

“Start by saying my name” – returning voice and identity to the unfree in Ruth Beale’s *Project Zed*

On arrival into this world, the first legal requirement is to register birth. Within 42 days, a new baby must be registered and allocated a name. This name becomes the foundation of the individual’s identity; it is the word a mother croons into her newborn’s ear, the word shouted across a playground during a game of football, the word printed in black ink across documents, letters and paperwork forever more.

However, on entering prison, this series of carefully selected syllables is immediately replaced with a number. In Carl Cattermole’s book *Prison*, an anecdote from a child insightfully captures this reductive process: “I’ve known Dad’s prison number off by heart for years. To his friends he is Ian, to the prison he is A9567AF; to me he is Dad.” As freedom is removed and the convict disappears behind a concrete wall, so their previously established identity of either “Dad” or “Ian” is eroded and reduced to a random string of numbers and letters. This is a theme picked up by artist Ruth Beale in her collaborative radio play (written with incarcerated people at HMP Lincoln), *Project Zed*. “I’m A168NPR” proclaims the central protagonist on being accused of not remembering his name. “That’s not a name.” quips another character with a more conventional name – Rose – “It’s a database reference.”

Beale – who often works collaboratively with communities – began her research into the prison system back in 2018 after receiving an open brief from Mansions of the Future to work in Lincoln where manuscripts of the Magna Carta and Charter of the Forest are held. Despite being key historic texts in outlining the basis of human rights, Beale observed that both the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest focus on the rights of the free. “So, this foundation of law and freedom was serving only a small minority of people. I started to think about who the unfree are in our society today.”

“The unfree” Beale met in HMP Lincoln were referred to by the prison officers not by their forenames or prison numbers, but in an “oddly formal way”, pairing their surnames with the title “Mr”. And when it came time for Beale to credit her co-collaborators by naming them on the script, she hit resistance from the prison due to a desire to protect victims and the need to dispel any negative publicity around the perception prisoners are indulged with enjoyable creative activities. The compromise was to use first names and to share the copyright of the script, assigning it freely to each other for future productions.

Performed by professional actors, *Project Zed* was broadcast in August across National Prison Radio, BBC Radio 4’s Front Row, Lincoln City Radio, Resonance FM and Montez Press Radio. Beale employed actors to perform the piece because she wanted to honour the inmates’ work with a high-quality production. In addition - as with the naming of prisoners – the voices of incarcerated people can’t be broadcast beyond the confines of the prison walls; National Prison Radio is only available within the prison system. With names censored and voices silenced, *Project Zed* becomes all the more important in capturing the experiences and thoughts of the incarcerated. And selecting sci-fi as the genre opened up endless possibilities, making it the perfect playground for the prisoners to create their new world.

The final half hour radio drama is set 60 years in the future when a prisoner is released into an Orwellian state. Once his memories start to return, the protagonist – or A168NPR – realises he is part of an abusive government-controlled conspiracy and he must decide whether to maintain his ignorance or take the risky road of rebellion. Alongside Beale, drama therapist Sonia Rossington assisted the prisoners as they role-played the various characters. Beale would make notes and write the script up every evening, producing a piece reflective of daily existence in the prison. “The script is full of prison in-jokes” explains Beale. “Zanco, the AI, is the brand name of the tiny phones that people smuggle into prisons, and A168NPR is offered two paracetamol, because that the prison medics offer you for everything.”

Just as the inmates’ voices and identities are shielded from public view, so is the case for A168NPR. Unable to remember his own name, he struggles to comprehend life beyond the prison walls. His inability to understand who he is also damages his relationships and – despite the fact Rose claims to know him – A168NPR’s lack of self-awareness blocks his ability to recognise her. *Project Zed* ends on a call to change the world that begins with Rose restoring A168NPR’s true identity, he says: “Then start by saying my name.”

When naming is so central to the structure of a functioning society – one that depends on healthy relationships and an understanding of individual identity – its absence from the prison system is striking. As part of the Mansions of the Future project, Beale also hosted two online conversations: *Incarceration, Power and the State* and *Arts, Education and Agency in Prisons*. An ex-inmate and prison abolitionist, John Bowden’s description of the purpose of prison in *Incarceration, Power and the State* goes some way towards explaining the reduction of identity into what Rose describes as “a database reference”. Bowden says: “One of the prime functions of the prison system is to totally disempower the prisoner and strip them of all civilian human rights. And the relationship of prisoners to the state is virtually almost one of slaves. They have no rights whatsoever.”

In *Project Zed* the removal of a name coincides with the removal of memory in order to hold civilians in a highly controlled state where a lack of individual awareness leads to a removal of free will. Bowden sees this insidious pattern within our own society: “The ills of society are [perceived as] the fault of this small, despised minority. That’s why prisons exist; to conceal them and to take them away from the rest of society. That’s the ideological justification for prison.” Carl Cattermole confirms this in *Prison*, explaining that entrance into incarceration is “a monsoon designed to wash away your humanity.”

If the removal of individual names and voices is part of a system to dehumanise and scapegoat the vulnerable, *Project Zed* does something quite radical. Not only does it clearly depict the issues with name reduction in the text, but it empowers the prisoners by enabling them to tell their own story. And, in listing their birthnames on the script, for a moment they are lifted from a hidden homogenous mass blamed for society’s ills into scriptwriters and commanders of their own narrative. A168NPR’s challenge to “start by saying my name” is answered in Beale’s project and is a provocation for us to reconsider the purpose of those giant concrete walls in segregating a large chunk of society.

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