a new one, I'm learning more about this multifaceted system and world and environment. And really when I transcribe them, and I'm actually punching their words into my keyboard or my laptop, is really when I get a sense of what they're going through, what their struggle is. I'm getting to feel, I'm basically duplicating their writing in their cell, but I'm doing it from my free world environment and I'm literally trying to place myself in their shoes. It's nearly impossible. But because so many of the letters I receive are so vivid and so detailed with granular detail, they transport me and like you mentioned, they become testimonial. They become testimonies and timestamps, marking, chronicling the time and torture, simultaneously. It's, oftentimes even hard to, to read these letters. Some of them, especially the longer ones, I find myself having to kind of pause and reread and, you know, just to ensure I've read it right because the accounts are so horrendous, and instances so beyond comprehension that you're almost hard pressed to just understand.

Every time I get a letter that has *TEXAS LETTERS* on the envelope, I know I'm in for something that's going to expand my awareness, but also hopefully, test me in some way and open up even more empathy. I think the more you learn, the more you can't look away. And, now that a lot of these prisoners have gotten access to tablets, and they have phone access from time to time, I'm getting an even more thorough testimony and experience and, you know, there's times when I can hear people screaming in the background and you get these guttural, visceral kind of sound, and kind of auditory elements that expand on the written word.

So, there's so many layers to the letters that go beyond the page. And that's really kind of been the biggest, and most powerful thing for me personally.

Malcolm Tariq: Yeah. I never even thought about that. You're experiencing, I said earlier that we get photos, we get the transcript, and we get like a photo of the original document, but you're also talking to these people personally sometimes like through the phone or through a voice message maybe. And so you get several different types of letters. Wow.

So, do you wanna read one more?

Damascus James: Yeah, I'd love to read one by Britney Gulley, who also goes by Xandan, that's X-A-N-D-A-N, and is a female-to-male transgender who's been in solitary confinement for six years. Is currently at the Lane Murray Unit in Gatesville, Texas.

And this letter dates from August 2nd of 2022.

This is my second time being held captive in prolonged solitary confinement. From 2012 to 2017, I was held hostage and only after filing a 2254 habeas corpus against the executive director at the time was I freed. This time around, once again, I filed a civil suit in the Western District US Court in Waco, Texas. Case number 6:22-cv-494, Britney Gulley Vs. Warden Audrey England, et al.

I hear the screams, I hear the cries. I hear the calls for help. Is it real or is it in the mind? Both. There are others screaming and crying along with me. I'm given dull razors to shave my face. I'm given panties, no boxers to cover my private area.

As a F-to-M transgender, I am often targeted for taunts, ridicule, belittling remarks, crude jokes, and gestures. I've not experienced sunshine in almost a year. I've not had any human contact in almost a year. I'm deprived of basic human necessities. I love to read books, but I can only read in the daytime when daylight comes through the cracks in the walls.

I have no light at night. I am succumbed with darkness, figuratively and literally. When I file complaints about these simple atrocities and the violating of my human rights, I'm retaliated against. I've been punched, kicked, spit on, and stomped in the skull after reporting abuse and bringing light to the corruptions in Texas prisons for women.

I'm a warrior who has not given up the fight for justice and peace and freedom. It is better to be hated for what you are, than to be loved for what you are not. I am my own. I can't be others. These four walls squeeze out the soul, murdering the mind and spirit. How I survive, I do not know.

Malcolm Tariq: Wow, these letters are so rich. Hearing you read it, I'm picking up on different things from when I just read it to myself, namely him saying he was kicked in the skull. What imagery to use. Instead of saying kicked in the *head*, to be kicked in the *skull*. It, it's definitely more visceral, but also kind of more, I don't know if the word is, not scientific, but there is—

Damascus James: Yeah, there's an anatomical quality to it.

Malcolm Tariq: Yeah. Yeah. Where it's almost like, this is like data.

Damascus James: For sure, for sure. And there is...they become...I mean, yeah, that happens in a lot of these letters where you have these very, physical depictions of, you know, how it goes beyond just the mental trauma and really, affects, physically, the body, the vessel that carries their mind and is subjected to, you know, beyond punches and kicks, you know, there's rape and all things you can imagine. And then it really translates into, a lot of times, self-harm, which is another anatomical kind of side of the trauma that's then released into a physical form. So there's so many layers to the psychology, the physiology. All those elements.

Malcolm Tariq: I guess my phrasing of it being scientific was kind of correct. But at the same time, with letters like this, it's like kicking the skull, but also a few lines later, this very poetic language.

And I've noticed that across so many of the letters that we receive at PEN America. You know, we get letters from prison every day, sometimes multiple times a day. We get letters dropped off on our desk. And just the poetry that's

infused I mean, letter writing is an art, but in these letters that are, like we were saying part testimony, part like detailing things that happen to these people on the daily. And there's this emotional, of course, like you can't read these. I mean, some people can and do not have an emotional response, but you know, it's just like in the very fabric of what they're writing about and how they're telling their story.

Damascus James: Yeah. I completely agree. What resonates with me a lot of the times is, like you're talking about, is there's this poetic quality that, that permeates, you know, a lot of them. And, I think it's that, that there's this strange strength quality that comes out of the fact that they're writing these letters. The stakes are so high in just writing a letter. That's the thing too, is, you know, they risk retaliation, they risk some sort of backlash, for speaking out against these injustices. So, there's a beauty in that strength that I find just so compelling and so inspiring.

And that's what I tell a lot of the contributors in this book is I just, I honestly, I just thank them for their courage to put pen to paper or to type it out on their SwinTec typewriter. You know, and hope for the best. Hope that it reaches some eyes or, or gets read aloud and reaches some ears.

So, it's, it's a very courageous thing to do, to put pen in paper in solitary confinement in Texas.

Malcolm Tariq: I think you just wrapped it up so beautifully, thanking the writers who contributed to this project, and definitely for being so vulnerable and, and sharing things about their life.

So, thank you for this work. Thank you for bringing these voices. To us and thank you for joining us for this conversation about this book, and I'm looking forward to the different volumes that come out soon. I mean, part of what I like about this is that these letters were written months ago and we have them so, so quickly, so that's very commendable on your part.

Damascus James: Yeah, thanks Malcolm. Yeah, there's a real time quality to publishing them as soon as they land in the mailbox and then, and then the plan is to continue to publish them in book form over the months and years to come.

Malcolm Tariq: That's great. Well, I'll definitely be on the lookout for those. Thank you for joining us today.

Damascus James: Thank you, Malcolm.

Music transition

Malcolm Tariq: This episode of works of justice was produced by Malcolm Tariq. Music used throughout this episode was created by BL Shirelle and Fury Young of Die Jim Crow Records, the nation's first non-profit record label for formerly and currently incarcerated artists.

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Members of PEN America prison and writing team include: Jessica Abolafia– Program Assistant, Moira Marquis Senior Manager, Free Writes Project, Caitis Meissner Director, Prison and Justice Writing, Robert Pollock Prison Writing Program Program Manager, Malcolm Tariq Senior Manager, Editorial Projects, Prison and Justice Writing

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