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Re: Louis Bourgeois and his course delivered at Parchman Prison

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to serve as a reference for Louis Bourgeois and the course that he delivered on memoir-writing at Parchman Prison in 2014. I am associate professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi, with a background in moral and political philosophy. I served as an external evaluator for a Mississippi Humanities Council grant which supported Louis's course at the prison. I am writing now independently of the state humanities council to let others know about the remarkable interactions I had the pleasure of witnessing between Louis and the student-prisoners at Parchman Prison.

Prior to attending a meeting of Louis's course on memoir-writing at Parchman Prison, I had not known him or Vox, the non-profit recipient of the grant. The long trip from Oxford to Parchman alone was evidence of Louis's enthusiasm and his wish to offer educational opportunities to all citizens, including those in prison. I only made the one round-trip visit, but Louis made the long drive weekly for the duration of the course and grant period. On the drive I enjoyed getting to know him, but it was in the classroom that I was most taken with his abilities as a humanities scholar and artist. Louis was professional, prepared, and early. We arrived in time to ensure that he had a chance to talk with the prison's director of education. It was clear from the staff at the prison that courses like the one Louis offered are welcome and desired, but that such opportunities are few. The students in Louis's class made the matter especially clear: they were deeply grateful for his course.

After taking care of preliminaries, such as copies for handouts, Louis joined the inmates who were all seated in the classroom, eagerly organizing their stacks of writing. Each was enthusiastically ready to submit stories, their own memoirs, to Louis, myself, and anyone interested in reading them. In good pedagogical fashion, Louis began the class with an exercise of reading over a text that everyone had in handout form, which featured excellent and artful prose. As a person who has taught for around a dozen years, I can tell you that it takes some thoughtful selection and preparation to pick a text read together which evokes student responses and rich interactions. I was profoundly impressed with the

prisoners' eagerness to jump in and discuss the material, to raise questions, and generally to interact seriously in discussion.

I have witnessed many classes taught by others. In each instance, the students felt somewhat self-conscious, given the presence of a guest observer. The only way I noted the inmates' reactions, however, was in their insistence that I appreciate how much the course meant to them. It was clear that, for many of them, this course was their first exposure to advanced intellectual engagement of this kind. They were hungry for the interactions. Every time a text was to be read, a student was ready to jump into reading the material aloud. I felt a certain amount of envy – desire to work with students so intensely interested in and grateful for the course. There was no hint that any of the students took the opportunity for granted. In addition, it was clearly a valued outlet for students' frustrations, feelings, and desire to be heard.

I was most moved when the students read their own work aloud. The range was remarkable, with some students writing about the treatment they had experienced in the penal system to others who wrote about their childhood. I remember one prisoner-student who wrote about what Christmas was like growing up in a family that could not do anything special for the holidays, though everyone else he knew was celebrating and excited. His depictions of growing up in poverty were moving and powerful. Another author wrote a beautiful depiction of going through forced school integration. He was too uncomfortable to read it himself, so one of his peers stepped in and was willing to read it to the class for him. The piece described the colors the author saw at school with reference to a box of crayons thrown open. Though my visit was months ago now, I still remember his reference to the intense commotion of joining a large school, with people going quickly in all directions, like a knocked-over ant hill. His language was elegant and his imagery was striking. I cannot do his work justice in my description from memory. Nevertheless, I can tell you that I have very few times in my educational and teaching career been as moved by student-teacher interactions as I was on my visit to Parchman Prison.

The matter that was clearest in my experience visiting Parchman and Louis's class was that more opportunities like the one he offered are wanted and needed. Some of the students told me that they felt transformed by the experience. If in any way you can encourage or support Louis's and Vox's efforts to deliver programming like what I witnessed at Parchman Prison, I strongly recommend that you do it.

If you have any questions for me about Louis, feel free to call me at 662.915.1336 or email me at etweber@olemiss.edu.

Sincerely,



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Associate Professor

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