

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*

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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

Timothy Barnett is Professor of English and Women's/Gender/Sexuality Studies at Northeastern Illinois University; he also directs Nontraditional Degree Programs at NEIU and is a member of the Leadership Committee of the Prison+Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (PNAP) in Chicago.

Correspondence to: Timothy Barnett, t-barnett1@neiu.edu

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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

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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,

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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 Yousafzai'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 Yousafzai'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.

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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.

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

(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

Individualism, Collective Action, and the Need for an Expansive View

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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