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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Established in 2019, the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* is the only open-access, peer-reviewed journal that publishes exclusively on topics and issues affecting the field of higher education in prison. Our goal is that the journal will serve as a tool to facilitate conversation on theory, praxis, and teaching and learning in prison.

Launching this journal represents one facet of our collective commitment to quality higher education, as well as an effort to engage in and promote public dialogue. As we move forward, we invite practitioners, students, advocates, policymakers, and others immersed in scholarship and research that centers teaching and learning in prison to use the pages of this journal to amplify access to their work. By creating a space dedicated to this scholarship, and expanding access to such work, we hope this journal will improve the quality of educational opportunities available to students currently incarcerated and alumni of higher education in prison programs with the ultimate goal of aiding in the effort to abolish the prison industrial complex.

Note: The *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* is published independently by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and is supported by an Editorial Board.

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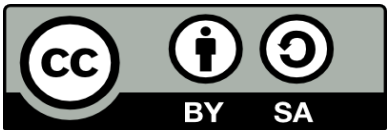
OPEN ACCESS & CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION

We are committed to making information and research freely accessible to the public in an effort to support a more robust exchange of knowledge on the field of higher education in prison. Accordingly, there are no fees associated with reading or publishing in the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* (e.g., no submission fees, subscription fees, or article processing charges [APCs]).



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Introducing the Journal of Higher Education in Prison

Erin Castro, Mary Gould, and Breea Willingham

Starting a journal for a field you wish did not exist and working actively to end is a strange feeling. Of course, we are inspired by our colleagues and students and relish the moments of dynamic learning experiences inside classrooms. We are transforming, too, as we learn to engage the work of higher education in prison in more ethical and just ways. But the places in which we work — prisons, jails, and detention centers for adults and children — are racist and inhumane and should not exist.

The oft-cited incarceration statistics in the United States are staggering but do not singularly paint a complete picture. The 2.2 million people in physical custody and isolation and an estimated million caged by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, are not a representative slice of the general population, but rather a specific and targeted community who threaten the terror of white supremacy: Black life; communities of Color; low socioeconomic communities; immigrants; queer people; and those ushered into marginalization by widespread social disinvestment (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). The repertoire of policing, courts, and surveillance has swept upwards of 8 million people into its scheme, with massive swaths of people, neighborhoods, and generations harmed by the gendered racial violence of targeted punishment (Rodríguez, 2020). The work of higher education in prison occurs within this context, and this context is all too missing from contemporary scholarship, literature, and conversations of practice.

We are witnessing a moment of renewed attention toward abolition and the possibility of a world without prisons. Activists such as Mariame Kaba, Angela Davis, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, have long argued for abolishing prisons and the attendant social reliance upon geographies of removal. Sustained by deep investments in antiblackness, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, xenophobia, and gendered racial violence, the work of incarceration is the work of white supremacy. Higher education in prison occurs here, where those of us who decide to enter prisons as free people must rely upon the mechanisms of state violence to secure that entrance. What might this necessary reliance upon Departments of Corrections mean for the work of higher education in prison? Can higher education in prison programs

work in partnership with Departments of Corrections, and should they? What might be some of the damaging consequences of considering the work of higher education in prison a field at all?

We hope that the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* (*JHEP*) is a space to raise these kinds of questions that wrestle with the histories and circumstances of coordinated human removal and privilege futures in which prisons, jails, detention centers, and all other locations designed to confine and cage people are not permanent fixtures in our world or imagination. We hope that this journal can be of service to those futures, and we think that there should be a venue where practitioners, scholars, activists, and students can come together to share ideas, stories, research, experiences, theories, and practices toward the end of prisons and punishment. So, in some sense, we are starting a journal in an effort to end it.

Strange? Perhaps.

Necessary? We think so.

Unlike publication outlets that focus on the site of prisons or jails and the people inside them as unique places for education to occur, we approach this journal with criticisms of our current conditions and deep knowledge of and respect for educational theory and praxis. At present, there are only two options to publish in this field: the *Journal of Correctional Education* and the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*. We believe there is a need for a third space, one that prioritizes a different set of values for college-in-prison as anti-racist, diverse in the areas of theory and practice, and necessary for the work of abolition; a space that firmly denounces the logic that upholds incarceration and focuses exclusively on postsecondary education. We want a venue to explore vulnerabilities and uncertainties, to question commonly held assumptions, and even to question the work itself and the very existence of higher education in prison. We want this journal to be an outlet where students can interrogate and explore their ideas and challenge and criticize the field. Accordingly, we hope the journal provides a productive space to interrogate the practices of higher education in prison and prisons themselves. As editors, the creation of this journal is a move away from a focus on the individual as the locus of attention, and toward the infrastructures of punishment, both inside and outside of prisons. In this sense, we seek scholarship that examines the politics

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and possibilities of higher education in prison from both a global and granular level, perhaps challenging dominant assumptions regarding student worth and desirability or the purposes of higher education in prison as tied to reduced recidivism. These are the primary reasons and questions that have inspired us to start this journal.

Overview of Contributions

The inaugural volume of the *JHEP* publishes two types of essays: Contemporary Perspectives and Articles and is inviting a third format, Book Reviews, to be included in Volume Two. We begin this volume with a series of pieces under the heading of Contemporary Perspectives. For this volume, we invited Contemporary Perspectives essays to address urgent issues in the field, including, but not limited to: The impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Prison; the reinstatement of Pell Grants; abolition; white supremacy; and anti-racism. Contemporary Perspectives essays maintain a singular topical focus and are shorter in length than a traditional article. Additionally, alternative genres (e.g., creative nonfiction; court cases; dialogical exchanges; etc.) were invited. We hope that this format will provide more publishing opportunities for potential contributors. A series of full-length Articles follow the Contemporary Perspectives essays.

This volume is representative of the effort to create room for an emerging intellectual community, as well as illustrate the challenges and limitations of these efforts, which include launching months before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enduring barriers to resources for scholars who are incarcerated. The Call for Manuscripts for the inaugural volume of *JHEP* was publicized in November 2019, in association with the 2019 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison. This first volume centers on the questions: *What is the field of higher education in prison?* and *What does it mean to be a 'field'?* Further, potential contributors were invited to explore various tensions and possibilities for higher education in prison and how those dynamics intersect with forms of oppression and power.

Contemporary Perspectives

This section opens with an essay by Oscar Fabian Soto titled, *Far from a Revolution: Global Capitalism, Higher Education in Prison and the Failed Movement against Super-Incarceration*. In it, Soto explores how "racial justice" has been commodified in the context of global capitalism. Further, Soto examines how higher education in prison programs that fit into this matrix have also become part of the machinery of moderation and incrementalism in the context of abolition and radical political practices against mass incarceration.

In the piece titled *Human Connection is Contraband. So how do we do Education?*, Kaia Stern offers a reflection on the unspoken knowledge that "human connection" is a form of "contraband" in the context of higher education in prison.

Framed in this essay as "smuggled goods," Stern explores the ways that connection and community are built, challenged, and in some cases, actively prevented in the higher education in prison classrooms.

Justin's[1] Contemporary Perspective essay titled, *heal me, oh jailer: Day 4,917*, offers an indictment on the hypocrisy of the concept of "rehabilitation" and adjacent, and equally problematic concepts, in the context of the prison system: "health," "heal," "well," and "cure." Turning the questions of who is "well" and who is "in need of rehabilitation," the essay picks apart the infrastructure supporting the all-to-common belief that the United States. prison system and incarceration itself is premised on the work of rehabilitation. Justin draws upon 4,917 days of observation to support the assessment offered of the prison system and ultimately of himself.

The fourth and final Contemporary Perspective essay forms a link between this section and a section to be fully integrated into *JHEP* in Volume Two: Book Reviews as well as a collaboration between the journal and Freedom Reads (formerly the Million Book Project).[2] The essay *Freedom Begins with a Book* opens with its author, Reginald Dwayne Betts, recounting a common lie that is told about people who are incarcerated, that they "don't crave the wonders that can be found in a book." Mounting a significant challenge, Betts offers their own literary journey, inside and outside, as evidence. Now, as the Founder of Freedom Reads, Betts is compiling a 500-book Freedom Library to be placed in prisons in every state, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. In partnership with the *JHEP*, this essay also announces the forthcoming launch of the Book Review section of the journal.

Articles

The three articles published in this inaugural volume offer a range of visions for postsecondary education inside prisons. Each poses challenges to the many assumptions of teaching and learning that are born out of a racist education system that divides students into groups deemed to be "deserving of quality" or groups deemed "deserving of better than nothing" educational opportunities. A thread moving through each of the pieces is that the philosophies of "good enough" or "better than nothing" are born of an infrastructure of injustice and inequality that undergirds some practices of teaching and learning in prison and that which must be eradicated.

Sarah Moore and Tanya Erzen explore the impact of a higher education in prison program in the article *The Relationship between Liberal Arts Classroom Experiences and the Development of Agency-related Well-being for Incarcerated Students*. Using survey feedback from current and former students, Moore and Erzen examine the relationship between "various academic experiences that characterize liberal arts education" and "students" development of agency-related beliefs and

[1] At the request of the author, only their first name is being used in the volume.

[2] Learn more about the Freedom Reads project: https://freedomreads.org/

behaviors." The study finds that nearly all student respondents expressed profound positive experiences related to their personal development, identity, and relationships with others. Students attributed these outcomes to their academic experiences and expectations in the classroom.

Caroline Cheung, in the article *Abolition Pedagogy is Necessary*, maintains that all educators, especially educators teaching in prisons, should teach with abolitionist and anti-racist frameworks. Drawing upon the work of abolitionist scholars and thinkers, Cheung contends that education, either in prison or on the outside, is harmful and oppressive if not approached from an abolitionist perspective. The author advocates for a teaching approach that centers community, care, and the ability to dream as ways to move closer to the ultimate goal of a world where higher education in prison does not exist because prisons do not exist. Cheung's essay calls upon educators to exist in "radical community with [their] students," all of whom are oppressed, whether they are incarcerated or not.

In the article *Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View: Literacy Narratives in the HEP Class*, Tim Barnett offers an alternative vision of the "Literacy Myth," which depends upon the correlation between literacy (and education) and individual transformation, as the foundation for ameliorating "societal problems." Instead, Barnett considers a more collective understanding of literacy narratives (stories individuals tell about their experiences with reading, writing and language) and how, for example, collective voice can serve as a lens through which the prison industrial complex can be challenged.

Limitations and What's Missing

One of the challenges of working at the intersections of higher education and incarceration is the lived reality of inequality: Not everyone shares an equal ability to submit scholarship for publication. The limited contributions from currently and/or formerly incarcerated scholars present a significant challenge for the field. Scholars inside prisons lack the resources necessary to conduct research, draft their ideas, receive feedback, and engage in community (i.e., sustained and consistent discussions and learning opportunities) in a way that would nurture their intellectual pursuits. Compounding the limits on resources available to scholars who are incarcerated is the lack of degree pathways (i.e., Bachelor's or graduate degrees) that would offer students the opportunity to engage in research and writing opportunities beyond introductory levels. Currently, among the known higher education in prison programs across the country (300 according to the National Directory of Higher Education in Prison Programs, 2020), only 43 programs (14%) offer a credential pathway beyond an Associate degree. Additional and glaring omissions include a Contemporary Perspective Essay or Article focused explicitly on the topic(s) of race, racism, anti-blackness and/or white supremacy, an Article from a formerly incarcerated student pursuing a degree outside, and/or an Article from an author who

is currently incarcerated. The future of the field and the work to end incarceration depends, in part, on deepening the access to resources and supports that are provided to currently and formerly incarcerated scholars.

Putting these values into practice for our inaugural volume during a pandemic was an undertaking in optimism and compassion —for all our authors and ourselves, too. We faced many challenges that, while certainly not limited to the emergence of COVID-19, were exacerbated by the devastating impact of the pandemic on the community of scholars inside. We hope this journal is a forum for the prison higher education community to engage the messy and difficult work of college-in-prison and pursuing futures that do not include our continued existence.

We want to do this work in community, and there are many ways to do so and for community members to be involved. We invite all readers to submit work and contribute either an Article, Contemporary Perspective, or Book Review when the Call for Submissions for Volume Two is distributed later this year (2021). We also invite more people to serve as reviewers. Furthermore, we especially want help getting the journal to students inside. Finally, and perhaps most important to our efforts, people who are currently not incarcerated, are invited to help facilitate the submission of scholarship by students, colleagues and friends who are currently incarcerated. To get involved, review manuscripts or request printed volumes of the journal for your students, contact us at jhep@higheredinprision. Print versions of individual Contemporary Perspective essays or Articles are available for download on the *JHEP* website (https://www.higheredinprison.org/journal-of-higher-education-in-prison). This is also the location where Calls for Submissions are posted.

Acknowledgments

There are many people we wish to acknowledge and thank for their work on this volume: Valeria Dani and Steph Iasiello, *JHEP* Editorial Assistants, Christine Fisher of Blue Marble Creative, the members of the *JHEP* Editorial Board and the 23 external reviewers who provided feedback on essays for this first volume.

Finally, let us express that we are hopeful about the future directions of the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* and the opportunity to be part of the intellectual life of the prison higher education community. It has been a pleasure to work alongside the many colleagues who contributed to the completion of this inaugural volume, and we are committed to continuing this work in solidarity with all those who envision a future that is more equitable and without prisons.

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Contemporary Perspectives are editorial pieces that succinctly address the most pressing issues in the field of higher education in prison. This section contains reflections written by practitioners, teachers, and students across the field on a range of topics, offering a unique viewpoint informed by their experiences.

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Far from a Revolution: The Need for a Critique of Global Capitalism in Prison Higher Education

Oscar Fabian Soto

> Capitalism comes first and next is racism. That when they brought slaves over here, it was to make money. So first the idea came that we want to make money, then the slaves came in order to make that money. That means, through historical fact, that racism had to come from capitalism. It had to be capitalism first and racism was a byproduct of that.
>
> —Fred Hampton, *It's a class struggle goddamit*

Shortly before the notorious Attica Prison uprising, George Jackson was shot and killed inside San Quentin State Prison on August 21, 1971. A captive revolutionary, Jackson argued:

> It is the system that must be crushed, for it continues to manufacture new and deeper contradictions of both class and race. Once it is destroyed, we may be able to address the problems of racism at an even more basic level. But we must also combat racism while we are in the process of destroying the system … Racism is a fundamental characteristic of monopoly capital. (Jackson, 2020, p. 112)

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Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the reviewers, Dr. William I. Robinson, Dr. Xuan Santos, Dr. Christopher Bickel and Juan Martin Leyva for their comments and extensive feedback on this article. Finally, I would like to thank my partner Brandy Denise Torres, my kids Paloma, Gadiel and Emiliano, and the entire Soto family.

Both Jackson's and Hampton's anti-capitalist rhetoric is painstakingly absent in the current anti-racist struggles in the aftermath of police brutality and the specific context of higher education in prison. We must not forget that we live in a society where super-incarceration disproportionately targets Black and Brown communities and that state violence is not just racism. Rather, we must see racism and super-incarceration as part of the larger structural form of oppression: global capitalism (Robinson, 2020). Racist police, police brutality, and policing are but extensions of the capitalist state that defends the private property of a global elite by criminalizing and marginalizing the poor. Correia and Wall (2017) argue that, "[t]he elite fear the destruction of their property, yes, but even more they fear the destruction of the social relations that make private property possible" (p. 83). The authors continue, "[a]nd so they fear a world without police" (p. 83). The protection of private property and the maintenance of hierarchical relations, including racialized divisions of labor, is why policing exists, not to protect and serve but to continue to exert social control over poor communities. Thus, we must, as Jackson (1990) argues, push for revolutions that encourage an "overthrow of all existing property relations and the destruction of all institutions that directly or indirectly support existing property relations," including prisons (p. 7).

A fervent critique of global capitalism should be at the heart of any prison education program seeking to engage the work of racial justice. The top 1 percent of humanity owns more than half of the world's wealth, and the top 20 percent owns just over 95 percent, while the bottom 80 percent share the rest, a mere 4.5 percent (Hardoon, 2015). These social inequalities contribute to massive unemployment, precarious and surplus labor, and transnational migration, all conditions that are super-policed, super-criminalized, and contribute to the caging of poor communities. Those who do not fall under the ranks of the 20 percent of humanity are subjected to the coercive mechanisms of the state. The police, therefore, are the coercive hand of the state.

Global capitalism is a system that pushes millions of people worldwide into the margins of surplus labor, surplus humanity, unemployment, and homelessness. According to the International Labour Organization (2014), over 1.5 billion workers or about 50 percent of the global workforce are "vulnerable" workers, including informal, flexible, part-time, contract, migrant, and itinerant workers. The International Labour Organization (2014) reported that in the late 20th century, one-third of the global labor force or approximately one-billion workers, remained unemployed and underemployed. While the rate of poor Black people killed by police is more than their white counterparts, the greater rates of inequality come from vulnerable conditions enacted by global capitalism, which routinely kill hundreds and thousands worldwide.

The solution, as the Black Panther Party outlines, is revolution. Revolution is a transformation of the whole society, to be achieved by combining Black, Brown,

and white workers and poor proletariats in opposition to the global capitalist empire. Below is an excerpt from Hampton's 1969 speech, which all prison higher education program staff and students should read it its entirety:

> We got to face some facts. That the masses are poor, that the masses belong to what you call the lower class, and when I talk about the masses, I'm talking about the white masses, I'm talking about the black masses, and the brown masses, and the yellow masses, too. We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're gonna fight racism with solidarity. We say you don't fight capitalism with no black capitalism; you fight capitalism with socialism. (para 20)

As these massive movements continue, it is our duty as intellectuals to open up a counter-hegemonic movement from below that combines racial and class struggles, while having a revolutionary critique of class exploitation and global capitalism. This is the premise of a radical political education and what I see is lacking in many higher education in prison programs.This is the premise of a radical political education and what I see is lacking in many higher education in prison programs. For more on this topic, see: Robinson and Soto (2020) for a complete critique of the prison movement and higher education in prison programs.

Even though higher education programs inside and outside of prison are on the rise, they mainly focus on vocational training and seemingly non-political education courses or education courses that do not maintain explicit political perspectives or training. Prison higher education programs need to engage in a radical political curriculum that provides a serious critique of global capitalism. This is needed because the broader struggles for racial justice will ultimately fall short without a true understanding of the race-class-exploitation relationship. Therefore, it is in all of our best interests to engage this work in prisons with a critical and political orientation, for the greater good of humanity.

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Human Connection is Contraband. So How do we do Education?

Kaia Stern

After 25 years of going in and out of jails and prisons across our nation, I still tremble as I witness how punishment dehumanizes everyone—the keepers and the kept.

Anyone who has spent time in a jail or prison knows that human connection is contraband. We do not say this aloud. It is not written in any policies or protocol. It is simply understood. Sharing is punished as extortion. Officers get fired for smiling too much. Forbidden, yet inevitable, human connection is a smuggled good.

It makes sense—punishment is about disconnection. And we, people in the United States, imagine justice to be punishment. We punish as redress for harm done and understand the punishment as justice. We banish people from their communities, separate loved ones, and isolate people in cells.

The unspoken logic of punishment pivots on the notion that some people are ontologically Other (Other in their very being). This Othering casually sanctions violence (perhaps the ultimate form of disconnection) – isolation in cells for 23.5 hours a day, being stripped and shackled to a table when under emotional distress, or despite federal law, while giving birth to a child. Oftentimes, state departments of "correction" use the language of "undue familiarity" to demarcate what behavior is prohibited and what kind of relations are allowed between people who are incarcerated and volunteers/employees. Given various vulnerabilities, power dynamics, and safety concerns, it is critical to maintain boundaries in a prison setting. However, the nature of those boundaries can and should reflect different values than they do at present.

So, if human connection is contraband, how do we do education?

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As educators who teach in prisons, we feel the tension. We know that connection is essential to cultivating a healthy learning community. And we know that the students in our classes are treated, in the name of public safety, in profoundly dehumanizing ways.

In practical ways, we prepare. We plan to be inspected and metal-detected. We display the underside of our tongues, show our waistbands, expose our heels – all the time knowing that we will leave in a matter of hours and our students endure far more injurious dignity and physical violations. And yet there is no way to prepare for the cognitive dissonance of moving through a paramilitary structure that treats people as "property of the state" to a prison classroom where we value people for their questions and thoughts.

We traverse checkpoints and then cross a threshold into the prison classroom—a sacred and liminal space. It is a territory that is both precious and treacherous for the students and the teacher. We know that we are participating in something that is, on some level, forbidden. One small misstep and an entire program can be decimated. In an environment where people are counted as numbers, where imprisonment is the punishment, our presence as educators who value human connection is destabilizing.

If our role as educators is, in part, to help people connect to their own and each other's ideas, to history, science, and broader viewpoints about the world, how do we embody and nurture human connection in environments constructed to dehumanize? How, in the face of routinized trauma, should the field of higher education in prison cultivate healthy human connection in ways that are not prohibited?

We slow down.

We pause. And we keep doing that.

We reckon with painful truths and become much more intentional about how we navigate human connection in carceral spaces. We also name what is at stake as a result of our presence as educators inside structures of state punishment. This process of naming and reckoning is how we maintain integrity in the face of corruption and oppression.

We attend to deep and abiding trauma that is institutional and intergenerational. We invest in trauma-informed training/pedagogy in carceral settings. We pay attention to the container (I call it a sacred space) of classroom ritual. We make room for appreciation, gratitude and grace. We deliberately create a beginning, middle, and ending. For example, I end class five minutes before the prison loudspeaker interrupts, so students have time to assimilate the material before they are rushed to return to their cell blocks. A container that is mindful of time (both actual and decontextualized) for the duration of class validates each student's presence, allows for sustained connection, and holds them responsibly through the experience of being in a learning environment. The classroom is a sanctified space

to me because it cultivates healthy human relationships, validates each student's existence, and affirms their right to connect to themselves and others in meaningful ways.

In such a classroom, I do not mean to imply that there will always be (or should be) agreement or harmony. I mean that we do all that we can not to harm each other. We respect each other and co-create a space that is as safe, brave, and open as can be. I believe that rigorous education asks us to be uncomfortable—to listen to what we do not understand, to interrogate our assumptions, and to change our minds. In places of immense privilege, like Harvard University where I also teach, students often confuse discomfort with being in danger and weaponize language to reassert their power. Students in prison are more likely to not only be uncomfortable but also to be unsafe. Perhaps they are not getting proper medical care. Nevertheless, they show up. They are barred from gathering, and still, despite all odds, they collaborate.

To tell the truth, that human connection is contraband, and to act in favor of connection, is to affirm one of our deepest held values: people who are condemned to prison are human beings and should be recognized as such. It is common to believe that when someone transgresses criminal law, their humanity comes into question. In another work, I explore the ways traditional Protestant ideas about who is human and who is evil oxygenate our punishment system (Stern, 2014). Of course, "plantation capitalism" (Lawson, 2013, 0:16) has regulated who is considered human in the first place.

No matter how despised they may be, despite untold injustices that cause incarceration, they are human. Regardless of the crime/sin they may have committed, they are to be treated as people/kin/equals who deserve dignity and are worthy of human rights.

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heal me, oh jailer: DAY 4,917

Justin

> By almost any standard the American Prison betrays itself as a system striving toward **unmitigated totalitarianism.** [emphasis added by author]
>
> —Angela Davis, *Lessons: From Attica to Soledad*

I am sick. I admit it. I am an inmate, I am a prisoner.

I am in need of your intervention, your correction, your rehabilitation.

It is I and I alone, through my psychosis, that has spit in the face of humanity.

Save Me From Myself.

I am currently *furniture*, property of the state of connecticut, I must be the best piece of furniture if I desire not to complete my stay in this *warehouse of warehouses*.

It is against my best interest to recognize that my *rehabilitation*, and the notion that I need *rehabilitating*, is a design for me to adhere to a state of ineptitude. **Inept I am not**, yet I am forced to grovel as if at the feet of a King.

A King that knows not his people; that has not laid brow upon the infrastructureless slums that pre-imprisons us; that has not smelt - nor will ever smell - the breath uncaged from a growling stomach; that has not calloused the virgin flesh of his palms as a pallbearer of uncured crates that imprison us for eternity.

Why must I embrace recuperation for an illness bestowed upon me? How can I?

I know right from wrong, I will never excuse a wrong for a right for previous wrongdoing, but I will not excuse that original wrongdoing in the process.

Justin is an aspiring activist, abolitionist, and allegory, albeit in *sarcophagus*.
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This is to say, I will not promote fraud because of our homeless crisis, I will not applaud drug-dealing because of the tyranny of pharmaceutical empires, and I will not champion murder because of this war on culture – this fixation on manacling those forced to "live" not as "profound" – but I will not condemn them with a depleted tolerance, deriving from those systemic assaults, as sick either.

I must admit I am sick to receive help;

Why not my jailer be asked the same to "heal"?

To become a prisoner is to become a servant to your past, your community, and your country.

america does not wish to see me well; the prison industrial complex stands to gain nothing if I am cured; *parole*, *probation*, *home confinement*, they do not thrive upon my restoration.

These exploitations flourish based upon my declaration of unhealthiness.

To accept these "means to demean" is to feed their perpetuation that their "righteousness" has not meant the devouring of those at their mercy.

If I need "rehabilitation" because you say I need "rehabilitation" – what level of health can I ever truly achieve?

True rehabilitation is what the imprisoned begs of their imprisoner.

True rehabilitation means *not* the incineration of my humanity – but the incineration of this structure which enables said incineration.

It is true I am on day four thousand nine hundred seventeen of my disappearance. It is true that I have come to know remorse, regret, compassion, and empathy. It is also true that my health is constantly defined then redefined by others who seek to enrich themselves with my ailments.

How can a system that's never had its own health to begin with, determine me to be unhealthy?

The prison industrial complex "evolves" from sick people; run by sick people; upheld by a sick people – with the intention of redistributing that sickness upon those it subjugates.

If the prisoner is condemned by "rehabilitation," then the condemning of the one who "rehabilitates," the one who truly needs condemnation, will never be breached.

I have seen in this *warehouse of warehouse*s the lack of opportunity invade the people with lethargy. The mental health sessions that lead to tranquilizer reliance. The Higher Educators restrained by curriculum – those that instill positivity and submissiveness – seizing our Higher Educators with sheer malpractice.

These Educators unable to enter these *cauldrons* with the freedoms to truly educate – forced to placate YOUR illness – for fear that their education might untangle a web of misdiagnosis.

I have seen the "law" incite, the people vanish within themselves, the canopy of hopelessness engulf the landscape –

I have seen
I have seen
I have seen …

I have not seen the mending of thought, the nurturing of self-awareness, the resurrecting of humanity, the "rehabilitation" that is associated with societal expectation.

Society does not know this carousel, this conveyor, this cash cow.

Society does not know that we enter as people and assimilate into a herd of furniture.

As long as we beg for rehabilitation, and continue to disclaim our health, society will essentially remain oblivious.

In a lecture by Angela Davis[1] on Decarceration, she questions our innate relationship with "rehabilitation" within the american penal system: "if we really want Rehabilitation, and we have to start talking about decarceration; how is rehabilitation possible under conditions of total confinement?"

Is total Rehabilitation truly what our confiner has in mind for those it confines, or is that "total confinement" the objective?

Why does our rehabilitation have to rely on this need for them to clutch onto our declaration of malady?

In the *Concise Oxford English dictionary: The world's most trusted dictionary* (12th ed.) the word DECARCERATION does not appear.

The word INCARCERATE does appear. In direct proximity, words that also appear are ironically words that inform the dichotomy between the despotism (totalitarianism) inflicted upon the incarcerated by the incarcerator: (above) incapable · incapacitant · incapacitate · incapacity; (below) incarnadine · incarnate · incarnation · incase (old-fashioned spelling of encase) · incautious · incendiary. Words that can be applied for purposes that would destabilize the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional wholeness of the incarcerated – all of which can be deployed with an inferior connotation.

Coincidence, possibly. Less of a coincidence, but more of a totality of our societal reflection, are various definitions of words that place one in another's custody: prisoner; inmate; captive; etc.

Less of a coincidence is the *absence* of Decarceration, and words that mirror that embodied definition.

As the days of my incarceration accumulate, I grow no more in 'sickness' than that of my very first day imprisoned. I am as sick as this prison industrial complex is healthy. I am as prepared to embrace this illusion, my need for 'rehabilitation' as my captor is prepared to reveal their purpose for such submission.

As long as I am prepared to denounce absolute and complete subservience to the state my health will remain my sickness.

[1] The source of this lecture was not able to be identified.

I am sick. I admit it. My health is resounding evidence of that.
I am healthy – I admit it. I recognize no such *rehabilitation*,
What will become of me?

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Freedom Begins with a Book

Reginald Dwayne Betts

One of the lies that people tell about prison is that men and women and children inside don't crave the wonders that can be found in a book. Some stories I tell often, one in particular, about being in solitary confinement and having a man whose name I never knew slide me Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* is a favorite. A favorite because the telling always surprises me, makes me remember that it did happen that way, and it captures so much of what contributes to a great educational experience: the desperation of a student wanting to learn, the willingness of an educator to offer tools to facilitate that learning, and the sheer discovery that comes with being introduced to the unexpected. With Randall's anthology, I met the poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka and Robert Hayden and Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni and so many others. But the voice that shifted something inside of me then was Etheridge Knight. Knight, who'd spent time in prison, was writing about people I knew, people who were navigating prison. Quiet as kept, the thing about that book was the ways it revealed something of myself to me, and that was far more important than what others might argue about the practical effects of education. Recognizing the artistry in Knight, artistry born in a prison cell, opened doors that allowed me to see a world within the 6' by 9' cell that held me captive.

So later, when I'd read the novel that a man in a nearby cell wrote, when he'd walk me through the outlines he'd scrawled longhand on prison request forms and arranged into a storyboard on cell wall, outlines riffing off of the stories in

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Reginald Dwayne Betts is a poet and lawyer. He is the Director of Freedom Reads (formerly the Million Book Project), an initiative out of the Yale Law School's Justice Collaboratory to radically transform the access to literature in prisons. The author of a memoir and three collections of poetry, he has transformed his latest collection of poetry, the American Book Award winning *Felon*, into a solo theater show that explores the post incarceration experience and lingering consequences of a criminal record through poetry, stories, and engaging with the timeless and transcendental art of papermaking. In 2019, Betts won the National Magazine Award in the Essays and Criticism category for his *NY Times Magazine* essay that chronicles his journey from prison to becoming a licensed attorney. He has been awarded a Radcliffe Fellowship from Havard's Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an Emerson Fellow at New America, and most recently a Civil Society Fellow at Aspen. Betts holds a J.D. from Yale Law School.
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songs, I understood him to be an artist. The old white man who handed me a fantasy novel, four hundred handwritten loose-leaf pages; the kid who used a paperclip to thread torn sheets through a stack of folded pages to make a book; and my friend who'd write letters for others. After Knight, I knew them all as artists.

Art reminds us of how dignity looks. I once had a cellie named Pops Spratley, in his sixties; he'd known more prison than freedom, and still, each week would fold himself around the small table in our cell and write dozens of pages to his children. Or Mike G, another cellie, who'd created a recording device from a Walkman, and let men come into our cell to record mixtapes, to read letters to their children, to read poems to would-be lovers.

We think of a lot of ways to feel different from each other, we arrange ourselves in groups based on race, social class, privilege and lack thereof; and yet, the urgency to really communicate, the risks we'll take to do it — that's what *The Black Poets* taught me. There has always been a sheer implausibility in holding on to this space. The discipline required to write letter after letter after decades and decades. The knowledge it takes to turn a walkman into a recording device. Learning to sew because you desire to turn your words into books. Turning a wall into an outline for a book that only the men around you may read.

Some of what the men I knew in prison did to feel whole feels Biblical. And the center of it all was a book. That these books found their way into our hands by happenstance is a tragedy. MoMA bibliographer David Senior argues that a library "provides an opening for a physical space that mimics a book itself — a passage into an elsewhere that includes as many narratives and conversations as possible books."

I recently founded Freedom Reads (formerly known as the Million Book Project) with this and my history of incarceration and reading in mind. The explicit aim of the project is to transform the ways that people in prison access the world of books. Funded with a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and countless individual donors, we will be bringing 500-volume Freedom Libraries into prisons in every state in this country, with the explicit intent to make these volumes available to men and women in their housing units. I remember how challenging it was to get to the library when I also had work obligations or wanted to exercise. I knew what it meant to need a good book at 7pm and have nowhere to turn. This project is meant to address that, recognizing and deeply believing that freedom begins with a book.

Together with this Journal, Freedom Reads invites your written responses to the books that matter to you, books that so moved you that they remained with you for years. Opportunities exist to publish these short reviews in both the Journal and the Freedom Reads catalog. We are looking for short responses that offer the reader an inroad into the book, why it matters to you, why the next reader should pick it up. Here is a strong example:

Dempsey Louis
"On Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*"

The same things that make you laugh can make you cry, and that's perhaps why Robert Penn Warren went from a white-is-right-if-you're-black-stay-back supremacist to a smile-on-your-brother-try-to-love-one-another humanist: a change of heart and thought enabled by a fireside talk with Malcolm X. Years before meeting Malcolm X and acquiring a softer sensibility, though, Warren wrote a hard charging, muscular masterpiece of intrigue and catch-me-if-you-can, sleight of hand politics that takes its title from Humpty Dumpty's fall from the wall. The book is set in Louisiana and loosely based on the dirty deeds done dirt cheap by, the high wheelings and low dealings of the professional politician and certified huckster Huey P. Long: a slick politician who had more shifty moves and slippery grooves than a fat cat in a fish market. Warren was a deft writer of both poetry and prose and both elements combine to add luster and shine to the brass knuckle business of hard shoe politics. Willie Stark is the hard shoe governor of Louisiana and shares central billing with his press agent, Jack Burden, who narrates the story with such an expansive understanding of dark passions and darker personalities, you'd think Socrates himself was telling this Louisiana gumbo tale of lawyers, guns and money right from the lofty, marbled steps of the Parthenon. This book is as substantive and weighty as gold, as is wisdom, which glitter from its pages. So go ahead and read it for yourself and you'll clearly see that while there are books for the moment, *All The King's Men* is a book for all time.

The *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* (*JHEP*) is thrilled to partner with Freedom Reads in order to build a space devoted to the life-defining impact of books and literature, especially for those who are currently incarcerated. In his piece, founder Reginald Dwayne Betts illuminates the often-forgotten power of reading through a recollection of his own experience; in doing so, he invites others to share their personal relationships with the books that matter to them. *JHEP* will share a full *Book Review: Call for Submissions* for this collaborative project, and some of the responses we receive will be published in this journal's pages and in the Freedom Reads catalogue.

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ARTICLES

Articles are full-length pieces of scholarship on a range of topics critical to the field of higher education in prison. This section contains contributions from practitioners, teachers, and students from multiple academic disciplines across the social sciences and humanities.

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The Relationship between Liberal Arts Classroom Experiences and the Development of Agency-related Well-being for Incarcerated Students

Sarah Moore, Tanya Erzen

In the present study, we examined the impact of a higher education in prison (HEP) program, specifically exploring the relationship between various academic experiences that characterize liberal arts education (e.g., opportunity to improve writing, opportunity to build and defend an argument) and students' development of agency-related beliefs and behaviors (e.g., proactive coping skills, confidence in advocating for themselves). Using a mixed-methods approach, we received survey data from 58 incarcerated students who were either currently or formerly enrolled in college courses as part of a HEP program where students could earn their Associates Degree; we also received qualitative data from 21 students enrolled in the same program. We found significant, moderate correlations between many of the educational experiences and the five different agency-related indicators. The qualitative remarks illustrated that nearly all respondents experienced profound transformations in how they understood their skills, related to others, and described their identity. Moreover, students connected these transformations to the set of personalized and rigorous academic standards to which they were held accountable in their courses. Collectively, these data suggest that such educational opportunities are critical to the well-being of incarcerated students and the ultimate success and benefit of HEPs.

Keywords: *liberal arts education, agency, well-being*

> I have found a greater purpose through FEPPS [Freedom Education Project Puget Sound] and not only have I found my voice, but I learned that I'm more resilient than I thought. I have learned the true meaning of suffering through countless sleepless nights of intense writing. I have [name of professor's] history class to thank for some of those experiences. I've learned the value of education, which provides the most important tool to build and create my life for a better tomorrow. … Higher education in prisons is an essential to my life as air and water. It does so much more than teach me facts or figures. It builds self-esteem where there was none. It creates hope when I thought there was not a hint of hope, and it opens doors in life that were once closed.
>
> —Student Feedback from FEPPS program graduate, Spring, 2020

Resilience, self-esteem, and hope for the future are just some of the benefits articulated by students in the Freedom Education Project Puget Sound (FEPPS) Higher Education in Prison (HEP) program in the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) in Washington State. The above quote captures how one student's participation in a liberal arts HEP program provides intellectual, emotional, and social sustenance. Yet, until recently, most evaluations of HEP privileged reduced recidivism and employment after prison as the key indicators that college in prison is successful; the extant literature has demonstrated a clear and consistent relationship in this regard (Chappell, 2004; Cho & Tyler, 2013; Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Duwe & Clark, 2013; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Kim & Clark, 2013; Vacca, 2004). Although we believe that these outcomes are critical, we assert that higher education confers much broader cognitive, social, psychological, and skill-based benefits that impact students well before their release. Moreover, these impacts are likely to mediate the relationship between higher educational experiences on the one hand and post-release effects on the other. The present study adds to

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Acknowledgments: We thank the Olson Foundation for funding the data collection reported in this paper. All data were collected with the approval of the Department of Corrections in addition to the Washington State and University of Puget Sound Institutional Review Boards.

the literature that has begun to address the gap between how students narrate their experience in HEP programs and existing research that views higher education in prison primarily as an intervention-based treatment or correction, beneficial insofar as it results in employment or reduced recidivism (Castro & Gould, 2018).

To reconcile the disjuncture between the lived experience of students and previous studies, we used both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the degree to which particular types of educational experiences associated with the liberal arts related to student psychological agency. In this study, agency refers to a set of related constructs associated with one's ability to self-advocate, general self-esteem, hope for the future, locus of control, and proactive coping. Frequently used in psychological social-science research, these constructs correlate both to one's well-being (Adler, 2012; Helgeson, 1994; Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011) and capacity to function effectively (Baker, Berghoff, Kuo, & Quevillon, 2020; Yi-Feng Chen, Crant, Wang, Kou, Qin, Yu, & Sun, 2021). Anecdotally and via qualitative research, HEP students frequently report improvements to these and related constructs such as empowerment (Evans, Pelletier, & Szkola, 2018) and personal responsibility (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, & Martinez, 2001).

In this study, however, we sought to explore more *systematically* if and how specific HEP program characteristics (e.g., programs that emphasize academic and social skills such as critical thinking, responding to feedback, ability to develop an argument based on credible evidence, improved interpersonal communications, writing skills, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity) were associated with agency-related variables. Demonstrating a connection between greater involvement with certain types of program characteristics to agency-related benefits is important to the extent that it bolsters the argument that the type of higher education one experiences is, in fact, consequential (Baranger, Rousseau, Mastrorilli, & Matesanz, 2018). It could also point to how programs might consider designing academic experiences within HEP programs, especially with the reinstatement of Pell funding. In the present study, such quantitative instruments to assess these program characteristics and agency-related measures made this type of examination possible. Using the rich and detailed descriptions of their academic experiences, we were then able to use students' qualitative data to complement our understanding of these connections.

FEPPS Program Background: HEP Context of the Present Study

Freedom Education Project Puget Sound (FEPPS) provides a rigorous liberal arts college program at Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW), a large women's prison in Washington State.[1] Both authors have been involved with

[1] Although FEPPS operates at WCCW, a facility founded for incarcerated women, FEPPS enrolls all persons at the prison who qualify for admission regardless of their sex or gender-identity status. This includes cis-gendered women, transgender men, and transgender women.

the FEPPS program. Tanya Erzen was instrumental in founding the program; she routinely teaches courses in the program and presently serves as the FEPPS Faculty Director. Sarah Moore has also taught courses in the FEPPS program and oversaw the data collection reported in this paper. Although both authors are connected with the program and its educational practices, the present data collection efforts were undertaken not as a program evaluation of FEPPS per se, but rather to examine the relationship between educational experiences and student psychological well-being. We engaged in this work, therefore, with the aim of being able to generalize our findings and make recommendations to similar programs.

FEPPS supports pathways to higher education after release from prison. In 2011, women inside WCCW advocated for access to higher education and reached out to local professors who began teaching as volunteers. Initially, the courses were not credit-bearing; however, one year later, FEPPS was founded as a nonprofit. In 2013, FEPPS partnered with a local community college to accredit an Associate of Arts degree. In the ensuing years, the program has grown to include some 279 students, 55 graduates, and 130 instructors from 26 institutions; in 2019, a liberal arts college approved accreditation for the Bachelor of Arts degree for FEPPS students.

Several important program qualities characterize the type of educational skills and experiences in which students are engaged. All students start as a cohort, with a sequence of pre-college math and English as needed. As they progress, they join the broader student body in other classes. This structure is critical to position students for success and to build a supportive community. The FEPPS courses themselves are grounded in the liberal arts tradition with an expectation of academic rigor comparable to outside classrooms and an emphasis on critical thinking, student leadership, and supportive relationships among students and between students and faculty. The A.A. and B.A. students alike develop critical, analytical, and contextual thinking and knowledge in ways designed to build self-efficacy and awareness of the social and political structures that shape individual lives, especially around race, gender, and sexuality. Courses explore broad themes essential to a liberal arts education such as: Who counts as experts? What is a valid question? What is evidence, and what counts as evidence for different fields? How do we understand issues from different disciplinary perspectives? Why do people believe what they believe? How does knowledge become codified? FEPPS also offers academic enrichment, including film, book, and lecture programs, and looks for collaborative opportunities to support a strong student community and learning culture at WCCW (e.g., gender identity workshops, the first women's Ethics Bowl team in a prison, and the first Phi Theta Kappa honor society chapter inside a women's prison).

Previous Program Evaluations: Beyond Employment and Recidivism

A recent and growing body of scholarship has challenged the predominant deterministic view of HEP programs' impact and benefit solely in relation to

employment and reduced recidivism (*see* Castro, 2018; Gould, 2018; McCorkel & DeFina, 2019; Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Early studies such as the participatory action research of Fine et al. (2001) demonstrated the impact of HEP on recidivism but also addressed its impact on the culture within the prison and student leadership. More recently, the Mount Tamalpais College/Prison University Project (MTC/PUP) and Education Justice Project (EJP) studies focused on criteria related to student well-being and found that higher education supported students' transition to more positive identities (e.g., mentors). The EJP study utilized student-generated criteria such as a sense of themselves as an "educated man" to assess the impact of their program (Boyce, 2019). Similarly, the program evaluation conducted by Evans et al. (2017) pointed to how higher education increased incarcerated students' sense of empowerment that, in turn, helped to diminish the negative self-stigma that frequently accompanies incarceration. Likewise, McCorkel and DeFina (2019) highlighted that such a singular emphasis on recidivism in HEP program evaluation detracts from higher education's importance to democracy and communities characterized by justice. A recent report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy commented that a fuller and more robust examination of HEP program's impacts was critical for responsible stewardship of public funds directed towards education in prisons (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020). In summary, the emerging literature on HEP programs suggests that their effects may be far-reaching, impacting much more than recidivism rates, and that continued examination is essential.

Another body of literature also informed our current study: research focused on understanding the impact of a liberal arts education. This literature demonstrates that liberal arts education cultivates lifelong learning, well-being, and leadership (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013; Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Blaich, 2008). In addition to the "hard" skills (e.g., writing, development of arguments using evidence) that are connected to assignments and specific coursework, good liberal arts education facilitates the development of more generalizable "soft" skills (e.g., ability to tolerate ambiguity, manage stressful situations, handle large workloads) and psychological well-being (Morales, 2011; Pascarella & Blaich, 2013). These benefits also extend to students who are incarcerated. These students are often in greater need of such skills and have fewer avenues for obtaining them due to their incarcerated status. Indeed, our focus on the broader impacts of high-quality higher educational experiences for all students aligns our scholarship with the call to move away from a "correctional education" philosophical underpinning that has often characterized the field (Castro & Gould, 2018).

Focus of the Present Study

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the focus of this study was to explore the relationship between various liberal arts educational experiences

to students' reports of agency-related benefits. Although the data also offered an evaluation of the FEPPS program, the primary emphasis of our research was not program evaluation per se. Rather, we sought to understand which educational features were associated with student well-being for the purposes of generalizing our findings and their implications to similar programs.

An important aspect of this work relates to how we considered and operationalized liberal arts education. Namely, for this study, when we speak of a liberal arts style of education, we are referring to a broad set of educational characteristics that include experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, we considered qualities of course requirements, the standards to which students are held, the varied types of skills students are asked to develop, the relationships they have with student peers and faculty, the informal conversations and study groups, and optional activities that augment students' development. Using the quantitative data specifically, we sought to identify which features of this educational approach were most strongly associated with the agency-related benefits. To our knowledge, previous scholars have not studied specific, granular educational characteristics in a HEP context; thus, part of our work involved developing this measure for our research. Should such specific qualities be identified, we believe they could inform HEP program development, revision, and/or evaluation.

There are many potential benefits from higher education. However, we chose to explore agency-related outcomes for two reasons. First, we posit that agency may play a mediating role in many of the post-release outcomes (such as reduced recidivism) and thus could point to a greater understanding of exactly why or how education confers benefits on these measures. Although this was not a primary motivator of the study, we recognize its potential benefit to the field. In addition, however, we believe that agency benefits are important in their own right, to the extent that they improve the incarcerated person's quality of life and may help them successfully navigate life inside prison. Such markers of agency (e.g., self-esteem, hope for the future) have long been recognized in the social sciences as meaningful contributors to mental health and well-being (Adler, 2012; Helgeson, 1994; Mak, et al., 2011).

Anecdotally and via qualitative data, students who are incarcerated have noted well-being benefits in previous research (*see* Baranger, et al., 2018; Fine, et al., 2001; Lagemann, 2016; Lewen, 2014). However, our use of a mixed methods approach makes several contributions to the literature. First, our quantitative methodology offers us a more standardized way to operationalize and understand what types of educational experiences and benefits students are experiencing; often, such precision is difficult to glean from qualitative data as students will use slightly different words, phrases, and examples to convey their meaning. Next, quantitative indicators allow us to identify more precisely which types of academic experiences correlate specifically to agency-related variables. Last, by examining

students' written, qualitative remarks to focused questions that ask about educational experiences, we can augment and enhance our understanding of these connections. In short, our use of both types of data confers two distinct advantages: precision in definition, measurement, and association (quantitative data); and depth, nuance, and fuller meaning (qualitative data).

Method

Participants and Procedures

The authors obtained data for this study from two different sources. In December 2019, we collected quantitative survey data from 58 incarcerated students who were either currently or formerly enrolled in courses as part of a higher education program that offers the opportunity for people who are incarcerated to earn their Associate's degree. As part of a semester-end, all-student meeting, we explained the aims of the evaluation and invited all students to participate in completing a survey designed to measure their classroom experiences and various indices of academic and personal well-being. We clarified that they would not receive any compensation for their participation and that their participation was voluntary. We provided an alternative activity to those who opted not to complete the survey. In advance of this meeting, we attended classes to explain the nature and aims of the evaluation project in an effort to encourage robust meeting attendance. Of approximately 125 students who were eligible to attend the meeting, 60 attended. All but two students in attendance chose to complete the survey (mean age = 37.3 SD = 9.7).

In Spring 2020, the authors also collected qualitative data by inviting the same students to participate in a focus group aimed at understanding their academic experiences in greater depth. We were able to schedule and hold one of these groups with three students before COVID-19 forced the prison's closure to outside volunteers. As an alternative data collection process, we converted these focus group questions to written form and invited students to answer a series of open-ended questions that asked more specific questions about their academic experiences and well-being. These data were collected via a written paper packet distributed to all students who were either presently or formerly enrolled in the same education program; 21 of the 128 students returned written responses to the authors. This lower-than-anticipated response rate was likely affected by COVID-19 and our inability to advertise the data collection in advance of the packet distribution. We obtained approval from the Department of Corrections, the Washington State Institutional Review Board, and our own university's IRB for both of these data collections.

Survey Questions

To measure academic experiences, we asked participants to consider their college coursework overall and to indicate the degree to which their courses had included various characteristics and opportunities such as "opportunities to improve my writing skills" and "working independently," rated from 1 (never) to 6 (always). These 32 items were generated by the authors and two other program support staff familiar with the types of educational opportunities available to students through the program. See Table 1 for a complete listing of item content, means, and standard deviations. The authors of this paper, both of whom have extensive experience teaching at a small, private, liberal arts university, also consulted the extant literature related to liberal arts education to develop a comprehensive list of viable characteristics and experiences (Haberberger, 2018; Seifert, et al., 2008).

We obtained measures of agency-related well-being from the literature and selected items to fit a sample of individuals who are incarcerated. We also had pragmatic concerns about the length of the survey and the prison's schedule constraints that impacted the amount of time available for survey administration. For this reason, it was necessary to shorten most of the measures by selecting those items with the best psychometric properties. These two modifications noted, scale reliabilities were comparable to those reported in the literature (see below). All measures used the same response format (1 = definitely false, 5 = definitely true), and where appropriate, negatively worded questions were reverse coded before summing to obtain a total score.

General Advocacy – Confidence was assessed with eight items that asked respondents to indicate the degree to which certain statements about their coping style were true for them (Hawley, Gerber, Pretz, Morey, & Whiteneck; 2016). Example statements included, "I can keep track of important information that I need," "I can communicate my needs in a way that is respectful of others," and "I can work with other people to solve problems" (alpha = .81). The General Self-esteem measure consisted of five statements drawn from Debowska, Boduszek, and Sherretts (2017) and Horon, Williams, McManus, and Roberts (2018) that asked participants to consider "how you feel about yourself." Statements included sentences such as "I feel like I can't do anything well" and "I think that I have worth as a person" (alpha = .82). We measured Hope for the Future with four statements (alpha = .79) that included, "The future appears bright to me" and "I see a purpose for my life" (Shumway, Dakin, Jordan, Kimball, Harris & Bradshaw; 2014). Locus of Control aimed to measure the degree to which one believes positive outcomes are a function of their own, internally derived efforts. The scale included such statements as "In my life, good luck is more important than hard work for success" (alpha = .61) and included items drawn from the work of Gregg, Galyardt, Wolfe, Moon, and Todd, (2017), Wang and Su (2013), and Alonso-Tapia, Garrido-Hernansaiz, Rodriguez-Ray, Ruiz, and Nieto (2017). Last, Proactive Coping was measured with

six items (alpha = .72) designed to evaluate the degree to which participants believe they have the skills and abilities to solve problems and overcome any barriers to these efforts (e.g., "I reach out to others in times of need," and "I begin working on my plans to meet my goals as soon as possible"). This measure was also developed by selecting items published by Gregg et al. (2017), Shumway et al. (2014), and Alonso-Tapia et al. (2017).

Focus Group Questions

To the extent possible, the written open-ended questions matched the questions we posed to the in-person focus group participants. The questions themselves centered on asking participants to describe the various ways they had changed during the time they were enrolled in the HEP courses and to identify the various education-related experiences that had prompted these changes. For example, we asked students: (a) What changes, if any, have you noticed in yourself over time as a result of your FEPPS enrollment? If you can't think of anything, what have others noticed about you? These can be personal, academic, professional, etc.; (b) What, exactly, is it about your FEPPS educational experiences that have led to your changes? Consider the types of in-person classes, teachers, or assignments that have had the biggest positive impacts. Be as specific as possible; (c) COVID-19 required that FEPPS courses shift to mail correspondence. What changes – both positive and negative – did you notice in the types of assignments and activities or your engagement and motivation?

For both the single, in-person focus group transcript and the 21 written sets of remarks, we read the responses and identified the types of changes reported by the students. Next, we identified the specific educational-related experiences the students cited as supporting these changes. The revisions to educational programming prompted by COVID-19 provided a point of comparison for many of the students and helped to illuminate the impacts of certain types of educational experiences.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings

To examine the impact of specific educational experiences on measures of agency-related well-being, we first examined the item means and standard deviations on educational experiences and their correlations with the five dependent measures. Table 1 illustrates that overall, students reported having experienced many of these educational qualities and characteristics. Item means were typically above 4.0 (grand mean 4.78 from a possible range of 1.0 to 6.0) with improving writing skills, improving stress management skills, belonging to a community of learners, hearing visiting speakers, participating in in-person discussions with other students, and participating in various forms of (class, advisory council, study groups, workshops) receiving the highest levels of endorsement.

The correlations between these individual educational items and the measures of agency-related well-being revealed overall, moderate associations. For example, the opportunity to improve writing skills, improve time management, build and defend an argument, see films in a film series, being held to high, rigorous standards for work, and engage in personal reflection each correlated with either four or five of the dependent measures. Looking at the findings from the point of view of the agency-related measures, we found that they each correlated with several of the academic experiences ranging from seven significant correlations (Hope for Future) to 22 significant correlations (General Advocacy – Confidence). However, an inspection of these correlations did not reveal particular subpatterns where, for example, certain types of educational experiences (e.g., those that involve other people, those that require the development of more traditional academic skills) showed systematic patterns of association with any particular agency-related measure.

Although we had intended to find a more focused set of relationships between the specific educational experiences and agency, such results may be due to the exploratory nature of our work and our development of this measure for use in this study. Accordingly, these initial findings provide a platform for revision and use in future research. For example, several of the items related to faculty relationships failed to show significant correlations. Yet, the qualitative remarks (see below) often referred to the profound impact of a specific faculty member (i.e., respondents differentiated between faculty as a whole versus particular faculty members). We recommend that future researchers thoughtfully consider making these types of revisions to items if they intend to study educational experiences at this level of detail.

An equally plausible explanation relates to how students experienced their academic involvements. Namely, based on our own teaching experiences, we speculate that these educational opportunities were inherently integrated. For example, classroom participation offered the chance to belong to a community of learners, build and defend an argument, and get to know their faculty who facilitated the classroom discussion. Students therefore experienced these opportunities as a collective, interwoven set of skills development that impacted their sense of self, coping strategies, academic visions, and personal development. Our interpretation of the quantitative findings was strongly informed by our students' written responses which often conveyed such interconnectivity (see below).

Qualitative Findings

The quote at the beginning of this article illustrates one student's profound and holistic transformation catalyzed by her higher educational experiences. She expressed increased self-esteem, hope for the future, capacity to advocate, and greater confidence due to struggles and successes she experienced with writing

assignments in higher education in prison programming. Although some students provided fuller explanations than others, we found similar types of descriptions of educational transformations in all but two of the 21 participants who responded.

Because we were interested in understanding which types of educational experiences were responsible for such changes, we read all written remarks and identified the phrases or sentences where the student connected a given educational practice or technique to some type of positive agency-related outcome. For example, Student 7 stated that she was empowered by learning how to write and build an argument with evidence, which has led to increased confidence and better decision-making in many important areas of her life:

> [Name of professor] taught me how to write a proper paragraph which led to a proper essay. She told me I could write whatever I wanted. She didn't have to agree with me/my point of view; so long as I had the evidence to support my claim, I could write whatever I wanted. No one's opinion is wrong, just make sure the evidence supports what I'm saying. This gave me the confidence to write what I really thought, to pursue what I wanted, to help me figure out my own likes and preferences when selecting classes … which led to making changes in my reading, TV watching, and eventually all areas of my life.

Examination of Student 19's comments revealed that she was able to apply improved communication and tenacity to areas of her life beyond the classroom and credited faculty interaction and dedication as being part of her newfound confidence:

> I'm able to articulate why I feel or think a certain way instead of just being hurt/angry and misunderstood. I'm a lot better at going through hard times where in the past I'd just give up. By having teachers who never gave up on me but believed in me helped me to succeed. This has given me a confidence that I know I'm unstoppable, fierce, smart, and determined.

Another student discussed how college classes allowed her to ask questions and reveal where she did not understand without defensiveness or fear of reprisal or shame. Shame is a pervasive experience within a prison, and a key barrier for many students entering the college program is the sense that they are incapable of successfully completing college work (Baranger et al., 2018). At first, many students are hesitant to show vulnerability in front of other students and therefore do not risk admitting to areas of ignorance. The FEPPS program builds confidence in collective settings over time via intensive and sustained conversation with faculty and students, which is a key benefit of in-person classes. One student wrote:

> I absolutely notice my humility. Prior to college, I was defensive whenever I didn't know something, as if I had to always explain why I did or didn't know. Now I'm able to be okay with saying, "Wow. I didn't know that." It's actually a sense of accomplishment now to say those words, because it means I'm learning. With FEPPS, it's a collective, everyone gets involved,

> including our professors … FEPPS professors allow for lengthy, interactive lectures that capture both the text and your attention. They make you think
>
> and question your learning process. They don't hold our hands, but they don't let us down either.

The sense of students receiving a holistic education in which the academic skills of writing and assessing evidence are translated to other realms of students' lives was evident throughout their remarks. Specifically, we found that students connected particular academic skills to the ability to engage with other viewpoints beyond the class. The ability to engage with viewpoints that differ from one's own is a vital skill for negotiating life inside an overcrowded prison.

> He [professor] really encouraged us to experience that time and place, to view the Enlightenment through the eyes of Bouldier [sic], to taste the culture of the Bourgeoisie. He helped to cultivate a sense of philosophical awe in me. … I naturally wanted to rebel. The thing is the teacher didn't try to stop me. She said, "What's your evidence," "Prove your point." I really had to start thinking for myself about my world views. These people and classes helped me to form opinions, to seek answers, to determine my own values, how I upheld them, and how I reacted to situations.

Another student talked about her renewed sense of self-advocacy and proactive coping due to being part of a community of learners, one where she gained skill and comfort in speaking in front of other people.

> Being involved with FEPPS has helped me to become a more confident and innovative person. Troubleshooting a program in prison has thrown me into situations where I have learned to network, to speak comfortably in front of people, to advocate for myself and others, and to feel and be seen as a collaborator rather than a subordinate.

We note that while these skills are valuable in non-prison contexts and in the college program in the prison, these same skills are often penalized inside the prison. Advocating for oneself may lead to an infraction or claims that a person is acting out, especially for women. National studies have demonstrated that women are often punished more harshly and regularly than men for talking and advocating for themselves (Shapiro, 2020). While the connection between academic skills of argumentation, marshaling evidence, and engaging multiple viewpoints leads to advocacy and improved communication skills in a group in the college program and perhaps with other people in the prison, it may lead to reprisal with officers or others. In a hierarchical prison space, these are antithetical to the expectations placed on women in the prison: To obey, listen, and not talk back.

Nevertheless, students expressed that the experience of being in a college classroom, connecting with other students and outside (non-incarcerated) professors also impacted their sense of hope for the future. A student describes:

> I deal with anger differently – see [the] bigger picture. I don't know how to put into words the amount of change that has occurred, both inside and in my relationships – but it is because of school. It is the one-on-one interaction with staff and professors – in English. I'd really given up hope of going on past AA; my English professor took time to tell me her stories about graduate school. She treated my work like it and pushed me/encouraged me by saying she thought I should go there.

Considered collectively and illustrated above, at the center of many remarks was a strong sentiment regarding the importance of the relationship between the students with each other as well as among the students, their work, and the faculty. Students' qualitative remarks illustrated the importance of the high and rigorous standards to which their faculty held them and the genuine care faculty had for their growth. Students also frequently mentioned skills they developed, such as: collaborating with others, using evidence, questioning assumptions, developing an openness and tolerance for ambiguity, and persevering despite academic challenges as central to their greater sense of confidence, hope, and self-esteem. These experiences were integrated, organic, and dynamic. They were also greatly facilitated by the in-person relationships that supported them as they learned these new skills that, for many students, signified highly transformative personal, emotional, and academic changes.

Conclusion

Drawing on the strengths of varied methodological approaches, the aim of our research was to identify precise educational characteristics that correlated with agency-related outcomes. Additionally, we sought to augment our understanding of the quantitative findings with qualitative student comments about their higher educational experiences in FEPPS. For reasons noted earlier and discussed in more detail below, our quantitative data did not yield a tidy subset of program characteristics that might, for example, serve as a checklist for HEP program administrators. Rather, both our quantitative and qualitative data connote the importance of ensuring high-quality higher education comprised of various elements that contribute to challenging content, varied pedagogical approaches, and caring relationships. We believe that there are likely many ways this may be accomplished: we recommend that HEP program administrators consider these elements as potential components for designing or evaluating whether the program is able to realize its desired outcomes vis-à-vis student academic achievement and psychological well-being.

Study Limitations

Before discussing recommendations, we acknowledge that our findings are limited by measurement issues, potential self-selection into the study, and response

bias. As noted earlier, the quantitative measures were both developed for this research (e.g., academic experience items) and modified from existing scales (e.g., agency measures) because the measures either did not exist or required modification to fit the incarcerated student context and time constraints of the prison. Even though statistical analyses of the measures (e.g., scale reliabilities) demonstrated that our newly developed scales were sound, we hope that other programs might utilize these measures to augment our program sample and provide additional psychometric reliability and validity evidence. In addition, it may be the case that students felt as though they needed to report positive reactions to the program, despite our repeated assurances that they could speak honestly, especially because they are incarcerated and potentially felt pressure to conform to their perception of researcher expectations. To address this potential problem, we provided the means for students to respond anonymously. We also had a program assistant, a person with less perceived power than the authors, disseminate the materials and serve as a point of contact for participants' questions.

Another potential limitation is that students may have simply been incorrect in their perceptions of their growth and development, the reports of their educational experiences, and/or the connection between the two. These problems noted, we assert that these issues are not unique to data collected in the social sciences; moreover, we believe that students' perceptions of their growth, even if flawed, are important in their own right. Further, we assert that the stories and examples put forward by students in their written remarks convey a degree of precision and specificity that give greater credence to their comments. Last, although students' qualitative data frequently speak of their higher educational experiences as causing changes in their well-being, our quantitative data were correlational. The field would benefit from longitudinal investigations that examine the degree to which specific higher educational experiences precede changes to students' well-being.

Recommendations

With these caveats noted, our findings point to the importance of various higher educational opportunities and experiences in the growth and development of students' esteem, coping-related skills, and hope in the future. Educational experiences such as building and defending an argument, improving time management, being held to high and rigorous standards, and engaging in personal reflection demonstrated a consistent association with the agency-related outcomes. Interestingly, some of the questions related to faculty involvement (e.g., get to know professors, faculty understand academic struggles and help me) failed to show many significant correlations, and yet in-person interactions were often mentioned in the qualitative remarks. We speculate that it was not so much the faculty as a whole per se, but rather what specific faculty did, such as helping a student improve their writing or holding them to rigorous standards, that mattered to the students' growth.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings together supports this interpretation and paints a picture of how a rich and robust learning environment — one that contains a full set of opportunities — is key to students' transformation. From these findings and others whose work emphasizes the importance of a supportive learning environment (e.g., Baranger et al., 2018), we recommend that (a) administrators consider ways to implement these types of educational opportunities into the design of their programs, and (b) scholars examine how in-person interactions, as opposed to online or mail correspondence modes of instruction, facilitate positive outcomes for students.

We also recommend that future scholars continue to expand the types of outcome measures they examine in relationship to HEP program impacts. In this study, we measured a subset of well-being, namely measures related to agency, but there are other important psychological well-being variables (e.g., resilience, anxiety, depression, community involvement). Many of the students also noted additional benefits that were essential in navigating employment and social and familial relationships post-release. By understanding the full and wide range of benefits HEP programs provide to the students, their peers, their families, and society at large (Brick & Ajinkya, 2020), program supporters will be better equipped to communicate these positive outcomes to potential students as well as critics of HEP programs.

Ultimately a research approach that values the idea that students are full human beings with the right to well-being, improved self-esteem, and hope for the future underscores the particular ways that higher education in and of itself is of value regardless of recidivism or job outcomes (Castro & Gould, 2018; McCorkel, & DeFina, 2019). Our approach recognizes the value of higher education for its own sake as a way to push back at the dosage/medical model of education in which a specific amount of education is tailored toward people in prison to achieve specific outcomes like anti-recidivism or job acquisition. Focusing on well-being in our research prioritizes the idea that everyone is deserving of hope for the future and that a student's current level of well-being matters as part of their participation in a HEP program.

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Table 1.

Academic Experiences: Item means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Well-being Measures

				Correlations with Well-being Measures				
	Overall, my classes have included opportunity to …	Item Mean	Item SD	Gen. Adv Confid	General Self-Esteem	Hope for Future	Locus of Control	Proactive Coping
1	Improve writing skill	5.53	.73	**.38**	**.48**	**.39**	**.34**	**.34**
2	Work independently	4.48	1.33	**.30**	.15	.23	.09	**.33**
3	Improve stress mgmt skill	5.32	.83	**.29**	**.41**	.15	.07	**.32**
4	Improve time mgmt skill	4.76	1.22	**.46**	**.35**	**.31**	.15	**.28**
5	Really understand topic in depth	5.21	.86	**.34**	.25	.01	.15	.26
6	Conversation ethical dec making	5.10	.85	.22	-.03	-.17	.04	.12
7	Build and defend argument	4.62	1.27	**.64**	**.36**	**.34**	**.40**	**.56**
8	Participate during class	5.28	.89	**.37**	.17	.24	**.29**	.26
9	Belong to community of learners	5.29	1.01	**.44**	.18	.16	**.32**	**.32**
10	Do research on a topic	5.07	1.02	**.31**	.24	**.29**	.20	**.28**
11	Use tech to write paper or do research	4.22	1.44	.18	.10	.07	.13	.23
12	Improve formal speaking skills	4.88	1.08	**.28**	**.31**	.20	.26	.24
13	Go to study hall	5.09	.91	**.32**	**.31**	.19	**.26**	.13
14	Work with undergrads outside prison	4.46	1.09	**.27**	.19	.13	.25	.16
15	Work with research partner outside prison	4.59	1.03	.10	.10	.10	-.01	.13
16	Hear visiting speakers	5.57	.82	**.27**	.20	.09	.08	.24
17	Participate study groups, workshops	5.46	.89	.13	.02	.04	.21	.17
18	See films in film series	4.39	1.37	**.34**	**.38**	**.28**	**.34**	**.39**
19	Participate in critical inquiry	3.32	1.49	.16	.10	.14	-.01	.24
20	Participate in advisory council	5.33	.97	**.31**	.21	.11	**.29**	**.27**
21	Learn from variety of professors	4.72	1.21	**.38**	.08	.19	.33*	.23
22	Get to know profs	3.40	1.66	.17	.16	.11	.21	.15
23	Held to high, rigorous standards for work	4.24	1.43	**.37**	**.27**	**.29**	.22	**.36**

24	Express frustration, concerns heard	4.31	1.57	.15	.04	-.05	.04	.11
25	Faculty understand academic struggles and help me	4.43	1.52	.20	.23	.20	.14	.13
26	Faculty notice growth as student	4.36	1.75	**.30**	.22	.22	**.27**	.22
27	In-person discussions with faculty	3.96	1.94	**.33**	.14	.14	.25	.22
28	In-person disc w other students	5.36	.85	.21	-.07	.02	.04	.09
29	Engage personal reflection	5.02	1.22	**.32**	**.42**	**.30**	.25	**.38**
30	Solve complex problems	4.95	1.28	.24	**.26**	.12	.25	**.27**
31	See issues from multiple pov	5.02	1.07	**.48**	.20	.17	**.36**	**.45**
32	Work w others who are different from me	5.21	.96	**.37**	.07	.06	.13	**.29**

Bolded numbers are significant at the $p < .05$ level, 2-tailed. Numbers greater than $r = .33$ are significant at the $p < .01$ level, 2-tailed. Item were rated on a 6-point scale anchored from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*)

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Abolition Pedagogy is Necessary

Caroline Cheung

According to grassroots organization Critical Resistance, "PIC abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and incarcerations." In this essay, the author maintains that all educators should teach with abolitionist and anti-racist frameworks. This is especially true for educators teaching in prisons. Consulting noteworthy prison scholars and abolitionist thinkers such as Angela Davis, Bettina Love, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and more, the author makes the case that education is harmful and oppressive without abolitionist pathways. Educators indeed provide instruction, lessons, and critical thinking to students, but educators should moreover provide community, care, and the ability to dream. Due to the hyper-oppressive space of the prison, providing these latter skills and rights to students is difficult, perhaps impossible. Thus, educators must practice and live abolition to see their students thrive. The dream is to create a world where higher education in prisons cannot exist because prisons do not exist. The dream is to meet, teach, and learn with our students outside of walls and barriers. This essay is a call to materialize that dream in radical community with our students who are incarcerated and oppressed with or without bars.

Keywords: *prison abolition, pedagogy, antiracism, higher education in prison*

I dream that prisons will not exist in my lifetime. It is also my dream that while working towards manifesting this reality, educators who work in prisons will only do so with an abolitionist framework. I begin this essay with a hard truth: People who teach in prisons without actively developing abolitionist politics often cause more harm in this work than good. Depending on one's race, gender, class, ability, and other positionalities, it is likely that well-meaning teachers in prisons perpetuate carceral violence. Specifically, teachers in prisons may subconsciously reproduce hierarchical relationships based on punishment, obedience, fear, and complicity – all of which animate the prison-industrial complex and the larger, white-heteropatriarchal, capitalist, settler-colonial United States. society.

I am writing this essay to encourage everyone towards a more equitable and healing path – a path towards a more free world. The prison-industrial complex (PIC), a term that derived from the "military-industrial complex" in the 1950s, is defined by the grassroots organization Critical Resistance (2020) as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (para. 1). Policing, surveillance, abuse, isolation, and "divide and conquer" tactics are not just systems of oppression that operate within the PIC; they are also systems of oppression that we, as individuals, (sometimes subconsciously, but always dangerously) subscribe to, rely upon, incorporate, and use in our daily lives.

Many teachers, both inside and outside of prisons, rely on such carceral logic in their classrooms. bell hooks, Bettina Love, and Tema Okun are a few scholars and activists who discuss how classrooms are usually operated around carceral logics. For example, the grading system punishes students for not understanding material or for making mistakes. Detention and sometimes humiliation are used to manage student behavior. What's more, these two examples become even more complicated when race is taken into account. Black and brown children are punished more severely in schools than white peers who display the same behavior (Lopez, 2018). In the 2015 book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls*

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Acknowledgments: I am indebted to everyone who does this work, especially those who do this work from spaces of incarceration. Everything I do is rooted in the work of Black and brown people, women, queer women, families, neighbors, revolutionaries, community organizers, teachers, students, people who are incarcerated/oppressed/marginalized, and anyone who has been moving us towards liberation.

in Schools, author Monique Morris shows how Black girls are uniquely targeted by criminalizing conditions in schools. Black girls have a "Unique pathway to confinement" as learning institutions weaponize zero tolerance policies against Black girls, often as young as four-years-old, which is why Morris dubs this anti-Black and misogynistic phenomenon "School-to-confinement pathways" (p. 11). Young Black girls are given detention, suspended, and expelled at rates far higher than their non-Black peers and thus are overrepresented in carceral situations such as house arrest, electronic monitoring, juvenile detention, and jails (Morris, 2015). Illegitimate authority, fear tactics, and punishment are not only standard, but celebrated in many classrooms throughout the United States as standardized tests, grading scales, zero tolerance policies, and increasing police presences in predominantly Black and brown schools all demonstrate. Such disciplinary, or policing, tactics are especially deployed against Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) creating the school-to-prison pipeline. Because this kind of teaching is the norm, students learn passivity and obedience instead of empowerment, agency, or community. Educator, feminist, author, and activist bell hooks (1994) speaks to this in her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, writing, "The primary lesson [in schools] was … to learn obedience to authority" (p. 4). hooks goes on to say that most teachers "often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power" (p. 5). While hooks is reflecting on United States public education and higher education, these methods of control also animate prison spaces. This is because the same white supremacy that dictates United States culture is invested in deploying the prison system and the education system in interconnected ways albeit with different political valances.

If educators hope to create the "freeing" education of which hooks dreams, they must be intentional and radical with their movements; they must be serious about dismantling the institutions, policies, ideologies, and behaviors that continually harm marginalized people. I have experienced such academic violence as a queer woman of color and daughter of immigrants from Korea and China who grew up in the predominately white suburbs of the United States. I have also enacted such academic violence as a light-skinned East Asian American person with class privilege. When we teach, our identities and positionalities are always present and animating the power dynamics of a given space. This means that to build the trust, and reciprocal, mutual relationships that teaching relies upon, according to hooks, educators and students must reckon with their privilege and the power such privilege affords them (hooks, 1994). Educators already come into schools as authority figures, so unpacking the privilege and power of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, citizenship status, and more is essential to teaching and learning in liberatory ways. For example, as I write this piece, I am indebted to the work of Black and Indigenous organizers, scholar-activists, ancestors, and community members. None of this work is new or mine. Instead, the call for abolition is rooted in the work of Black

and brown people, specifically Black women, queer womxn, families, neighbors, revolutionaries, community organizers, teachers, and anyone who has been creating spaces for liberatory learning and relations.

Finally, while binaries are typically untrue and unhelpful, the following declaration by historian Lerone Bennett Jr. is critical for teachers inside and outside prisons: "An educator in a system of oppression is either a revolutionary or an oppressor" (Kawi, 2020, para. 3). To be a revolutionary in education, teachers inside and outside prisons must do the life-long, difficult, and exhausting work of antiracist, anti-oppressive, and abolitionist politics. Educators provide instruction, lessons, and opportunities for critical thinking to students; but, educators should also provide community, care, and the space to dream for students. Systems designed to kill, or as Dr. Bettina Love (2019) defines "spirit-murder," Black and brown students inherently steal their community, wellbeing, and dreams (p. 38). Thus, it is imperative and necessary that people who do higher education in prison commit themselves to the prison abolition movement – a praxis dedicated to dismantling the systems around us and within us that kill or spirit-murder Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Because, perhaps more than anything, teachers should fight for their students to be safe and at home. For incarcerated students, this means teachers need to fight for our students to return home.

The Prison-Industrial Complex: A Brief History

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1975) addresses the relationship between power and knowledge in prisons and schools, and how this relationship is used for social control. Foucault grounds his discussion of power and authority in the history of Western institutions. Foucault's concept of "disciplines" or technological powers animate these institutions. These powers control bodies or as Foucault (1975) writes, "discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience) … in short, it dissociates power from the body," arguing that "disciplinary coercion" and economic exploitation operate in similar ways (p. 138). For example, capitalism exploits a person's body as they perform labor, as the products and profits of their labor go to another. Foucault argues that complying with these systems of exploitation requires an active process of "discipline" (as a verb). People must be "disciplined" to obey structures that otherwise oppress them. While Foucault traces the rise of the prison as the dominant form of punishment in the West, he also explains how punishment and discipline tactics are deployed in other institutions. In other words, the carceral state expands beyond prisons by animating schools, as well. In both prisons and schools, disciplinary forces are used to create "docile bodies" which ultimately ensure the state maintains what Foucault (1975) calls an "automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). This is also how the prison and the school systems are inherently political spaces, according to Foucault. However, notably absent from Foucault's work is a

critical race analysis. How the PIC reinforces racist policies, policing strategies, and social discriminatory attitudes against communities of color are ignored in this work. Briefly, Foucault (1975) questions the consequences of incarceration, proposing that prison creates "an unnatural, useless and dangerous existence" for people who are incarcerated (p. 266). But this concern remains peripheral to Foucault's overall theoretical assertions regarding the mechanics of power and disciplines of control.

On the one hand, Foucault's omission of how Black and brown communities are affected disproportionately by the concepts of biopower and surveillance is a sign of Foucault's white Eurocentrism. On the other hand, even Foucault's Eurocentric account of the carceral state, which remains exclusive to the experiences of white subjects, relates to arguments made by critical race scholars. This includes his declaration that the carceral state expands beyond prisons by animating schools, hospitals, churches, and militaries with punitive methods of control. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, bell hooks, Frederick Douglass, and countless other critical race scholar-activists and Black revolutionaries have made this clear not just in theory but also in practice and through lived experiences. If Foucault cannot ignore the violence and dominance of punitive systems, spreading to areas outside the literal prison, such as schools, then the questions of who suffers from this dual carceral and educational violence, or together racialized violence, and how to end that violence must be raised.

Angela Davis, the activist, scholar, and writer addresses these concerns of ending racialized violence, especially against targeted communities. She fills a crucial gap that Foucault left open. In her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Davis speaks to similar histories and concepts as Foucault does. She discusses the panopticon, the rise of the penitentiary in Western Europe and the United States, and even cites Foucault throughout the book. Like Foucault, Davis traces the rise of the penitentiary as a so-called "humane" practice of punishment. She also notes that the prison system grew in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in England and Western Europe. However, as opposed to only tracing the rise of the prison system as a form of punishment, Davis also traces the rise of prison abolition as part of a larger history of abolition movements. Her genealogical reading of the prison system is informed by her larger concerns with the history of abolition movements. Therefore, Davis' analysis of the PIC immediately and necessarily foregrounds race, colonialism, and gender. Foucault's, Morris', and Rothman's shared assertion that European forms of punitive justice started to spread worldwide are, according to Davis, better understood as a result of colonialism. In the 18th and 19th centuries, European prison systems were imported to and implemented in Asia and Africa "as an important component of colonial rule" (Davis, 2003, p. 42).

The role of punishment in Western society is systemically and historically connected to the exploitation and oppression of Black and brown bodies as a defining feature of the colonial system. As Davis (2003) explains, "jails [were] established in

the second half of the 18th century" in colonized regions such as India and Nigeria (p. 42). European colonists and trading companies constructed prisons to hold kidnapped Africans before the Middle Passage. Africans who resisted European invasion, and subsequent dominion over resources, local businesses, and trade, were detained in these new facilities. In India, jails were established in Calcutta and Madras to detain dissenters to British rule; they often imprisoned Indigenous and Indian political leaders to warn the colonized population of the risks and consequences of anti-colonial activities. Western European countries helped spread the use of penal institutions globally as part of their colonial projects. Prisons were an essential tool for colonization as they detained the local (often Black and brown) people who fought back against colonial forces.

Davis further introduces the relationship among race, gender, and colonialism into her analysis of the history and structures of the prison system. On the PIC, she writes the following:

> The term 'prison industrial complex' was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit. (Davis, 2003, p. 84)

Here, Davis goes where Foucault does not: She asserts that the rise of the prison was a direct result of racism and capitalism. This claim also leads Davis to the necessity of prison abolitionism. Suggesting that anti-racism and anti-prison work are necessarily interconnected, Davis (2003) posits the following:

> If we are already persuaded that racism should not be allowed to define the planet's future and if we can successfully argue that prisons are racist institutions, this may lead us to take seriously the prospect of declaring prisons obsolete. (p. 25)

Davis supports her claim that prisons are racist institutions by comparing prison regulations to the Slave Codes. Davis (2003) cites historian Adam Jay Hirsch who explains how both the penitentiary system and chattel slavery "subordinated their subjects to the will of others" (p. 27). In other words, both people who were enslaved in the South and people who were incarcerated followed the command of their superiors. As a result they were reduced to a state of hyper-dependency, relying on others for the "supply of basic human services such as food and shelter" (Davis, 2003, p. 27). Practices of isolation, confinement, coercion, and labor exploitation defined both the penitentiary and the plantation. Even Thomas Jefferson noted the similarities between these two institutions when he explained that free people could be punished for crimes through prison sentences and hard labor, but enslaved people could not because these were conditions they already experienced daily (Davis, 2003). In this way, Davis contends that the similarities between the institutions of the

slave plantation and the prison system involve the punishment of Black bodies and profit, especially for white Americans.

The central analytical principle of Davis' (2003) work in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* is that the very concept of race has "always played a central role in constructing presumptions of criminality" (p. 28). For example, Davis (2003) describes the 13th Amendment, which declares the abolition of slavery "except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted" (p. 28). This exception, which does not abolish slavery as much as it amends slavery, led to a series of new Black Codes – a successor to the Slave Codes. The Black Codes identified specific actions "including vagrancy, absence from work, breach of job contracts, the possession of guns, and insulting gestures or acts" as criminal for Black people only (Davis, 2003). Through these racist laws, Southern states were able to continue profiting off the labor of Black bodies, lending to the creation of the convict lease system. Mary Ellen Curtin's study of Alabama prisoners provides a telling example of this practice. While Alabama still practiced slavery, 99% of prisoners in Alabama's penitentiaries were white (Davis, 2003). After the Black Codes were written and 400,000 Black people were freed, the overwhelming majority of Alabama's prison population quickly shifted to Black (Davis, 2003). Southern states were quick to develop a criminal justice system that restricted and removed possibilities of freedom for newly released slaves; they even made this process legal and profitable for themselves.

States relied on such penal servitude to build the modern urban centers in the United States today, including the White House, the United States Capitol, Wall Street, the Smithsonian Institute, and various universities and used incarcerated people as unpaid labor in mining for resources and construction businesses. Davis's study thus illuminates how the development of the prison in the United States and the country's development as a modern nation is directly tied to plantation slavery. Moreover, Davis highlights how the fight to end the prison system is also directly tied to ending slavery. Anti-prison activists protested the systemic and historical racism of both the penitentiary and convict lease system as they were implemented (Davis, 2003). Most of these activists were formerly enslaved abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Davis clarifies that the fight to end slavery is connected to the fight to abolish prisons and that both must be part of the movement to end racism.

Academic Violence + Carceral Violence = White Supremacist Culture

The struggle to make education more liberating is directly connected to abolishing slavery and prisons. Given the United States' history of murderous assimilation practices (e.g., Native "residential" schools), segregation policies, English-only initiatives, and the school-to-prison pipeline, to only name a few, it should come as no surprise that formal education is also weaponized as a form of

subjugation – primarily against BIPOC communities. Schools are a fundamental tool for creating and continuing white supremacy culture, or the idea that "White people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions" (Dismantling Racism, n.d., para. 3). Moreover, it is at school that many BIPOC children have their first experiences with police and policing practices. For example, Black children, especially young Black girls, are punished in more severe ways (e.g., detention, suspension, expulsion, and calling the cops) than their white peers who show the same behavior.[1]

In this way, schools are intricately intertwined with the criminal injustice system, which is why abolitionist and organizer, Mariame Kaba (2017), states that "white supremacy is maintained and reproduced through the criminal punishment apparatus" (Kaba & Duda, 2017, para. 2). The violence that Black and brown children, adolescents, teenagers, and adults face in sites of education is state-sponsored, white supremacist violence organized by carceral logic. Then, BIPOC trauma is compounded as the act of threatening the lives and spirits of Black and brown children becomes increasingly normalized as part of discipline, professionalism, or lessons in education. Therefore, educators – whether they recognize it or not – are employed as agents of the state. Through dehumanizing or whitewashed curriculum, the ability to externalize implicit bias and prejudice through positions of power, white savior notions, and abuse of authority, educators in the United States serve in positions that promote white supremacy. The duty as educators, then, is to refuse and dismantle the ways white supremacy lives in the institutions and themselves. Educators must be weakening the institutions they work within to create pathways toward liberation and imagine new ways of learning together in community.

Power dynamics are unavoidable in prison classrooms where teachers' freedom of movement and recognition of agency are in stark contrast to the restrictive, repressive, and (re)traumatizing purpose of the prison itself. The violence enacted on students at prisons, as people who are being caged and abused by the state, is inseparable from the prison classroom. Yet, typically, I encounter educators in prison who either refuse to contend with this violent power dynamic or, if they do, they externalize paternalist and white savior ideologies. Students at the prison I teach at remarked how many times their teachers told them education would "save" them. During a faculty meeting with other teachers, a white woman literally said, "I want to save them all" when asked why they do this work. Two of my primary supervisors referred to the people incarcerated at this "men's" prison as "broken" and "helpless." In *White Supremacy Culture*, Tema Okun (2001) describes paternalism as "those with power [thinking] they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power" (para. 1). I have lost count of the number of times a co-worker at the prisons where I teach have said they "want to save everyone" there or that

[1] See *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris

the people imprisoned are "broken and need my help to fix them." White savior and paternalist notions, as these statements and the like are, dangerously promote white supremacy and Black and brown dehumanization and death.

These statements demonstrate how white people and people on the outside control BIPOC and incarcerated peoples' oppression and suffering, and also control their freedom and resistance. According to Dena Simmons (2020), this is how the "mentality of slavery" operates in schools and the mindsets of teachers to this day (Haymarket Books, 18:55). White saviorism and paternalism disempower BIPOC by centering whiteness and white power. These notions erase histories and communities of BIPOC survival, resistance, revolution, joy, love, and liberation movements. BIPOC, and people who are imprisoned, have been resisting their oppression for centuries. The results of white saviorism are deadly.

Refusing to subscribe to paternalistic white savior notions is just one of the demands of abolitionist teachers who seek to dismantle the white supremacist culture that organizes education, relationships, imaginations, and societies. Teachers must also take risks, using and sacrificing privilege and positions of power, to shepherd and steal resources for marginalized communities. There must be attention given to dismantling and disrupting systems of power. These are the tenets of antiracist, anti-oppressive, and abolitionist teaching: That educators are articulating their social justice pedagogy in radical actions outside of the classroom. However, antiracist and anti-oppressive teaching in prisons is complicated by the fact that prison classrooms are often more hyper-surveilled, censored, and regulated by prison staff than classrooms on the outside. Thus, teachers in prisons are faced with a paradox in which teaching in antiracist ways and about antiracist material is essential, but also politically fraught for both teachers and students.

Teachers in prison cannot ignore the reality of racism and white supremacy that flourishes in the prison system. Jean Genet (1994), a French novelist and political activist, deemed the prison a space of amplified racism. He writes the following in the preface to George Jackson's (1970) published letters, *Soledad Brother*:

> If, by some oversight, racism were to disappear from the surface of the U.S., we could then seek it out, intact and more dense, in one of these cells … one might say that racism is here in its pure state, gathering its forces, pulsing with power, ready to spring. (p. 335)

Prison is indeed a space where racism is "pure" and pulsing with heightened power.

The only way to truly prevent BIPOC in prisons from suffering from the racist violence of peers, staff, and administrators is to abolish the prison system and its attending features of the police, surveillance technology, borders, and more. The only way to truly protect BIPOC students is to fight for the day where they can be students and teachers in the open, free world – a world without cages and with a transformed, antiracist and anti-oppressive education system. In other words, the

only way is abolition. One way for in-prison teachers to reach toward abolition is to work towards getting people home: support students' commutations, get involved with freedom campaigns, provide resources for local jail support collectives, and, of course, provide students with resources and tools that do not solely support their academic experience, but also support their survival, livelihoods, and resistance movements.

Educators who teach in prisons must commit themselves to prison abolition study and work because the ultimate dream of education cannot thrive in a hyper-oppressive space, such as prisons (and militarized schools, as well). The ability to dream and hope are taken from marginalized people – or people of the Global Majority – through the practices of policing and imprisonment. The prison-industrial complex does this in a profitable way. It criminalizes dark-skinned people and then exploits their bodies for labor (e.g., the convict leasing system). Both the capitalization and racialization of BIPOC uphold the prison-industrial complex. As Davis (2020) declares, "Racial capitalism is capitalism," which is painfully evident in the very structures of prisons and jails nationwide (Democracy Now, 2020, 39:28). Incarceration itself disempowers Black, Indigenous, people of color, and LGBTQ+ communities, especially as prisons profit off the caging of their bodies and exploitation of their labor. It removes the possibility for organized action and communal determination by isolating members of these communities by the masses – and traumatizing them and their loved ones. The binary that teachers reckon with, to be complicit agents of the white supremacist state or to be active dissenters from the white supremacist state, is a choice that teachers make through their actions. Will teachers contribute to the oppression and traumatization of their students, or will they support their liberation and healing? The answer to these questions cannot be spoken as mere semantics; the answers must be evident in practices and actions. Fortunately, abolitionist politics provides the lens for teachers to start and sustain this work responsibly.

Defining Abolition & Abolitionist Teaching

According to Critical Resistance (2020), "PIC abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and incarcerations" (para. 3). The notion of abolition is both a tool and a goal as it will require broad and imaginative strategies that must remain flexible to different communities and their needs. While prison abolitionism employs various strategies of organizing, knowledge-making, and resourcing toward a goal of dismantling, it also must offer new ways of imagining and creating an anti-carceral or post-carceral world toward a goal of building. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2019), prison and geography scholar, asserts, "Abolition means not just the closing of prisons but the presence, instead, of vital systems of support that many communities lack" (as cited in Kushner, 2019, para.15).

This reconstructive or transformative goal of prison abolitionism is incredibly complicated, considering prison abolition would require various communities' self-determination as opposed to reliance on state governance. The self-determined agendas by which communities decide on their needs and priorities will vary between different communities. Each local community operates within particular historical contexts and according to specific cultural values. In this context, the connections between prison abolitionism, transnational feminism, and postcolonial criticism are particularly relevant. Prison abolitionism must avoid essentialism regarding identity, nationality, community, and history. Therefore, prison abolitionism must be a versatile and multidimensional network of movements and theories as opposed to a singular, generic formula.

The role of educators in such a dynamic movement of prison abolition is not simply to teach about prison abolitionism but to live prison abolition. Just as antiracist teaching is not simply teaching a "diverse" curriculum or reading a book about racial struggle, abolitionist teaching is not simply using the word "abolition" or reading Angela Davis (though reading Angela Davis is very important). Both antiracist and abolitionist teaching, which are inextricable from one another, are a way of life. When you live anti-racism and abolition work, you are exhausted. You do not have a checklist or a due date. It is your life; it is your lens; it is how you view yourself and the world around you; it is how you relate; it is how you act; it is how you imagine; it is how you organize. Love (2020) writes the following:

> Antiracist teaching is not just about acknowledging that racism exists but about consciously committing to the struggle of fighting for racial justice, and it is fundamental to abolitionist teaching. Antiracist educators seek to understand the everyday experiences of dark people living, enduring, and resisting White supremacy and White rage. (p. 54)

Teaching from an abolitionist agenda inside prisons means recognizing the historical and contemporary violence of whiteness and how that violence takes shape in the PIC.

At the same time, however, abolition is more than the interpersonal. Abolition indeed must happen at home, in our relationships, and within ourselves, but it also must be directed at systemic and institutional violence. This is why Love (2019) asserts that "understanding the everyday experiences of dark people" is not enough (p. 54). One must commit themselves, as Love says, to the "struggle of fighting for racial justice" (p. 54). As much as academics may resist the idea, studying and learning alone are insufficient gestures toward justice. They are important, but they often do not change the material world of those oppressed and marginalized. Students who are imprisoned, for example, may find reprieve or hope from higher education within prison. However, the fact remains that they still live behind bars. Despite reading Assata Shakur, our students are still traumatized from isolation practices. Despite discussing mental health, our students are still

dangerously denied adequate healthcare, counseling, and therapy. Despite college credit and even degrees, our students are still sexually, physically, psychologically, and emotionally abused. Higher education is neither freedom nor justice and to claim it is either is a form of deception.

In an interview with the "Groundings" podcast, scholar-activist and professor Joy James (2021) argues that abolition is plural. There are multiple kinds of abolition; it is "abolitionisms." However, while the plurality of abolition makes it powerfully expansive, it also makes it "vulnerable to neoradical handling" (James, 2021, 3:40). One way that abolition is co-opted through this handling is in the emergence of "academic abolition." According to James (2021), academia's appropriation of the language of abolition, without the politics and practices of abolition, allows the mainstream elite to "control abolition without meeting the needs of the captive" (2:00). James gives an example of this kind of academic abolition, explaining how a university might ask formerly imprisoned people to speak as part of a panel on higher education in prison. They may even frame this panel as "abolitionist" or "antiracist." However, key components might make that panel inequitable, such as whether the university is paying panelists or if the panelists are all white or non-Black. If it is not an equitable space, it is not an abolitionist space.

Moreover, James (2021) suggests that universities that sponsor panels of formerly incarcerated people often punish or discipline panelists who speak out against the university, higher education in prison, or liberal hegemonic politics more generally. James (2021) summarizes academic abolition as the promotion of currently or formerly incarcerated people who admit they did wrong, laud education for helping them, and now are ready for "civic life" (9:08). Notably, higher education in prison promotes similar sanitized thinking (e.g. incarcerated students pressured to laud higher education as life-changing even when it does not change their material reality - or worse, puts them in debt). I have heard teachers tell students in prison that their education will "save them" by getting them jobs or reducing the recidivism rate, completely ignoring and minimizing the heightened struggles formerly imprisoned people face in a capitalist, elitist society and not to mention, if they are also BIPOC, facing a white supremacist society with a record. I have heard students say that they would not have received an education unless they were in prison. Often the tone students say this with is a mix of resentment, disappointment, gratitude, and dismay. People on the outside who hear this statement and do not have abolitionist frameworks will sometimes use this as justification or praise for prison and prison reform. On the contrary, I hope that this statement points to how violent, inequitable, and anti-Black the prison and education systems are in the United States. No one should have to be removed from their community and caged in a cell to finally receive a formal education. That this is the reality for some of our students in prison highlights how inaccessible education is in the United States and how manipulative the prison system is.

Reduced recidivism rates, higher education programs in prison, and/or finding a community in prison do not make the prison system just or equitable. They may make prison more survivable, but they should not be used to justify or expand the prison-industrial complex. Teachers must understand that higher education in prison is not an act of liberation. Framing higher education in prison as liberatory without attending to the violence of prison and white supremacist culture puts students, especially BIPOC students, in more positions of trauma. Furthermore, in this example of academic violence, students in prisons are also taught to be grateful for this deception and the exploitation of their bodies. Often, teachers in prison will write about or conduct research on students. Sometimes, this looks like white teachers turning the experiences of Black and brown people in prison into data. Other times, this looks like teachers furthering their career by starting podcasts, blogs, or other platforms in which they discuss their students' traumas and stories. It is rare, unfortunately, for these teachers to include abolitionist demands with these materials. As a result, students in prison are typically asked to come to classrooms where their bodily experiences of being caged are ultimately used to further the careers of teachers who can move freely in and out of the prison. In this way, teachers also "profit" off their students' labor in the classroom.

Without abolitionist work, such as protesting the prison system, letter writing campaigns, and fighting to bring people home, and more, teachers - perhaps unknowingly - participate in a pattern of exploitation where their gain is at the cost of their students' health and freedom. When teachers in prisons claim to "save" or "help" their students in their publications, workshops, and more, but fail to do abolitionist work, they muddy the very idea of liberation. Liberation does not look like education in an institution that is inherently violent, abusive, and dehumanizing. Liberation, instead, looks like people laughing in a total sense of safety and belonging at home, as one example. Prison steals that from people. Abolition is plural, but it cannot be abstracted. Abolition is about bringing people home, refusing and preventing white supremacist violence, and creating a place for them in a society that thrives outside carceral logics.

Applying the Politics of Abolitionist Teaching

Abolitionist teaching can provide a model of community and healthy boundaries for people who are otherwise indoctrinated into a hyper-violent space. Setting boundaries, such as consent, content warnings, time and energy spent on certain topics, expectations, agency, to name a few, are healthy and important for all people. Establishing healthy boundaries for and between teachers and students in prisons is crucial when people who are incarcerated are stripped of agency, choice, privacy, bodily autonomy, and replaced with isolation, abusive practices, harassment, and humiliation. Additionally, abolitionist teaching can provide a sense of solidarity for those witnessing and experiencing the intensified forces of racism from other

imprisoned people, the prison staff, and other government agents. No matter what, educators who teach in prisons have a position of privilege and power that can cause harm. Abolitionist and antiracist politics would encourage, even require, educators to analyze their positionality and move with intention and self-accountability.

Dismantling white supremacy will take time. Transforming how people, and the world, relates will take time. Thus, abolitionist teaching is a lifelong praxis. There is no checklist or best practices guide because abolitionist teaching should be a lens that is applied to all actions, intentions, and mentalities every day. This is not work that should be done alone, but instead, in community. Community offers grounding, allows for rest, and holds people accountable, which is needed, because this work can be messy. And, of course, it is crucial that abolitionist teaching is a political framework and not simply a few examples, words, or lessons you do one day. Abolitionist teaching is a way of living and shapes every move we make as teachers and people. Abolitionist educators must teach that which the white supremacist state fears. This can include Black and brown history and revolutionaries, Black and Indigenous joy and love, multi-racial coalitions, anti-capitalist principles, and critical pedagogy that moves us all towards social justice. What we teach should weaken the institution we are a part of whether that is the prison, the academy, or the larger settler-colonial, capitalist state. For example, in my classes I teach the work of Black revolutionaries such as Assata Shakur, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X. I have students model the works of the Combahee River Collective and Alcatraz Occupation by compiling their needs, desires and dreams and then writing about them creatively and politically. Students create a mix of memoirs, poetry, and essays and then couple those works with a list of their demands.

Celebrating and cherishing BIPOC love, joy, and rest can also weaken the system. Amplifying and affirming BIPOC critiques of white supremacist violence can weaken the system. Advocating for getting cops off campus or for students' commutations can weaken the system. Working within your own community to find people you can call instead of the police can weaken the system. Pushing back against grading practices or the policies of mandatory reporting in higher education can weaken the system. Labor strikes can weaken the system. Teaching white people how to reckon with what it means to be white and how they benefit from white supremacy can weaken the system. Modeling self-accountability and boundaries with students can weaken the system, such as the following: Dismantling any desires to be proximate to whiteness as non-Black people of color. Refusing to traumatize students and refusing to use the traumas of BIPOC for the sake of white students. Taking away white supremacists' platforms whether in your classroom or outside of your classroom. Promoting social justice education by having students critically analyze and organize in their local environments. Teaching skills-sharing such as community gardening practices, political zine making, water purity testing, quantitative and qualitative analytical skills, and more. All of us stepping in and out of teacher and

student roles by co-creating our education together. Moving from thought to action, and empowering students to move from thought to action in their own roles and contexts. Recognizing that there can be no "restorative justice" without first restoring history and reclaiming BIPOC power. Being adamant about the violence of the prison system and how it does not keep any of us safe. Acknowledging that there is no abolition unless caged people are prioritized, centered, and freed. Committing yourself to the fight for your students' liberation will weaken the system. Being led by your students' knowledge and expertise in their own liberation. Preventing violence from entering your students' communities so they can freely dream.

"Freedom-dreaming" Abolition through Activism & Mutual Aid

The movement to end prisons is a historical and dynamic web of actions, stories, strategies, teachings, and theories. It has gained momentum by adapting to encompass an ever-evolving network of carceral violence in the United States, and around the world, such as the proliferation of policing and detention practices in schools and academic spaces. Grappling with and ultimately dismantling the complicated strategies and structures of the PIC in the United States requires interdisciplinary methodologies rooted in the practices and theories of Black, Indigenous, people of color, and womxn of color feminisms, particularly that of Black women who lie at the intersections of multiple oppressions. This can mean anything from citing Black women and reading Black women's works to serving Black women's justice movements to simply hearing and believing Black women. For educators in prison, we must practice acts of liberation with each other and our students in the classroom as we fight for their liberation from carceral spaces and structures. It means we must dream of possibilities for health, happiness, and freedom in our work at the same time we demand them on the ground.

Abolition is happening all around us. Ancestors, community organizers, youth groups, teachers, scholars, activists, and people who are incarcerated have been doing this dual dismantling and transforming work for centuries. Abolitionists refuse and dismantle as much as they imagine and create. Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) is adamant about the power of radical dream-work in social movements in his book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, insisting that coconspirators "must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream," (p. xii). Community organizers, specifically those creating mutual aid projects, community accountability processes, and transformative justice spaces are showing us how this dream-work is essential to abolitionist politics. Mariame Kaba (2021) also describes the imaginative work of abolition on the ground, and, similar to Kelley, insists, "We must imagine and experiment with new collective structures that enable us to take more principled action, such as embracing collective responsibility to resolve conflicts" (p. 4). There is no creation without first imagination. Moreover, there is no liberation without first dreaming of

freedom. And there is no materializing those dreams without controlling the violence that kills and spirit-murders BIPOC.

Many scholars and activists, including the INCITE! team, Kai Cheng Thom, Harsha Walia, Victoria Law, and more, discuss the gendered and racialized violence of the prison-industrial complex before focusing on what it will take to end this kind of violence. They demonstrate dreams at work through advocacy. For example, Beth Richie, author of *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*, tells the stories of Black women organizing against the prison-industrial complex and thriving despite such violence. Richie (2012) historicizes how in the mid-1980s, "as more formal structures [targeting Black women] were being created, Black women volunteered for, staffed, and provided leadership to the many women's collectives, hotlines, shelters, and other support services for women experiencing male violence" (p. 149). In the 1990s, Black women created national organizations, such as the National Black Women's Health Project and the African American Women in Defense of Ourselves network (Richie, 2012). This latter group gathered in response to the infamous Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill legal case. In a demonstration of the relationship between activism and scholarship, the group protested Thomas' confirmation as a Supreme Court Justice and documented their activism in the 1992 book *Race-ing Justice, En-gendeirng Power: Essays on Anita Hill*, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality. Additionally, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) devotes a chapter to "Mothers Reclaiming Our Children" (Mothers ROC) in her book, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California.* Mothers ROC was a group founded by Black women in 1992 Los Angeles. The community-led organization focused on supporting the rights of Black and Latino men incarcerated on false or exaggerated charges.

Davis (2003) also devotes sections of her foundational book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, to chronicling community activism and calls such activism "abolitionist alternatives" (p. 105). These alternatives encompass actions that dismantle problematic systems as well as build new resources and relations for communities. Those invested in a healthier society must establish job and living wage programs, community recreational facilities, and drug treatment centers – all resources that exist for the wealthy, but not the working class. Simultaneously, we must dismantle the racist laws and attitudes that govern the PIC (Davis, 2003). Scholar-activists, prison abolitionists, educators, and others must build a system where health and social professionals and trained community members respond to domestic violence as opposed to the police. While the Black Panther Party (BPP) was not completely aligned with abolitionist politics, they created remarkable mutual aid programs in the late 20th century. Local BPP chapters distributed a community handbook with guidelines for training community members who could respond to disputes instead of cops. This became a radical and tangible way to resist the PIC; Black and brown could respond to each other's needs without risking an altercation with police

forces. Abolitionists today work with their legacy to dream of even more liberatory possibilities.

Conclusion

As educators, we should fight for the freedom of our students today and every day; that necessitates fighting for abolition. We should fight for abolition and thus liberation today and every day. We should fight for our students' rights to dream, manifest a new world, and live responsibly within it. Why else do we teach? There is a more just and equitable world that we – students, teachers, activists, scholars, people – can create if we are conscious, collective, and active – if we are abolitionists. This is what makes abolition work so hard. It is difficult to imagine and create new ways of relating, being, and believing. It is difficult to be in radical community with one another based on intention, accountability, and care; but it is worth it, and it is necessary if we wish to materialize a truly free and just world. The state, institutions, and other communities retaliate when we collectively dream in such radical ways. They retaliate because these dreams attack the status quo. Specifically, white supremacists retaliate when they see Black empowerment and community-building both inside and outside of prison walls.

There are so many barriers we face as abolitionists. We are not given the resources or funding needed and yet are expected to provide "proof" that abolition is feasible. What we know is that we have had centuries of punitive methods seeped in anti-Black racism. We know that these methods do not make anyone safer. Safety created and threatened by violence is not safety at all. What we know is that Black politics and Black feminism have created methods for mutual aid, survival, and revolution. We know that BIPOC, LGBTQ+, undocumented, migrant, disabled, and other marginalized communities have created and imagined new forms of justice. What we know is that abolition is necessary.

If prison abolition means transforming policing tactics in the United States, then it also means that educators do not act like police to each other or students. If prison abolition means building public health programs, then it also means we support each other's mental health. If prison abolition means dismantling systemic racism, then it also means we dismantle our own biases and learned prejudice. And if prison abolition means being in community with one another, then it also means we transform the ways we teach and learn together. Following the argument of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) article, *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*, I conclude with a similar sentiment. Abolition brings about a world without prisons and police. Abolition is not a metaphor. It is not a metaphor for other forms of policing or other forms of detention. It is not repurposing punitive methods under a different name. It is about the creation of new systems and structures that do not rely on punishment, police, or prisons. It is about the politics of mutual aid, community care, and dream-work. It is a practice, a strategy, an ideology, a theory, a community, a movement, a

history, and a future. Abolition is a lens through which we understand the world. It is a politics and a value system. It is what makes educators in prisons hope and fight for the day when our jobs do not exist, because prisons do not exist.

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Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View: Literacy Narratives in the Higher Education in Prison Classroom

Timothy Barnett

Literacy narratives, or stories people tell about their experiences with reading, writing, and language, have a history in autobiographies by those who have been incarcerated. These texts often rely on the Literacy Myth, a belief that literacy and education more broadly can be a panacea for societal problems. The Literacy Myth also depends on the idea of individualism, and literacy narratives often depict writers and readers as autonomous individuals, whose literacy practices are directed toward personal success and individual transformation. This essay considers the literacy narratives of students in a prison writing program, which suggest that a more social understanding of the literacy narrative genre and of readers and writers in general is needed to address social ills. This shift is particularly important for higher education programs in prison where an acknowledgement of the power of collectivity (through writing groups that emphasize a collective voice, for example) can prove particularly useful, both in terms of maintaining quality education and helping students and instructors understand the need for collective action if we are to challenge the prison-industrial complex. Thoughtful, critical alliances are encouraged, and faculty and students in higher education programs in prison are urged to use literacy narratives as one tool to consider structural change in a system that too often focuses on individual reform.

Keywords: *literacy narratives, prison writing, prison education, writing pedagogy, higher education in prison*

I argue in this essay for the significance of a specific genre, the literacy narrative, as an important tool for Higher Education in Prison (HEP) faculty and students. This genre features personal stories of reading, writing, and language use more broadly and is already present in the field, but rarely noted as such (Patrick Berry [2017] is one exception). The literacy narrative deserves recognition as an important text for HEP faculty and students to both read and write. The power of this genre comes, in part, from its ability to help us think about the role language plays in the ways individuals navigate identity, power, and change. Literacy narratives can also cast a critical light on education, something often discussed in HEP classrooms because traditional forms of education have often been complicated for students who are incarcerated, even as education frequently takes on new importance in carceral settings.

In this essay, I focus on the ways literacy narratives help identify the interplay around identity, education, and change, especially in relation to the Enlightenment understanding of the individual as self-made, independent of history and ideology. This understanding of identity, of course, has been challenged by feminist, queer, and other theories, which see consciousness as inherently political, culturally formed, and, therefore, materially and ideologically tied to the world (scholars such as Foucault [1990] and Butler [2006] influenced this way of thinking in profound ways). These criticisms reject any notion of the self as autonomous and assert that history is made not by individual heroes but by the power of the many. Accordingly, and, given how deeply interconnected all lives are, collective action must be the primary tool for political change.

The Literacy Myth

Those who study writing, rhetoric, and literacy often connect the conflict between an autonomous and socially constructed self to what Graff (1991) has called the Literacy Myth. The myth, which has been influential in many fields, suggests that advanced literacy is the key to a middle-class life fortified by economic and political capital, the kind of personal success valorized, if often mythical, in capitalism. While not wholly wrong—literacy does have power and it is hard to have economic

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viability today without it—the Literacy Myth distorts historical disparities. It glosses over the vast differences in opportunity afforded to different groups and ascribes too much power to literacy, and education more broadly, as singularly responsible for change. Graff (2010) was asked to write a retrospective on the 30th anniversary of his book *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the 19th Century*, and in this piece, he repeatedly connects the myth to individualism and personal success. He writes, for example, that the Literacy Myth initially arose from "dreams of mobility …; an evangelical Protestantism rooted in salvation for the individual …; a class structure inseparable from capitalism …; meritocratic and stratified notions of egalitarianism; radical individualism …; and limits to collective action" (Graff, 2010, p. 644). The Literacy Myth holds tightly to the concept of the autonomous individual in a way that is embedded in a politics of control. As Graff (2010) notes, the myth's promotion of personal success for individuals leaves little space for collective action, complicating notions of a "common good." There is, therefore, little room for understanding literacy as a tool for systemic change, an idea that comes with problems of its own, as Plemons (2019), Berry (2017), Barrett et al. (2019), and others (following Graff) demonstrate in their critiques of literacy as a tool of social transformation. While I respect the concerns of these scholars, I also do not want to overlook the possibilities of literacy as a tool in the fight for radical change — not the only tool or one without problems — but a significant tool nonetheless, and one important to a radical vision for HEP pedagogy.

Despite the power of the Literacy Myth, scholars recognize that literacy is not invariably a good thing, since it can be used as a medium of control and often leads to pain and struggle, as work in literacy studies demonstrates (Stuckey, 1990; LeCourt, 2004; Young, 2007; and Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, and Lovejoy, 2018). Fox (2004) is another scholar who acknowledges the problems literacy can create; he notes that many enslaved in the antebellum South learned to read and write despite the criminalization of literacy. Enslaved people also frequently used literacy to come together in revolt. Fox notes that writing, protest literature in particular, "became identified with freedom on [an] … individual level, but it also became a part of the collective struggle" for the enslaved because of its reach (p. 123). The "volume and force" of protest literature, Fox (2004) continues, "tied literacy—in both the enslaved populations and in white enslavers—to [collective] resistance" (p. 123). However, citing Cornelius (1990), Fox (2004) also writes, "Many white southerners argued that the best way to preserve slavery would be to institutionalize literacy…. [T]hat formal schooling for slaves would … make slaves more submissive, industrious, and accepting" (p. 123), a sentiment that echoes concerns of Carter G. Woodson's (1933) *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Fox argues that education as a means of control seemed to prevail with the development of Freedmen's Schools, which focused on literacy as a tool of individual transformation rather than a tool for political change. These schools often fell under the care of Northern white women, and even the most

progressive among them stressed "individual character [rather than collective action] as a means of political reform" (Fox, 2004, p. 126). In language similar to today's transformation discourse for the incarcerated, the focus on individual character emphasized the need for those who were freed to work toward self-improvement but limited, Fox (2004) writes, "the kinds of critical incisiveness or collective action that would have served the Freedmen's political needs at the time" (p. 126). These needs included new political systems and material compensation for the labor extorted through slavery.

Literacy cannot guarantee the kind of "equality" the Literacy Myth would suggest—for individuals or groups. Individuals simply do not have the power to facilitate large-scale political change. Likewise, members of racialized and marginalized groups cannot count on personal advancement simply by taking in what the United States educational system, built on and sustained by racism and misogyny, has to offer. Further, it is necessary to understand how the state continues to use education as a means of control, as recent efforts to ban critical race theory in Idaho, Tennessee, and elsewhere demonstrate (Wilson, 2021). Vieira et al. (2019) note the many faces of literacy when they write that "literacy is always tied up in complex agendas, personal histories, technological changes, shifting winds of power. … [I]t is incumbent upon educators and researchers to understand the conditions under which literacy can liberate, and the conditions under which it can oppress" (p. 37).

Discussions of liberation and oppression take on whole new meanings in carceral settings, as Appleman (2019) describes in a story about a student named Doppler who one day tells Appleman that she teaches like Paulo Freire, "to liberate" (p. 19). When Appleman thanks him for the compliment, Doppler continues: "'I am not sure if it's a compliment or a curse,' he replied, grinning broadly. 'You are fucking me up … bad. … You want our minds to be free, but the rest of us isn't, so how is that supposed to work? Tell me, teacher, how?'" (p. 19). While spoken with a grin, Doppler reminds us that freedom of mind depends significantly on bodily freedom. Moreover, if real change is to happen, free bodies depend on sustained, collaborative movements that include, but are not limited to, critical literacy and education programs that understand the limits of a politics of "personal" success.

Work such as Appleman's and the growing body of scholarship coming from people who are or have been incarcerated (often written with free world faculty and students and taking up issues of individual success and collective change) frequently include literacy narratives (Betts, 2010, Barrett et al., 2019; Castro et al., 2015), with Baca's (2002) *A Place to Stand* an iconic story of language education. Literacy narratives—which can describe encounters with language education, language use in and out of school, the ways language is used against people, the many technologies of reading and writing, and so much more—are productive in this context because they bring together lived experience and theoretical perspectives. They offer a perspective on education that includes emotion as well as analysis and

ask us to consider inhumane systems in humane, or at least human, ways. As other scholars have noted, literacy narratives will not shut down prisons (Plemons, 2019; Cavallaro et al., 2016). However, recognizing that these narratives already exist in HEP literature and utilizing these texts more consciously can help us see the limits of radical individualism and glimpse the possibilities of connected selves negotiating "the relational webs within which we all exist" (Plemons, 2019, p. 11).

In this essay, I consider how the master narrative of individualism competes with the little narrative of the social actor, both in a prison education program overall and in the stories the writers in the program tell. This focus on the social actor in the context of a HEP program demonstrates how notions of individual transformation for the incarcerated overlap with, bump up against, and potentially undermine notions of identity as collective—and social change as a goal for educators and students.

Literacy Narratives as a Genre

Literacy narratives include famous stories such as Frederick Douglass's account of teaching himself to read and write, as well as stories from everyday people. Mary Soliday (1994) helped introduce the genre in college writing classes in the 1990s, and her (often-cited) quote suggests some of the power instructors ascribe to the genre:

> Literacy stories are … places where writers explore … 'liminal' crossings between worlds. In focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds. (p. 511)

Soliday's understanding of language as a tool to negotiate shifts in identity grounds her idea that teachers should ask writers to examine moments when new forms of linguistic practice demanded, encouraged, or allowed for change. In other words, she encourages writers to identify moments when they may have used literate activities in or out of school (writing music or tagging a building, for example) to redefine themselves and the worlds in which they live.

Issues around defining the self also arise in the work of Alexander (2011; 2019). Alexander (2011) considers how students see themselves as readers and writers in relation to Graff's Literacy Myth, as she also considers how students' stories complicate the myth through "little narratives" of literacy, a term she draws from Daniell (1999) and Lyotard (1984). Alexander (2011) analyzes the work of 60 college writers to examine how students use "little narratives" that stray from the overgeneralized success story of the Literacy Myth, whose dominating presence limits stories of reading and writing. Drawing further from Lyotard and Daniell, Alexander notes that "little narratives are less generalizable and more individualized" than the master narrative of the Literacy Myth as they present literacy as "multiple,

contextual, and ideological" (p. 611). Little narratives also frequently occur in stories told by "marginal groups" and thus "present many truths about literacy, not one Truth" (Alexander, 2011, p. 611). The focus on little narratives in literacy stories, then, is important because these transgressive narratives open space to understand more realistically the possibilities and limitations of language in our lives.

Alexander's (2011) initial analysis notes seven "little narratives" that students often include in their stories alongside the master narrative of the Literacy Myth. These little narratives (except for one labeled the "Other" category) are based on notions of identity and tend to emphasize an individualistic notion of self. They include the hero narrative,where students write of themselves as the protagonist doing wondrous things through reading and writing, as well as the child prodigy and literacy winner narratives, all of which support the Literacy Myth's focus on success but refuse its broad strokes and over-generalizations. Alexander (2011) also notes little narratives that work against the success story of the Literacy Myth, including the victim narrative, where someone, often a teacher, usurps the student's voice or crushes the student's interest in literacy, as well as the outsider and rebel little narratives, which describe students who are alienated from literacy or who choose to reject school literacies and read and write on their own terms, respectively. These little narratives challenge the Literacy Myth as they describe some of the negative ways we relate to literacy. However, the myth remains difficult to unseat as it pushes us to see literacy primarily, or only, as a vehicle for individual success, even when our experience might indicate otherwise.

Richard Rodriguez's (1982) *Hunger of Memory*, a classic literacy narrative, suggests how the Literacy Myth limits our understanding of language and education. Rodriguez's autobiographical story paints a painful picture of young Spanish-speaking "Ricardo," whose home identity is all but erased through school-based literacy, linguistic prejudice, and his own desire to achieve the Literacy Myth. He becomes "Richard" in the process and is alienated from his family through his loss of Spanish, his focus on his teachers as role models, and his overwhelming desire to become "educated" at the expense of time with family. Rodriguez achieves a kind of academic excellence that is impressive in traditional ways, but he eventually recognizes himself as a "bad student" and his education as empty. By the end of Rodriguez's story, students are often most struck by the deep pain he expresses, pain that would seem to support an argument for linguistic diversity in schools and respect for the conflicts of identity students often face. Rodriguez (1982), however, argues steadily against bilingual education and for schools' traditional goal of using literacy as a tool of assimilation. Rodriguez glosses over the many little narratives in *Hunger of Memory*, which reveal him as a literacy victim, outsider, rebel, and more to focus on a narrative of individual "success" that is jarring next to the details of his story. Analytical terms like those from Alexander's study, however, help clarify Rodriguez's story; they enable readers to see how the myth's assertion of literacy as

an individual path to success might have minimized Rodriguez's ability to grapple more fully with the cultural, familial, and political conflicts that compromise his linguistic journey.

Master and little narratives are, therefore, powerful analytical tools to make sense of a book like Rodriguez's as well as readers' personal stories of literacy. However, as Alexander (2019) later notes, this time examining Malala Yousafsai's autobiography *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, there is a need to expand the list of little narratives in order to imagine new kinds of literate identities. To that end, Alexander notes four new little narratives in Yousafsai's autobiography (the ambassador, nomad, narrator, and warrior narratives), which she connects to more social understandings of literacy and identity. What Alexander (2019) does not do, however, is create a category that directly identifies and foregrounds a more relational understanding of identity. It is important to identify such a little narrative so that the social self that is the focus of this essay, and that Plemons and Alexander (2019) describe through different lenses, is not glossed over by the historical strength of the Literacy Myth. To that end, I propose the *social actor* as a new kind of little narrative to consider when reading and writing stories of literacy.

I have found snippets of this little narrative in literacy narratives and, in the following section, I examine how the narrative of the social actor plays out in Appleman's (2019) *Words No Bars Can Hold: Literacy Learning in Prison*. I examine the little narrative of the social actor in the context of a prison education program to tease out the ways a social-self navigates literacy in an environment that discourages both individuality **and** collectivity. I have chosen to explore Appleman's work because it describes a successful higher education in prison program (Appleman has taught creative writing at Minnesota Correctional Facility—Stillwater for some years) and because the book describes a multi-faceted program with talented, committed teachers and brilliant students. I also examine this book because Appleman and her students grapple with notions of individualism in ways that reflect some of the tensions of this concept. In addition, *Words No Bars Can Hold* is a recent book that features a kind of literacy narrative from several of its students, and it has received glowing reviews from well-known composition scholar and teacher Mike Rose as well as from poet, writer, and activist Jimmy Santiago Baca, whose voice carries weight in the HEP community. Of course, no single book or program is representative of HEP programs around the country, but the Minnesota-Stillwater program is "mainstream" in various ways, including its use of literacy education as a tool for personal development, an issue that is never quite as simple as it seems.

Narratives of Literacy in *Words No Bars Can Hold:* Individual and Social Actors

Appleman's (2019) book is significant in part because of the way it features student voices. Passages and often whole texts from incarcerated students are present in nearly every chapter and are central in some (Chapters Six and Eight, for example). Students also write a kind of literacy narrative in the program, called "Writer's Statements," which feature students' experiences with and ideas about writing. The book includes several of these statements. While the students' texts are most important for this analysis, I first want to look at the program more generally, its emphasis on individual growth and transformation in particular. This emphasis, while limiting (*see* Meiners, 2007), cannot be dismissed since, as Appleman (2019) notes, prisons seek to eliminate any sense of individual uniqueness as part of their "corrective" process. Attempts to push back on prisons' refusal to see individuals as human need to involve a focus on the personal. However, I want to argue for an expanded notion of literate identities beyond what I would call the strong individualist approach Appleman takes as I demonstrate how the idea of the social actor makes its presence known even in a program focusing on individual transformation.

Appleman's focus on the individual comes from a notion of liberal education adapted, in part, from Harris, who writes that liberal arts education "will enable you to develop your own opinions, attitudes, values, and beliefs, based not on the authority of parents, peers, or professors, … but upon your own worthy … evaluation of argument and evidence;" further, this understanding will "make the phenomena of life appear coherent and understandable" (Harris in Appleman, 2019, p. 3). The idea of "individual evaluation," with no reliance on others, suggests a truly autonomous identity and ignores a central tenet of rhetoric as well as recent critical theory: that knowledge is based on combinations of our interactions with others (including "authorities"), interactions with texts, personal observations and experiences, a history (or multiple histories) of knowledge passed through generations, the languages we use to describe our realities, and our own cultural and individual biases. Knowledge in this view is constructed, unstable, and social; it is rarely fully "coherent" because it is political and communal and subject to change, as are those who create and use it.

Appleman (2019) emphasizes the importance of the individual in her program elsewhere as well, for example, when she argues for the importance of "a … frame through which to view literacy education in prison" (p. 43) that is "more realistic" than what Berry (2017) calls a "narrative of hope", an idea closely tied to the Literacy Myth. Appleman writes:

> Perhaps … individual rather than structural transformation is a more realistic way of thinking about 'the power of literacy.' It is not a large macro-narrative about social justice or political reform. Rather its focus is

> smaller in scope but…equally stunning and momentous: changes that an individual experiences. (p. 43)

Such an approach makes a certain kind of sense given that "The realities of the carceral state and the prison-industrial complex are undeniable …" (Appleman, 2019, p. 43). However, while it is true that individual transformation, especially in prison, can be "momentous," I worry about the limits of this approach, limits indicated by the final words of the sentence just quoted, which are "perhaps even insurmountable" (p. 43). As Appleman, Plemons (2019), and others argue, educators must be wary of romanticizing literacy education; however, teachers, scholars, and activists cannot give in to the idea that the prison industrial complex (PIC) is "insurmountable" or that literacy education has no role to play in systemic change. In terms of Graff's Literacy Myth, then, Appleman (2019) appears to both accept and reject the myth when she writes, "While there are clear limits … to the narrative of hope and transformation for the incarcerated through literacy…, there is no denying that writing can transform one's sense of self" (p. 43). Such a statement acknowledges the central problem of the Literacy Myth by affirming that an uncritical "narrative of hope" around literacy is untenable. At the same time, Appleman appears to hold onto another key element of the Myth: the idea that literacy learning is the realm of the individual whose only or primary goal is to work toward personal success.

Note that Appleman's concern with "a large macro-narrative about social justice or political reform" suggests structural transformation as a master narrative that must be corrected because broad change cannot happen through literacy alone. Appleman (2019) suggests that the "little narrative" in this situation is the narrative of personal change, which is a smaller, more manageable—if still "momentous"—goal because it does not involve working toward a hard-to-define common good and radically revised institutions to achieve that good. While it is true that structural change is more difficult than individual change, this conflict between master and little narrative can be understood in a different way. That is, the narrative of social change, which relies on collective notions of the self and collective action, can be seen as the little narrative in this example because relational understandings of the self are simply not a part of our national consciousness in the same way that the idea of the autonomous individual is (even if collectivity is not absent from our cultural imagination, as recent Black Lives Matters protesters demonstrate). What a narrative focusing on collectivity does, however, is challenge radical individualism, which is perhaps the most significant master narrative in Western culture and an idea whose power seems unabated despite ongoing challenges. I am arguing, then, with Appleman (2019) that it is necessary to critique the idea that literacy alone will create the changes we need in this world. At the same time, I do not want to valorize strong notions of individualism inherent in the Literacy Myth, which unnecessarily limit the horizons of HEP programs.

I propose following Plemons (2019) and Cavallaro et al. (2016), who, citing Mathieu (2005), argue for the importance of small, strategic, and collective tactics in the fight against systems of power, rather than simply accepting the inevitability of the prison state. Along with Barrett et al. (2019), Plemons asks readers to take very seriously the idea that education, politics, and change can mean many things to the various participants involved in HEP programs (*see* Plemons, 2019, p. 28), as she also suggests a need to limit expectations of literacy. However, Plemons (2019) writes, "I do not imagine bureaucracies—of education or incarceration—are too monolithic … to be moved by increments. This text presumes that congruence between what we desire and do is indeed possible, that a situated, albeit contingent, agency is possible …" (p. 30). Additionally, Plemons (2019) notes that the kind of tactics she has in mind must often be small and, frequently, must be revised or given up for safety's sake. Extreme caution is always needed. Ultimately, however, all such work must be done collaboratively and with an eye toward change that extends beyond the individual.

Appleman (2019) is right that changing the world through literacy is harder than changing individuals, but literacy and education programs should have a role in structural change, even if the role will vary from situation to situation and education alone will not change the world. Unsettling the idea of individualism is itself a weighty task, and it is a focus on radical individualism that makes change of any kind (personal or structural) so difficult. With these ideas in mind, I will examine one last passage from *Words No Bars Can Hold*: "Perhaps … there can be no more worthwhile endeavor than helping to create the conditions under which an individual can reclaim his sense of self and therefore his humanity" (Appleman, 2019, p. 44). Educators working in a system built on dehumanization must recognize the value of these words, as they also complicate them. How, for example, can the "personal" success of a few individuals (as necessary as that is) serve as a tool for the powerful to keep systems of oppression in place, for instance, in the way that some point to Barack Obama's election as the end of racism? How does the idea that there can be "nothing" greater than individual transformation obfuscate the desire many students and instructors in HEP programs have for coalition building to address larger issues significant to the common good—collaborations that might mean rethinking or deferring individual dreams for collective goals? The tensions between individual and group needs are real, and there is no clear map for how to balance these two things. HEP faculty and students cannot, and should not, gloss over the importance of the individual in a culture that prizes individuality and occasionally rewards those who live the "bootstraps narrative." However, it is necessary to foster more expansive visions of individuality, politics, and education.

Appleman (2019) briefly takes up these issues when she describes a writers' collective at the prison, which she links to structural goals and social understandings of the self. This collective would appear to be an example of the kind of tactical

intervention advocated for by Plemons' (2019): a "small, local attempt" to shift structures of power, which cannot "singlehandedly [sic] solve the problem of mass incarceration or dismantle the ideological foundation on which it rests," but which nonetheless matters (p. 110). Appleman's description of the writers' collective begins this way: "Usually when we talk about transformation through education for the incarcerated, we talk about individual stories. ... Yet one of the most remarkable kinds of transformation in the prison is the rise of … communities of practice" (p. 48). While affirming the dominance of personal transformation narratives, Appleman (2019) demonstrates how the collective offers students an opportunity to subvert the system they are a part of in limited but significant ways. Through collective action, students have taken on writing, editing, tutoring, and teaching roles they would not otherwise have access to in the prison. The collective has also created opportunities to work on an outside journal and provides students the power to shape monthly readings at the prison that feature both inside and outside writers (p. 49). In the collective, students work collaboratively with each other and with free world participants to open doors and to reimagine their relationships with each other and the world; they perform the little narrative of the "social actor." Appleman describes the monthly readings as being "a remarkable toppling of the hierarchy inscribed in these spaces" (p. 49), a statement that a reader might expect to open the door for a more social analysis of literacy. However, the theme of individualism is taken back up after this short section, with a section titled "Testimony of Transformation," and Appleman does not comment much further on the power of the social in her students' writing.

The Little Narrative of the Social Actor: Chris's Writing

Students provide scholars additional material to consider the social actor as a little narrative of literacy. Chris is an accomplished Latinx writer and artist in the Minnesota program Appleman (2019) describes, and his work helps us see how narratives of the autonomous individual and the individual as social actor overlap and compete in literacy narratives. Chris's work is present throughout the book, and he is featured with four other writers in Chapter Six. Appleman (2019) writes in the introduction to this chapter that "The general public … tends to think of 'the incarcerated' as a mass noun" and that, in prison, "Individual needs, characteristics, and histories are blurred into a collective identity of a cellblock of 'offenders'" (p. 58). Because prisons work to erase the individuality of the incarcerated, Appleman's goal in Chapter Six is to feature extensive work from each writer so that readers can see their unique humanity.

As one of the featured four, Chris's work is fascinating. While his history and portfolio of work highlight his uniqueness, Chris's words also provide insight into the social and suggest the possibility for tactical interventions within the prison and beyond. There is a complicated dance in this chapter as Appleman

(2019) challenges prisons' attempts to depict their residents as a mass of faceless, undifferentiated "offenders" by reverting to the master narrative of the individual. However, because it offers us the little narrative of the social actor, Chris's writing suggests that highlighting the individuality of those lumped together by the general public is only one way to challenge dehumanizing practices. Another is to create a vital community that defines itself and speaks with more authority than any individual can.

Chris's Writer's Statement is included in this chapter, along with an essay titled *A Certain Kind*. This last piece is not explicitly a literacy narrative but functions as one as it explores writing as a source of identity. These essays help Chris explore who he is individually and how he relates to language and is connected to others through words. In his Writer's Statement, Chris notes that genre affects his writing: "My poetry is a processed venting of emotion that I refine into something that I can grasp. The nonfiction pieces I write through a lens of advocacy …" (p. 60). Poetry as a tool to process emotion is a classic example of writing as self-exploration, and nonfiction is often seen as doing the "work of the world," and it is useful to consider the power of genre to limit how we use language. For example, what must we do to highlight little narratives of the social actor in poetry, a genre frequently taught in prisons and often stereotyped as introspective and personal? Furthermore, can we borrow from non-fiction to help writers see the social possibilities of poetry, for activism and social change in particular?

Chris more directly expresses the little narrative of the social actor in the essay *A Certain Kind*, which describes the writer's collective from his perspective. Interestingly, the following paragraph is cited twice in Applemann's (2019) book, even as its emphasis on the social contrasts with the book's ostensible focus on writing for individual change, a distinction that suggests how little narratives can emerge to complicate master narratives. Chris writes:

> For most of us, anything past family and friends were considered enemies or strangers. Our writing collective shapes community through shared interests and new ideas of social obligation; they are teaching us how to relate to people outside our natural bounds. In writing we find the opportunity to develop a bond with society through audience. It's not simply about being heard, but about acknowledging the responsibility of listening. Through critiques, dissecting works, and public readings we are taught how to pay attention to the world around us. In doing this we cannot help but discover the thread that binds us all together in this human condition. (p. 50)

Chris's words offer insight into a social definition of writing and, by extension, the self. Reading and writing become activities that help Chris and his fellow writers relate to others, known and unknown, in multiple ways. The "natural" boundaries between Chris and a larger society made up only of "strangers" or "enemies" have seemingly been reconfigured through the group and its literate

practices. As his relationship to the world is changing, Chris's words suggest that he sees boundaries as always open to revision—as are identities, influenced by "new ideas of social obligation." Chris's understanding of himself as a writer, involves an opening up to the world, which is especially powerful given that the world has shut him out. More specifically, Chris sees "audience" as a bridge to society, but not "society" itself when he writes: "we find the opportunity to develop a bond with society through audience" (Appleman, 2019, p. 50). His sense of everyone outside his neighborhood as a monolith of strangers and enemies is evolving as his writing demonstrates that people outside of his neighborhood can become part of his audience, strangers, maybe, but also potential allies. Such a recognition suggests that the world that has created strict boundaries to keep Chris in his "place," both before he was incarcerated and, especially, through his incarceration, is not as impenetrable as it had seemed. The audience that Chris has found for his work creates an inroad into the world that seems navigable, if not entirely safe or known.

Most remarkable in this passage is Chris's emphasis on the "responsibility of listening," which comes immediately after his idea of forming a "bond with society through audience." The placement of the sentences suggests that Chris and the collective have a responsibility to listen to a society that has thrown them away, many since birth. The writing collective seems to have instilled in Chris (and, as his emphasis on the "we" would suggest, seemingly others in the group) a willingness to listen to an often brutal society, one that valorizes the idea that "anyone" can make it and thus shifts blame for its violence onto those most deeply harmed. Chris sets an example here: his willingness to listen generously is a model for a culture that has silenced men like him, that is smug or indifferent about this silencing and its own unwillingness to change, and that has lied to him about the possibilities of individuals making it "on their own."

The activities that Chris describes in his second-to-last sentence: Writers reading their work, analyzing texts, giving feedback to others, recognizing that words, even important, transformational words, are always subject to change, and taking part in groups, recognize knowledge and progress as social concepts that move beyond the individual and into the public sphere. These activities teach the writers how "to pay attention to the world" as the collective encourages risk-taking and the binding of lives through language. Chris's words conjure the image of a social actor, as he and the other members of the collective appear able to imagine new forms of connection through writing and sharing, connections most often fail to see.

One final example of the social actor in Chris's text is worth noting. In the following, Chris recognizes that he is pushing boundaries as he considers multiple relationships in his life:

> We are responsible for atrocious acts, and this is no small thing to consider. It's protocol for people to want to take us for who we are today and shun the

> past moral barriers we have breached but to deny these realities is to live in denial of the deepest darkest impulses that linger at the primal bedrock of the human condition.
>
> The problem lies in our inability to endure such contradicting emotions while holding people accountable. What do we do when a human being strays from the boundaries we set for humankind, and how do we bring them back into the fold of humanity—once we have caged them? One way is through writing. (p. 63-4)

This second reference to the "human condition" balances the earlier one; if there is a "thread that binds us all together in this human condition"—even those who have been purposefully left to suffer—it is also true that the "human condition" does not come without pain and the likelihood that any of us, at any time, might cause harm to others: sometimes deep, life-changing harm. Our identities are forged through our relations with others and cannot be understood as separate from those relations, the good and the bad. While we can reduce the potential for harm by creating economic security, education, healthcare, and housing for all, we also have to be prepared to negotiate violence and pain as we live together, and Chris's discomfort with "denying the realities" of the pain we cause each other is significant. While his use of "We" to open this paragraph might be qualified to recognize that many in prison have not committed "atrocious acts," this gesture asks us to reconnect people inside and outside of prison to an unvarnished history as it refuses binaries of "good" and "bad."

Individuals that is, cannot understand the complexity of relational identities when focusing only on their worst acts or only on the good, and instructors and students in HEP programs (and, maybe most of all, the "general public") must take accurate stock of how we relate to others and to history before we think about change. Writing, in this context, becomes a tool to keep multiple balls permanently in the air, to bring opposites together, to create a reality that is more complex and human than master narratives (about the need for individual redemption or the permanence of social institutions, for example) might suggest. Chris's acknowledgment of the way individuals are social actors tied—deeply, powerfully, painfully—to history and to community, as well as the ways writing can help us explore the complexities of these ties, helps us understand who we want to be together as much as who we want to be simply for ourselves.

Conclusion

A desire to understand language and language education as tools for structural change suggests that we must continue to think about what it means to work together across dynamics of power and difference. We must also critically re-evaluate what it means to forge critical alliances in a world that discourages any rethinking of "self" and "other." These ideas are not new, but scholars have struggled

to make them visible and concrete, and literacy narratives can play a role in that effort; these works foster dialogue on the implications of seeing the self in new ways.

As Appleman (2019) and so many others suggest, we must be wary of what Berry calls a "narrative of hope," Graff's (2010) Literacy Myth, or any idea that simplistically posits literacy as a solution to complex, multi-faceted problems. Berry (2014 and 2017), however, also writes about "critical hope" in his work, a concept borrowed from Freire (1994) that is skeptical of change while acknowledging that structures and systems are not invincible. A collective effort can alter them. As Berry (2014; 2019) and Freire (1994) both argue, "We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water" (p. 8). I join them in this call for critical hope and contend that students, academics, activists, and others explore the kinds of tactical interventions Plemons (2019) advocates for so that we do not give up on these necessary changes (even as we understand that higher education in prison cannot solely serve instructors' or students' political agendas (Barrett et al., 2019). None of this is easy, but, as Angela Davis notes, "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world … all the time" (Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2014). Literacy narratives and literacy work more broadly will not save us, but to ignore the possibilities of this work is to ignore vital tools in the pursuit of systemic change.

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