

The logo consists of a black square containing the letters 'JH' in the top half and 'EP' in the bottom half, all in white, bold, sans-serif font. The background of the cover features a horizontal split: the top half is a textured gradient from dark blue to teal to yellow, and the bottom half is solid white.

**JH
EP**

Journal of Higher Education in Prison

Volume 2 • 2023



Journal of Higher Education in Prison

Volume 2 • Number 1 • 2023

Published by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison

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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In Search of Uncertainty in Prison Higher Education

Erin L. Castro, Mary R. Gould

Our initial conversations about a volume dedicated to pedagogy in prison higher education were rooted in a desire for complexity and unfinishedness. Saturated with savior narratives and nods to transformation, we craved – and still do – references to the untidy and layered ways failure orchestrates the prison classroom. Up against reigning narratives of success and increased pressure to demonstrate return-on-investment, we urged authors to turn away from dogmatic ideas of education-as-rehabilitation and instead tune-into questions of uncertainty and impossibility (Ellsworth, 1996), and to share moments of ambiguity and stuckness (Lather, 1998). We wanted authors to share what happens in the aftermath of when things do not go according to plan and to learn what it is that educators and students *do*. Instead of focusing on how transformational prison higher education is or can be, we wanted to unpack emergent possibilities of failures and ruptures, or explore what Pillow and Family (2015) refer to as a pedagogy of pain.

To be certain, all classrooms are political and sites of cultural and social struggle. But social relations of knowing are amplified in the prison classroom where rhetorics of “success” and “empowerment” literally undergird the possibility and desire of such spaces. Yes, individuals on all sides of the teaching/learning matrix in any classroom can be changed by the experience, but the prison classroom naturally lends itself to a higher stakes scenario, especially in relationship to power imbalances and unjust structures of the system. As we approached this volume and the Call for Submissions, we were curious about the lingering questions of success and failure in prison higher education – the very questions upon which rich discussions of pedagogy occur. What about the discomfort in prison classrooms, or skepticism and unease? Where is the unfinishedness and examples of failure? The absence of these conversations is perhaps one consequence of participating in an educational enterprise so tightly bound to desires for transformation and rehabilitation. That is, the risks of engaging in a pedagogy of uncertainty are too high given the fraught nature of higher education during incarceration and the very real ways that it can disappear. In a field that is so precariously positioned at the mercy of budget cuts, fundraising campaigns, and federal policy, the risks to deepening prison higher education pedagogy are shadowed – and in many instances, rightly so – by the very real threat of a disappearing prison classroom.

In Search of Uncertainty in Prison Higher Education

We recognize that we are writing this introduction in the context of a potentially significant moment for the field of higher education in prison, and certainly one where the future is unknown. In this context, there is an additional feeling of fragility, but also a sense of urgency. It is in this moment that we believe that the conversation we have invited is relevant and necessary.

We know that impactful experiences happen in prison higher education and that students and educators alike share moments of growth and transformation. We also know that all classroom experiences are “situated” and do not exist beyond the social, cultural, and historical context of their surroundings (Lather & Ellsworth, 1996). At the same time, there are universal narratives that animate the field of higher education in prison. I (Erin) was just asked last week why non-incarcerated faculty on campus experience the most satisfying teaching experiences of their career with incarcerated students. It’s not that this statement is untrue – but this reality is only made possible because of the deprivation of incarceration and the violence of denying people access to the most basic aspects of humanity. Is it fair to congratulate ourselves on a job well done when even arriving with the smallest unit of access to education (for example, a pen and piece of paper) might earn us the gratitude of a person who has been deprived of these simple resources? Or when even showing up receives praise? Are we at a place where we can talk about this ... situation?

Three months after the launch of the Call for Submission for Volume Two, we learned about the death of bell hooks. Insisting that the classroom does not exist in a vacuum but instead within “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” hooks (2003) shows us an urgency to engage conversations of failure and impossibility in prison higher education (p. 17). In *Teaching to transgress* (1994), for example, hooks bring to the forefront the role of authority and domination in the classroom and asks us to focus on the *transformation of education*. Juxtapose her call for the transformation of the classroom with the dominant narrative of the transformation of the student in prison higher education, which is often the focus of prison programs and instructors, departments of corrections, and oftentimes, out of necessity, students.

As we reflect on hooks’ imperative to situate the classroom within the discourse of impossibility, we acknowledge our own initial discomfort with the

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framing of this volume. Would the call be too limiting? Could there be risks associated with challenging narratives of transformation? Were the stakes too high to talk about failure? While we express concern, we are also inspired by the imperative to get comfortable with discomfort, in what Ellsworth calls the “impossibility of teaching” so we can “learn from and produce ruptures, failures, breaks and refusals” (1998, as cited in Lather, 2001, p. 189). We envision that by opening up a space for this conversation, and ones like it, that can be added to the prevailing narratives of success and transformation – not as an antidote or counterbalance, but as a way to add fullness and create space for the richness of experiences in the practice of teaching and learning. We offer this volume as an effort in the exploration of failure, disruption, and impossibility in the prison classroom. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations of our efforts. Simply abandoning narratives of success and transformation is not possible, nor should it be expected, as change is always at the core of all intellectual pursuits.

Overview of Contributions

The articles and essays in this volume continue the efforts of the inaugural volume of the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison (JHEP)*: to create space for an emerging intellectual community and to publish work that is representative of the challenges and limitations of teaching and learning within prisons. The Call for Submissions for Volume Two of *JHEP* was publicized in March 2021, and the second volume is publishing three types of essays: Contemporary Perspectives, Keynote Address (from the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison), and Articles. For Volume Two, we invited narratives of “fracture, unknowing, discomfort, and failure” and we specifically hoped to challenge “neat”, and often prevailing, narratives of success and transformation. We specifically named the following underrepresented topics in the Call for Submissions: abolition, accommodations, censorship, failure, identity, saviorism, trauma, technology, white supremacy, and/or other urgencies. Additionally, *JHEP* continued to invite these submissions in alternative formats/genres (e.g., creative nonfiction, dialogical exchanges, visual imagery, poetry, etc.) to increase the publishing opportunities for potential contributors. Volume Two begins with an edited transcript of the Keynote Address presented at the 2021 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (Virtual Addendum). Following the Keynote Address is a series of Contemporary Perspective Essays, and the volume closes with full-length Articles. In what follows, we briefly introduce each of the submissions included in Volume Two of the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison*.

Keynote Address: National Conference on Higher Education in Prison

We are pleased to introduce a new section to the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison*, and hope that it is one that continues into future volumes,

focused on Keynote presentations at the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP). The inaugural publication in this section is titled “A Conversation on Abolition and Pedagogy” and presents an edited version of a dialogue between Priya Kandaswamy and Erica R. Meiners, members of Critical Resistance and higher education in prison practitioners, respectively. The conversation between Kandaswamy and Meiners was part of a virtual addendum to the 2021 in-person NCHEP, and centered on the integration of abolition into teaching and learning. Kandaswamy and Meiners engaged the audience through personal stories of how they both came to abolition work, introduced several basic tenants of abolition, a brief history of abolitionist organizing, how they both envision a reclaiming of a feminist politic and practice, and most significantly, how abolition is not just a means of analysis but also a practice for educators, students, and allies in the higher education in prison community (and beyond).

Contemporary Perspectives

This section of Volume Two opens with an essay by Trip Finitiy Taylor titled “Culturalchemy”, where the author draws upon their years of experience with both higher education and incarceration while describing the challenges and opportunities inherent in trying to gain access to education while incarcerated. Taylor identifies “culture change” as “[T]he first step to improve higher education potential in prison” and, as the title suggests, a sort of “alchemy” might be required to accomplish this goal. While this “culturalchemy” is not common, Taylor has seen for himself the “perfect storm of people and opportunities” that brought access to higher education in prison to the Idaho prison where he is currently incarcerated. Through the collaboration of the Department of Corrections and the Inside-Out program that came to the prison in 2018, Taylor experienced the collaboration that he argues is critical for the success of postsecondary programs in prison.

In “Food for thought” author Carileigh Jones explores censorship as a “defining factor of imprisonment” and as “characterize[ing] the everyday life of incarcerated individuals”. Jones continues to expand upon a body of literature that rejects “recidivism” as the necessary outcome (or gold standard) of education in prison, and instead argues for a logic that challenges the amplification of “ideological frameworks ‘that privilege Euro-American values and customs’ (Chavez-Garcia, 2015). Book bans significantly diminish the ability of programs, instructors, and students to engage in activities and ideas that potentially bring attention to systemic exclusion and injustice. For these reasons, Jones concludes, it is critical that higher education in prison programs are not complicit in book bans and uses the Education Justice Project and Illinois Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison as a model for what this type of pushback could look like in the disciplinary space of the prison.

In the essay titled “Theorizing critical carceral pedagogies”, Shawn R. Coon presents an opportunity to question and rethink the use of some aspects of

critical theory in the higher education prison classroom. Explicitly focused on Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of "conscientization", or the effort to increase the critical consciousness of students, Coon asks readers to consider the question: "Can there be conscientization in the prison classroom that isn't driven by a desire to emancipate?". Placing the student at the center of pedagogy, Coon argues that encouraging students to critique a system that is actively causing them harm could have material consequences and are often beyond the knowledge of the instructor. In particular, Coon questions the utility of "conscientization" and "whether the coercive nature of a prison undermines attempts at anti-oppressive education". Coon poses that these strategies might be more effective on the outside campus (or other learning environments outside of the prison space) as a means of expanding anti-oppression goals to a broader audience.

The final essay in this section "What are the possibilities and limitations of teaching and learning in prison spaces?" by Matthew Anderson details the ways that in-prison education programs can "ride the wave of digital learning opportunities generated in the wake of the COVID-19". Anderson, drawing on their firsthand experience "riding the wave" of access and exclusion from education in prison, names the many possibilities that emerged during the uncertain and traumatic experience of the global pandemic. While not presenting a flawless case for implementation, Anderson contends that the "trial and error" methods begun during the early phase of the pandemic should continue to guide the philosophy of many Departments of Corrections across the country. The drive for greater access to technology for people who are incarcerated starts with the willingness to understand technology as critical to quality education. Anderson concludes the essay with a sentiment likely shared by many: that the possibilities outweigh the limitations and shares ideas about how policies and practices might be modified to accomplish the best outcomes for students.

The four articles published in Volume Two 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 that must be eradicated.

Articles

This section opens with the article "'Read this and don't get caught': Cellblock intellectuals and the transformation of prison education", where authors Martin Leyva and Christopher Bickel situate their work within the theoretical traditions of convict criminology and abolitionist criminology and introduce readers

to the often-underappreciated network of informal education that is a pillar of intellectual life within prisons across the country. While there is far less attention paid to the role of “cellblock intellectuals” in the literature on prison education, Leyva and Bickel deftly highlight the critical role these teachers and mentors play in learning within prisons. Decentering the classroom as the singular space of teaching and learning, this essay, drawing from interviews with formerly incarcerated students and the lived experiences of the authors, argues that “prison intellectuals provide a blueprint for prison education programs” that can transform the “unjust conditions” that characterize in-prison pedagogy, and highlight the role of “informal education” for people who are currently incarcerated. Finally, the article advocates for the recognition of “Cellblock Intellectuals” as educators, creating counter-narratives that “situate incarcerated people within a long history of transformative struggle against oppression”.

Author Rachel Oppenheim, in the essay titled “The carceral classroom as a site of multiple fantasies” explores the many fantasies circulating within an education program in a women-designated jail. By applying a critical theoretical framework the author argues that the fantasies “of both empowerment and redemption work” held by educators, students and program and prison administrators, can potentially “obscure structural injustices, placing the onus of rehabilitation on incarcerated people and discounting their desires and needs”. Oppenheim specifically focuses on the ideas and expectations of the non-incarcerated volunteer instructors and argues that their fantasies of education must be rigorously interrogated, less they risk reinforcing the same coercive and repressive practices of the criminal-legal system.

In the essay titled “A symphony of solidarity: Abolitionist pedagogies and the beloved community”, author Johari Jabir interrogates the embedded nature of language and its limits in the carceral logic, which he contends is an opportunity. Replacing the language of “alienation” with that of “solidarity” allows for an expanded liberatory vision for higher education in prison programs and practitioners. Through examples from their own teaching, the author illustrates how carceral logics limit the liberatory vision of higher education in prison. Jabir explores the potential of abolitionist pedagogy to confront “the limits of language embedded in carceral logics” and as a result “reclaim ... incarcerated students ... as members of the Beloved Community”. Deeply rooted in an abolitionist framework, the article takes to task carceral logics that permeate all aspects of modern society, ultimately determining which lives, experiences and bodies are “disposable” – within the context of a history of white settler colonialism. The author holds the space for the prison classroom to remain a place of possibility, and solidarity, where the practice of abolitionist pedagogy can cultivate and recognize a “radical each-otherness”.

In the final essay in this section, titled “Prison pedagogies of place: Leveraging space, time, and institutional knowledge in higher education in prison teaching”, author Logan Middleton presents a case for greater attention to “place”

and “space” in the context of higher education in prison pedagogy. By tracing “how incarcerated students leverage their spatial, temporal, and experiential knowledges” Middleton illuminates how the classroom can become a more innovative and collaborative space for students and educators, specifically, because of the ingenuity and creativity that students who are incarcerated bring to teaching and learning. At the same time, Middleton remains acutely aware of and accounts for the barriers and challenges that are inherent in the prison setting, a site of extreme dehumanization and isolation. It is for these reasons that an analysis of space and place and the material structures (and bureaucracies), Middleton argues, is critical in theorizing higher education in prison pedagogy.

Limitations and What’s Next

At the conclusion of Volume One of *JHEP* we named ‘the lived reality of inequality’ as the foremost limitation of managing a journal that exists at the intersection of higher education and prison. As we reflect on the completion of Volume Two, it is this same limitation that we are again confronted with. The scholars we are most intent on reaching and collaborating with, those inside prisons, continue to lack access to the basic resources needed to fully engage in a scholarly community: access to research materials, consistent opportunities to produce material and receive feedback, and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Volume Two contains two Contemporary Perspective Essays from authors who are currently incarcerated and there is not a currently incarcerated scholar who is an author or co-author of a full-length article. This volume is publishing the work of three current graduate students, two currently incarcerated (solo) authors and two authors who are formerly incarcerated.

We continue to invite the higher education in prison community to be part of this project, and there are many ways to do so. First, we encourage anyone working with people who are currently incarcerated (i.e., teachers, tutors, program directors, etc.) to request copies of *JHEP* to distribute or to share the “Request a Volume” form that is located on the journal’s website. We invite all readers to submit a manuscript for review and to share the Call for Submissions with anyone in your community who is interested in lending their experience and expertise to this field. We are investing in working in community with the vast network of scholars and intellectuals inside U.S. prisons and we hope that all readers will be part of the effort to ensure they have the opportunity to contribute to this project.

To get involved, review manuscripts or request printed volumes of the journal for your students, contact us at jhep@higheredinprison.org. Print versions of the NCHPE Keynote Address and 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.

In Search of Uncertainty in Prison Higher Education

Acknowledgments

We would like to begin by thanking the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Higher Education in Prison (JHEP)* who continue to provide counsel and support in the early stages of the formation of the journal. We wish to acknowledge the efforts of our Editorial team: Breea Willingham, *JHEP* Managing Editor, Valeria Dani, *JHEP* Associate Editor, and Cydney Caradonna, *JHEP* Editorial Assistant. We are grateful for the production and design support of Christine Fisher and Blake Foskett of Blue Marble Creative and for the work of the thirteen external reviewers who provided feedback on the submissions for this volume. As we expressed at the conclusion of Volume One of *JHEP*, we continue to be hopeful about the future directions of this journal and the contribution we can make to the intellectual and scholarly life of the higher education in prison community. We aspire to distribute more volumes of *JHEP* to students, scholars, and allies inside and outside prison, and we remain committed to working in solidarity with all people who envision a world without prisons.

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Keynote Address is an edited transcript from a presentation given at the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison. This section includes contributions from scholar-practitioners whose multidisciplinary expertise serves as crucial impetus for higher education in prison praxis.

A Conversation on Abolition and Pedagogy

Priya Kandaswamy, Erica R. Meiners

Following the 2021 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP), hosted in person (Denver, CO) by the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison (the Alliance), Priya Kandaswamy and Erica Meiners offered a virtual conversation on abolition and pedagogy for the higher education in prison community. This conversation was the closing event following two days of a virtual addendum to the in-person conference. Working from a transcription of this event produced by Valeria Dani (Community Engagement Director, Alliance for Higher Education in Prison), Priya and Erica edited their conversation and also included a few of the generative questions offered by session participants.

Erica R. Meiners (ERM): Greetings from the traditional unceded homelands of the Council of the Three Fires - Ojibwe, Odawa, and the Potawatomi Nations - which you may know as Chicago. It's a crisp day here and leaves are falling. I am a member of the Prison + Neighborhood Arts / Education Project and a faculty member at Northeastern Illinois University. I've been involved in campaigns for free education for everyone everywhere, and abolitionist campaigns and projects and initiatives for probably about 30 years now.

On behalf of Priya and I, we offer deep gratitude to all the staff at the Alliance for their vision and labor: after an in-person conference, the Alliance is organizing a virtual conference! It is powerful to participate in a meeting of a professional organization which is organizing towards its own obsolescence. And I also want to extend our gratitude to everyone who's joining us today - despite hectic schedules and an ongoing pandemic. We acknowledge all the people who aren't able to be with us today because of COVID, incarceration, or work. We recognize your absence as well.

I'm very excited to be in conversation with Dr. Priya Kandaswamy, a long time colleague, comrade, and a friend. I've been privileged to work alongside Priya for many years and to learn from her scholarship. She's the author of the brilliant

Domestic contradictions: Race and gendered citizenship from reconstruction to welfare reform (2021, Duke University Press), and she's also published useful and powerful scholarship in journals such as *American Quarterly*, *Feminist Formations* and *Radical Teacher*.

Priya and I are members of Critical Resistance's abolitionist educators collective. I fondly remember us organizing a fundraiser for Critical Resistance at a National Women's Studies Conference maybe 15 years ago. We probably only raised a few hundred dollars, but through that event we built tiny networks, shared information about campaigns, circulated political education materials and also insisted that social and political movements were and are vital teaching and learning sites that produce necessary language and analysis. These critical movements should be front and center at scholarly and academic events. I don't know if my fundraising skills have improved much in the last 15 years, but because of being in community with organizers and scholars like Priya, my analysis and frameworks continue to deepen.

At the in-person Alliance conference two of my co-panelists referenced beautiful poems to open our conversation. I was trying to think of one that reminded us that it is collectives and communities that allow us to unlearn, and learn, and grow, and organize and stay connected over the long haul. These are the pathways that get us free. I was trying to find a poem that expressed this feeling of community, and I kept coming back to the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, just a line from her wonderful poem about Paul Robeson: "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond."

With that invocation, I turn to Priya who is going to share with us some of her thinking and work around abolition. I'm particularly excited about this conversation as Priya centers abolitionist practice in scholarship, teaching, and, yes, even in administrative labors. Her framework is not that abolition is a goal, but a practice. It isn't a checklist so that we can get everything "right," but a way

Priya Kandaswamy is associate professor of Women's Studies at San Diego State University and the former academic program director at Mt. Tamalpais College, a community college program inside San Quentin State Prison. She is the author of *Domestic Contradictions: Race and Gendered Citizenship from Reconstruction to Welfare Reform* (Duke, 2021).

Erica R. Meiners is a writer, educator and organizer. Her current books include a co-edited anthology *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working Towards Freedom* (Haymarket Press, 2018) and the co-authored *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Haymarket 2022).

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<https://www.higheredinprison.org/journal/2-1-a-conversation-on-abolition-pedagogy>

of approaching the work with a clear vision of the world we need. Priya, could you share a little bit about how you came to abolition, and in that process, offer a working definition or a framework for this term?

Priya Kandaswamy (PK): Before we start, I just wanted to say thank you to everyone and thank you, Erica, for such a beautiful introduction and for opening this conversation in such a powerful and community-oriented way. I have learned so much about abolition from so many people so what I have to say is just a small piece of a much larger conversation. One of the people I have learned a great deal about abolition from is Erica, so I do hope that this can be a conversation. I'm very humbled and honored to be here. I know that everyone is very busy, that these are hard times and that people are working really, really hard in very challenging situations so it means a lot to me for people to take the time to come and think with us about abolition, something that I care a great deal about.

The question of how I came to abolition and how we define abolition is a great place to start. While my own story with abolition is not particularly remarkable, it does illustrate how abolitionist frameworks often emerge from and are helpful in grappling with problems we encounter on the ground. I first came to abolition through my involvement in the feminist anti-violence movement, particularly organizing against domestic violence and sexual assault in the 1990s when what we today call carceral feminism was gaining ground. As a young person working on these issues, I consistently saw the ways reframing violence against women as a crime, and incarcerating perpetrators as the solution, was ineffective and often had terrible consequences for survivors. For example, mandatory arrest laws resulted in survivors being arrested, and organizations that developed collaborations with the police and the legal system became completely inaccessible to survivors who were already criminalized by those systems. Activist and scholar Beth Richie and organizations like Incite! have documented how carceral feminist approaches fortified prison growth and led to the abandonment of Black women, indigenous women, women of color, queer and trans folks, and other criminalized groups by mainstream feminist movements. Through this work, I really came to an understanding that the police and the legal system are not our friends and that turning to the state was an extremely limited approach to the problems that survivors of violence face. Not only did criminalization fail to achieve the desired effects, the approach entirely ignored the state as a primary source of gendered violence in many communities and so couldn't actually bring about an end to that violence.

While I felt very uncomfortable and critical of this work at the time, I didn't have a good language to articulate these critiques until I encountered abolition through the work of Critical Resistance, a national organization of abolitionist activists and thinkers. I was lucky enough to attend the first Critical Resistance conference at UC Berkeley and that was such a formative experience for me.

Encountering abolitionist work gave me a language to think and talk about the problems I saw in the work I had done before and also opened up a whole new way of seeing what might be possible.

Critical Resistance's definition of Prison Industrial Complex abolition (which can be found on their website) is:

a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment. From where we are now, sometimes we can't really imagine what abolition is going to look like. Abolition isn't just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It's also about undoing the society we live in because the PIC both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people. Because the PIC is not an isolated system, abolition is a broad strategy. An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives. Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal.

I like this definition because it emphasizes that while abolition is about getting rid of prisons and policing, it is also about imagining and building a different world.

There are a few basic concepts about abolition that I always find myself returning to. One is the creative potential of abolition. Another is the idea that the prison system isn't broken, but rather that it does exactly what it is designed to do. This seems particularly important to emphasize in the contemporary moment when there is a growing movement for prison reform. For example, framings that emphasize a critique of mass incarceration, highlight the role that individual bias plays in policing and the legal system, center the use of prison labor or the growth of private prisons, or focus on the lack of rehabilitative programming in prison, all suggest that somehow the prison itself can be fixed by tinkering with the system.

In *Golden gulag* (2007), Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues that instead of trying to fix the prison we need to understand that the prison works as a "fix" for socioeconomic crises. Rather than grapple with the structural unemployment or poverty produced by racial capitalism, we incarcerate those impacted. Rather than deal with the root causes of homelessness or addiction, we incarcerate the unhoused or those who participate in the drug economy. Similarly to the examples of gendered violence I raised earlier, rather than grapple with the root causes of gendered violence we remove individual perpetrators from society and put them in prison. Folks like Dean Spade (2015) have made similar arguments about the criminalization of hate crimes as well.

Prisons are fundamentally institutions of containment. The contemporary prison industrial complex emerged as a response to radical movements that sought widespread social transformation, and it has been an effective tool in containing those movements both literally (i.e., the criminalization and incarceration of radical activists) and in terms of what it does to our ability to imagine a different society. If we understand prisons this way, then abolition is not just a call to dismantle prisons, but to actually engage with and transform the inequalities that structure our society. It is a struggle against the containment of radical possibilities, motivated by a desire to see those possibilities flourish.

Erica described abolition as being a practice, which is really important. People's first response to abolition is often that it isn't possible, but for me it's helpful to remember that people are doing abolition all the time. For example, there are many communities where you would never call the police, and those communities have developed (or at least experimented) with ways of dealing with harm without using the criminal justice system. Similarly, many people who do letter writing to incarcerated people or work on campaigns to get individuals released or work in prison higher education are challenging the structural abandonment of certain communities and refusing the logic that some people should simply be disappeared from our society. To me, these are all examples of abolitionist practice.

ERM: I really appreciate how you offered a narrative of coming to abolition, really, through reclaiming a feminist politic or a feminist practice. It seems so obvious and yet is not a narrative that circulates that often - even as we know that if we really want to build worlds free of gender and sexual violence, supporting and investing in the criminal legal system isn't the way to end gender and sexual violence. Also you are amplifying what we know - that social movements start as ideas. "Nothing happens in the real world," to paraphrase Gloria Anzaldúa, "without first happening as ideas in our head."

This push to be open to imaginative possibilities, new language, and to pay attention to how the new languages of abolition make us think and act is really important. Also you emphasize abolition as a practice, as an analytic, not as a goal or a finish line. And this is crucial.

For some, abolition might be a new concept, but people have been doing abolitionist organizing for decades. Can you share a brief history of abolitionist organizing? Can you talk a little bit about a couple of organizations that have been trying to produce more political education resources around abolition and are doing different kinds of campaigns and projects in order to offer a little bit of contextualization for abolition?

PK: Absolutely. People have been doing abolition for centuries, and given that the prison is a modern invention, all kinds of societies have built worlds without prisons

for longer than that even. It's important to highlight contemporary abolitionist movements as having roots in the Black radical tradition and the movement to abolish slavery. Abolition also has deep connections and resonances with decolonial struggles and struggles for indigenous sovereignty, labor movements, struggles against border policing, disability justice, and feminist and queer liberation that are important to elaborate.

In terms of specific examples of contemporary organizing, Critical Resistance has very effectively connected abolitionist knowledge-production and on the ground organizing for more than twenty years. For example, where I live in Oakland, California, our local Critical Resistance chapter worked with a coalition of community groups to stop the Urban Shield conference from taking place, first in downtown Oakland and then in Alameda county as a whole. Urban Shield was a paramilitary conference funded by the Department of Homeland Security that used the framework of "emergency preparedness" as a front for a huge weapons expo and for the further militarization of the police. What was really exciting about the anti-Urban Shield organizing was the way it made connections between international and domestic warfare, and how it engaged a broad range of local communities. Groups of people who were concerned about the violence of policing domestically worked with people who had been impacted by US militarism in their homelands, and together grew an analysis that linked the "war on crime" and the "war on terror." Healthcare workers and first responders questioned militarism as an approach to emergency preparedness and articulated a vision of safety and security that was grounded in genuinely caring for everyone in the community. In Oakland, Critical Resistance has also been a part of organizing to remove gang injunctions and to successfully resist the construction of new jails. My examples are specific to my locality, but you'll find similar campaigns in other places as well.

Another organization is Survived and Punished (SP), which draws attention to the ways in which survivors of gender violence are incarcerated and punished for self defense. SP has both organized campaigns to get survivors released and put forward an analysis of how the prison system is a source of gendered violence. Similarly, the California Coalition of Women Prisoners has organized an amazing campaign to drop 'life without parole' sentences in California again while working simultaneously to get individuals released and to draw attention to systemic injustices. Erica's co-authored book with Beth Richie, Gina Dent, and Angela Davis, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (2022) provides a really rich engagement with these kinds of feminist abolitionist projects and is an excellent resource for those looking for more examples.

Where I live, there are multiple local initiatives that inform how I think about the abolitionist possibilities in my community. If people are new to abolition, or looking for ways to participate, starting where you live or work - or bringing abolitionist issues to a group you are already a part of - is a good place to start. I

often highlight Oakland's Anti Police Terror Project as having done phenomenal work to hold the Oakland Police Department accountable as well as for its efforts to build non-police response systems to mental health crises. There is also a lot of exciting campus- based activism. For example, the Cops off Campus Coalition is doing profound work to denaturalize and end policing on campus. I also think that the very scrappy, small student or community abolitionist groups do really important work and can be an important place to learn and work with others to figure out how to do abolition in the place where you are and what that looks like.

Finally, there is a lot of work that I would consider abolitionist that is not necessarily directly targeted at the prison. For example, in my own research on welfare politics, I see movements like the welfare rights movement or more contemporary poor people's organizing as abolitionist because they are fundamentally contesting the ways that poverty is criminalized while fighting for systems that would provide for everyone's basic material needs. Similarly, a lot of the mutual aid work that has been amplified during the pandemic and is rooted in the belief that we take care of each other is doing that abolitionist work of building the kind of world we want to live in.

ERM: I love that. And I just want to amplify your point about the fact that sometimes it is just three or four people in a synagogue basement or in a small classroom who are doing the work to propel either campuses or schools or communities to shift. A lot of this work doesn't often surface or make headlines, or doesn't get a lot of splashy grant funding. But we are always surrounded by abolitionist work.

I'm so appreciative of Priya's sketching this really vibrant landscape that has been building possibilities. The demand to defund police that emerged after the murder of George Floyd came from these decades of small networks and groups running campaigns and projects and doing the important cultural and political work to shift paradigms, to shift language, to really invite people to rethink public safety (or to push communities to challenge safety) in some cases.

With that kind of framework of abolition as both an analytic but also a practice, let's turn to abolitionist work in higher education, and in particular in prison education and prison programs. Priya currently works directly in the field of higher education in prison - before we talk specifically about that teaching and learning context, can you share generally about how you integrated abolition into your teaching and learning work in higher education?

PK: I think about the question of integrating abolition into teaching and learning in at least three different ways. Firstly, there's always the question of what you teach. It's important to teach classes that engage with the prison industrial complex in abolitionist ways. Recently, there's been a lot more interest in teaching about

prisons and policing, but many of the most common texts that circulate offer very reformist understandings of the problem. I have found the Critical Resistance Abolitionist Educators collective that we are both a part of to be really helpful in thinking about this problem. The project of creating a “Research Guide for Teaching and Learning Abolition” deepened my own thinking about what it means to teach abolition rather than just teach about prisons. The guide is organized through a series of key questions (How did we get here? How does the Prison Industrial Complex work? What is its purpose? Who is impacted? What do abolitionists want? How do abolitionists struggle?) and offers a list of texts that engage with each of these questions. The focus on questions helped me reframe the “what we teach” as actually being about cultivating an abolitionist analytic or learning how to think like an abolitionist.

Most of my teaching has been in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and in this context, teaching abolition also involves thinking about how the field itself and the larger university are connected to carceral institutions. Many of the feminists who were demanding Women’s Studies were also demanding that violence against women be treated as a crime so there is a tricky, sticky relationship between the field and the prison. In my teaching, I’ve wanted to point to other foundations of the field. It is important to look for and teach work that emphasizes the anticarceral movements in feminism and in queer politics. I really appreciate scholarship like Emily Thuma’s (2020) book that highlights a long history of feminists organizing against prisons, and Sarah Haley’s (2016) that shows how abolitionist Black feminist politics was practiced in the Jim Crow era. This long abolitionist history poses an alternate way of thinking about what the field is.

Many academic disciplines have a relationship to the prison. For example, fields like Sociology, Education, and Psychology are deeply embedded and involved in producing knowledge through carceral structures. It’s important that we interrogate those relationships when we teach that material and think about how relationships with carceral institutions or reliance on particular concepts of crime or deviance shape the knowledge developed in those fields. It is also important for teachers and students to ask and imagine what those fields would be like if they adopted an abolitionist perspective. How can we engage the important questions of these fields in ways that challenge rather than reinforce carceral concepts and structures?

A great example of this is Chanda Prescod-Weinstein’s book *The disordered cosmos* (2021), in which she develops a Black feminist approach to astrophysics. Prescod-Weinstein has written about Harriet Tubman as an extraordinary astronomer who used her knowledge of the stars to free people in the nineteenth century. What can knowledge about the stars teach us about freeing people today? I don’t know the answer to that question, but I am really excited that people are asking it.

Second, in addition to what we teach, the “how” of teaching raises lots of opportunities for experimenting with abolitionist practice. What do our classrooms look like? How do we engage with students? How do students engage with each other? Do our classrooms reproduce hierarchy, authoritarianism, and carceral logics or do they challenge them? How do we find ways to be in good relation with each other in the classroom? How do we encourage questioning and critical analysis? How do we create classroom environments that build students’ skills practicing solidarity? How do we create safety and belonging in the classroom that isn’t grounded in policing? In my experience, these questions are all amplified in the prison higher education context and engaging with them can be an important way of experimenting with abolitionist practices in the classroom.

Third, the structural relationship between the university and the prison is one that should be front and center in our teaching and learning work. As someone whose institution went through financial collapse and has seen the hard end of what austerity means for higher education first hand, it’s important that we understand our working conditions and their impact on teaching and learning. The classroom isn’t a given, and we can’t take it for granted. We aren’t guaranteed spaces in which to teach and learn so we do need to struggle politically to defend the spaces we have and to create more teaching and learning spaces that reflect the world we want to live in. People who work in prison higher education have a great deal of experience navigating and contesting the precarity of educational spaces and could teach people in higher education on the outside. This is a place where the earlier question about abolitionist practice really connects to this question about abolitionist teaching and learning. Why do we have so much money for prisons and so little for education? What do we want social resources to go toward? How do we make that happen? Engaging these questions theoretically and in practice is a really important part of our teaching and learning work as well.

ERM: I love the focus on content, but also on the “how”: how do we create communities of organizers, communities with the skills and the tools to practice solidarity for example, because those are the kind of outcomes that we have the potential to grow in teaching and learning contexts, even in universities. Let’s shift from that to the context of higher education in prison: talk a little bit about what principles and practices of abolition you’re bringing into your current work in a higher education program at a prison - extend this conversation to that context?

PK: I am fairly new to the work so I want to be clear that I am early in my learning, but I can offer a few thoughts. Much like higher education on the outside, prison higher education is not necessarily abolitionist. Rather, it depends on how we envision and practice it. Many of the arguments for prison higher education trouble me because they focus on rehabilitation as the goal and, in doing so, they reproduce

individualizing logics of criminalization. It is important to contest the narrative that individuals are incarcerated because there is something wrong with them and that the purpose of education programs is to fix or assimilate them to dominant societies' norms. This logic is certainly connected to the proliferation of prison higher education programs that we are seeing today. The framing of college programs as rehabilitative also works to rehabilitate the prison in liberal discourse, for example through the idea that prison isn't so bad if you can earn a college degree there or that what we need is more education inside rather than abolition. Still, I see a lot of abolitionist potential in prison higher education, particularly when we shift our orientation from rehabilitation toward liberation.

Prison higher education can be a powerful tool for redistributing resources and resisting the structural abandonment of certain communities. For example, the program I work for is entirely free to students and has no admissions requirements other than having a GED or high school diploma. That kind of accessibility has a lot of radical potential, and I certainly think that free education for everyone is an abolitionist goal that should not require one to be incarcerated! In order to exist, prison higher education programs have to navigate a tricky line between working with the institution and creating a space inside for genuine learning and the freedom that requires, which really complicates the work. However, those complexities exist when you work in educational institutions on the outside too. There is something useful about how prison higher education forces us to grapple with those complexities and do the work of developing abolitionist approaches to working with people inside.

There's a lot of abolitionist potential in the question that prison higher education raises about the "how" of teaching that we were talking about earlier. One of the things that working with incarcerated students has really driven home for me is how intricately connected people's experiences with education are with their experiences of incarceration. The tremendous fear and anxiety that many people have about just being in a classroom is powerful evidence of how schooling is often just an extension of policing. If we want to meaningfully engage with our students, we have to be accountable to that fact and actively work to build classroom spaces that defy carceral logics. For me, working in prison higher education has been a good reality check on the way that education is often held up as a panacea for everything, a reminder that education is only transformative if we do the work to make it that way.

One of the most important things that prison higher education can do is amplify the voices of incarcerated people and build connections between people inside and outside. Our programs can provide vehicles for people inside to be a part of conversations that are happening in movements on the outside, and that can be really powerful. I also find that people who teach in prisons often have meaningful experiences that transform how they see prisons and there is the possibility for an

interesting political and pedagogical community. Part of abolition is developing creative approaches to deal with difficult challenges, and there's a lot of that happening in prison higher education.

ERM: [Reminder: This conversation originally took place on Zoom, and participants submitted questions in the chat.] There are some questions coming into the chat: Can you share some working models that address domestic violence within an abolitionist framework?

PK: There are a lot of organizations that have tried to document or envision forms of transformative justice or restorative justice as ways of responding to gender violence. To name a few, Creative Interventions has a whole toolkit, Project Nia has created and curated multiple resources, and in the Bay Area, the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective has developed ways that transformative justice can be employed in situations of domestic violence. It's a really big question, but there are lots of different people who are working on this and who have written about this question.

ERM: Another question in the chat: A teacher reported that her traditional or non-incarcerated students who identify as abolitionists will not go into the prison for "inside out" classes because they don't want to support the system of oppression. What would we say to these students?

I will jump in: Fast response - all work is not for everyone! One beautiful and complicated thing about this political moment is that we need many people doing all kinds of work. We need interconnections between folks that are willing and accountable to networks and movements and who are going inside prisons and also see themselves as connected to movements for liberation. But that work isn't for everybody and doesn't necessarily need to be done by everyone. There are many places to get involved - find your places!

Another question in the chat about censorship: How to create abolitionist conversations with the students who are currently incarcerated? Is there a way to defy the very powerful carceral censorship towards class materials?

I'll start a quick response: it always surprises me what gets into the prison and what doesn't. I'm not in any way minimizing the incredible and overt censorship. I'm in the state of Illinois, and we had a program at a prison in our state that essentially blocked any book that had the word "race" in the title, even though outside organizations had fundraised and paid for those books. The state Department of Corrections has an intricate list of what can and can't get in. We had to rip 16th century maps out of readings that were approved: even though the tiny map was hundreds of years old, it was a map - and that was prohibited.

I don't minimize the persistent censorship - but to echo Priya's earlier points, we need to be strategic.

And of course prisons are not the only site where radical teaching and learning is surveilled and has punitive consequences. Doing critical teaching that aims to challenge white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy is challenging in public pre K-12 schools - consider the current backlash against critical race theory. What is the response to these multiple and ongoing forms of surveillance in our classrooms? We need to collectivize. We need to agitate. We need to organize. We need, of course, to challenge institutions when material is banned or our faculty and students are sanctioned. But at the same time we also need to try to be strategic and try to get material in as best we can. We need to do the “both/and.”

We also need to enlist unlikely actors - those perceived as perhaps outside of this conversation. Let's get public librarians involved. Let's get associations like the American Library Association in the struggle. Let's make sure family members are front and center. Let's make sure that we're bringing different people into this conversation because then we build a stronger base for our demand, and we build a dialogue for the long haul.

PK: It can also be helpful to think about abolition as an approach. You don't have to be teaching a text that is explicitly about abolition or the prison to be cultivating abolitionist thinking. For example, I taught a text about the Morrill Act, which was an act that established land grant universities, and it sparked this amazing conversation about what is “stealing” and when stealing is regarded as a crime and when stealing is regarded as an endowment. At the same time, it's important that our students are able to access the broadest range of texts possible, and it is part of our responsibility as educators to work toward making that happen.

ERM: A participant is asking a question about language: Why do we use the term “criminal legal system” rather than “criminal justice system?” Language continues to be so imperative to how we shape and imagine - and therefore change!- our world. Using the language of “criminal legal system” for me helps me recognize that our courts, police, and bail bonds people don't necessarily deliver justice, but rather are connected systems and institutions that not only often deliver harm, but don't help us move towards healing and “justice.” Substituting “legal” instead of “justice” seems more accurate, and can also open up space for us to consider what might bring healing and justice.

The popularization of the term “police violence” offers another example: the increased usage of this term has helped us recognize the violence enacted by individual police. But I prefer the term ‘the violence of policing’ as it helps me to recognize a more broad range of harm that the institution of policing does, not just the violence attached to individual police.

One key learning that I have pulled from social movements is to pay attention to language, and to struggle to be much more precise about the kind of

language that I use and to question and reject language produced by the state, which is often attempting to constrain or frame what the question is or what the problem should be - and therefore what interventions are feasible. We must be highly skeptical of the language produced by dominant institutions, because that often leads us towards responses or ways of seeing problems or phenomena that aren't actually helpful.

PK: The question of language is incredibly important, and I really appreciate the way that you're highlighting what a term like "criminal legal system" enables us to think about. It's also important for us to consider the word "justice" and how it gets deployed in social movements. "Justice" is a word that derives from legal frameworks for dealing with harm. What does it mean for social movements to use language from the legal system to describe our goals? Would it be better for us to use different terms? I'm not sure justice can be extricated from concepts like crime and retribution, which is one of the reasons I have a lot of discomfort with the language of social justice. I would rather fight for liberation than justice. That's not to be dismissive of the many very important political claims made in the language of justice. I just think it's important that we have these conversations about language and be attentive to the ways that the language we use might enable or limit our imaginations.

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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.

CULTURALCHEMY

Trip Finity Taylor

Culture: The ways of living that characterizes a group of people
Alchemy: A process of transforming something common into something special

I have read or heard about several success stories of incarcerated residents earning a Bachelor's, Master's, and even Doctorate degrees while incarcerated: in my experience, this seems like the exception rather than the rule when it comes to higher education in a prison setting. I come from Idaho where most societal constructs, like formal education, have generally fallen behind the times or well below the median line. I suppose that if I resided in a correctional facility outside of Princeton or Hanover, the culture of higher education within those walls may be quite different. Perhaps. Probably not. Nonetheless, I would like to share my perspective and perhaps shed a small sliver of light on the subject.

I have numerous years of experience in both higher education and incarceration. When I entered prison in 2016 I was hopeful that I would be able to get back in the water and continue my own education while wading alongside others as they ventured into the pool with me. What I found, for the most part, was a culture where swimming upstream against the current was the only option available to incarcerated residents.

Limitations to Higher Education

It has been my experience that a prison located in a rural county within a rural state has a security staff primarily lacking higher education degrees or any post-secondary experience. I would, without much reluctance, venture to guess that this categorization extends beyond my little neck of the woods – that most security staff

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Acknowledgments: As with almost everything of academic influence that I have had access to in prison, special thanks to Dr. Omi Hodwitz and Instructor David Manley.

hired in prisons across the U.S. have no more than a high school diploma or G.E.D.¹ And because incarcerated residents spend much of their time under the proverbial gun of these security officers, it carries that they tend to hold most of the cards that dictate the culture within a prison. In the name of security, I have seen officers scoff at an incarcerated resident trying to obtain materials for a correspondence course in which they were enrolled. Others have had vital readings or coursework temporarily confiscated during cell searches because the material seemed ‘out of the ordinary’. Most appalling, however, was the group of officers who loudly chastised an academically-driven prisoner, berating him for trying to accomplish something while still having numerous years on his sentence, and doing so in front of several other ‘solid’ incarcerated residents. Sadly, that incarcerated resident stopped his attempts at furthering his education. The hurdles and hoops placed in front of an incarcerated individual by the security staff are often the most debilitating barrier impeding the possibility of pursuing higher education while in prison, regardless of the opportunities made available.²

Possibilities

The first step to improve higher education potential in prison is to change the culture for those that maintain the prison (including the security staff), and transform it into one that values and promotes education and not stagnancy. Since it is impossible to bring incarcerated residents to college campuses, the only alternative is to bring college classes to the incarcerated residents. It can happen if everyone, not just educators and prospective students, are willing to do so (I have experienced it firsthand). In what seemed like a perfect storm of people and opportunities, the facility where I live brought in the Inside-Out program in 2018. We were lucky to have the right warden, prison school instructor, and local university professor at the right time (pre-pandemic) to introduce this legitimate face-to-face higher education class to our prison.³ Our Warden and team recognized that in-person education was an important way to improve the mental and academic health at the facility, which research supports: “In the prison setting, real-time, face-to-face contact between instructors and students and among students creates a critically needed learning community that supports students’ academic progress and psychological well-being” (Ezran et al., 2019, p. 9). But the real measure of success was that most (though not all) of the security staff at our facility welcomed the program, which is partly why it continues to this day.

¹Given my limited access to research while incarcerated, I cannot verify this assertion and can only express this as my opinion.

²I fully accept that there are manipulative people who have and will continue to use education services to get/pass contraband, and accordingly I acknowledge that security is a vital aspect in prison environments.

Nevertheless, many prisons do not have all these fortuitous conditions necessary to start and/or maintain a face-to-face program, or they are simply unwilling to try. Typically, when one piece of the puzzle leaves or changes at the facility, the whole program is prone to crumble. One way to reduce this possibility is to build a program that includes as many active partners from across all segments of the facility. Alas, perhaps it is necessary to involve security staff in the planning, preparation, or participation of higher education classes. Security is, of course, paramount to the success of any influential interaction between incarcerated students and non-incarcerated instructors. Frankly, programs need them. Stakeholders need to connect more dots and develop a culture where security staff see eye-to-eye with incarcerated residents and non-incarcerated educators. As the title of this article suggests, a change is necessary in the ways that security staff relate to students/incarcerated residents. We need a new alchemy to disrupt the current culture in most prisons that dismisses incarcerated people as students. Prison staff need to be fully on-board with incarcerated people pursuing higher education while in prison. Period.

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Thoughts on Censorship and the Sociological Imagination in Prison

Carileigh Jones

Something you may not expect is that a lot of books dealing with history are prohibited. I consider it strange because they want to control our learning. They say some books could possibly cause riots. I've never heard of a book doing that...

– Tyree Little, *Locked up but not locked down: A guide to surviving the American prison system*

Books! They actually prohibit knowledge.
– Kashara C. Armstrong, *Locked up but not locked down: A guide to surviving the American prison system*

Censorship is a defining factor of imprisonment. It characterizes the everyday life of incarcerated individuals, and it is pervasive in that it structures everything from what they may read to the communication that they may have with friends and family. The quotes above come from the book *Locked up but not locked down: A guide to surviving the American prison system* (Jackson & Seven, 2011). The book provides information about navigating life in prison through the real-life experiences and stories of currently and formerly incarcerated people. Jackson and Seven (2011) asked people who were formerly incarcerated about items prohibited by prisons, and based upon their findings, books were one of the most consistently mentioned items that were banned within institutions.

In recent years, more attention has been brought to the phenomenon of book bans in prison. Pen America, a key advocate for incarcerated individuals' right

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to read, argues that book restrictions in prisons “constitute the nation’s largest book ban” and that “prison systems frequently place bans on literature that discusses civil rights, historical abuses within America’s prisons, or criticisms of the prison system itself, often on the grounds that such titles advocate disruption of the prison’s social order” (Tager, 2019, p. 1). Examples include prisons banning Michelle Alexander’s *The new Jim Crow*, Paul Butler’s *Chokehold: Policing Black men*, and *Slavery and the making of America* by Lois and James Horton (Tager, 2019; Watson, et.al., 2011). In 2019, over 200 books were removed without notification from the Danville Correctional Center in Illinois, and strikingly, most of the books removed were about race and social justice struggles – problems that incarcerated individuals often have experienced in their personal lives (Nickeas, 2019). Removing such books hinders the ability to connect personal lived experiences to wider social issues and history. Mills (1959) explains that although people face highly consequential problems in their daily lives, they are seldom able to connect their struggles to larger social structures. This is particularly relevant as we consider the forces that funnel people into jails and prisons. Without this ability, complex social issues (eg., poverty) are attributed to personal failings alone, and cannot be addressed at the systems level.

Unfortunately, book bans are not isolated events. Occurrences like the ones outlined above continue to be documented in prisons across the country and such practices seriously impact the ability of higher education in prison instructors and incarcerated students to engage critical material. Wade (2021) found that prison instructors frequently encounter issues teaching and providing material around topics including but not limited to feminism, slavery, mass incarceration, racism, and white supremacy. Because maintaining control is of paramount importance to prison officials, they hold that objective over and above anything else, including education, and deny anything that they feel might place it in jeopardy. Juxtaposed to this, however, is the fact that incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated individuals consistently point to the fact that critical material is what changed and broadened their perspectives.

For example, Blackwell (2022), an incarcerated writer, explains that books, particularly those that informed him of structural forces, expanded his mind beyond the “toxic environments” in which he lived. He mentions one specific book, *Angry White men: American masculinity at the end of an era* by Michael Kimmel, that broadened his understanding of “structures around masculinity” and how they impacted him (Blackwell, 2022, para.13). Initially, however, the prison banned the book as officials expressed that “the content could reasonably be thought to lead or add to tensions between groups specifically in a prison setting” (para.11).

Similarly, in an interview, Jason Hernandez expressed that the frequently censored book *The new Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander opened his eyes to the fact that “there are systems in place that were designed to disrupt and destroy and

incarcerate communities of color” (Amaral, 2018). The book inspired Jason to apply for clemency, and now he runs a non-profit advocating for sentencing reforms. These examples highlight the possible power of reading books about structures of inequality and the impact that they have on people’s growth inside and outside of prison, along with the way they can motivate people to make positive changes within themselves and society.

Research has highlighted connections between reading and rehabilitation, which is often measured in terms of recidivism (Schutt et al., 2013). In fact, the connection between education and reduced recidivism has driven the implementation of many prisons’ education programs in the United States (McCorkel & DeFina, 2019). However, within such logics, critical books that both examine and challenge systems and structures of inequality are not legible as rehabilitative, but instead as a risk. When we take a look at the history of the prison in the U.S., there is a long history of using ideological frameworks “that privilege Euro-American values and customs” to identify and prevent the spread of what are deemed criminogenic factors (Chavez-Garcia, 2015, p. 53). Furthermore, the liberal ideology that “everyone is equal in America” works to delegitimize experiences and realities that bring attention to systemic issues within the country. Consequently, books highlighting such information are perceived by prison officials to be divisive and inflammatory.

Historically, only books that would foster moral growth and maturation in line with hegemonic middle-class mores were allowed in prisons (Sullivan, 2000). According to the idea of bibliotherapy, the type of inward exploration that was inspired from such material would lead to inward change (Arford, 2013). While bibliotherapy is no longer an ideal held by many, characterizing prison education and the library more generally as a rehabilitative tool maintains that the purpose of reading is to change or fix something wrong with the individual. This type of education, which is often the most legible to prison officials, “individualizes social problems and diminishes the radical possibilities of education for encouraging peaceful and just communities” (McCorkel & DeFina, 2019, p. 2).

The individualization of larger social problems is especially problematic as we consider the fact that U.S. prisons are overwhelmingly composed of disenfranchised Black and Brown communities and/or those who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Delaney et al., 2018). Oftentimes, the circumstances that lead people to incarceration shed light on enormous structural and institutional failures including –but not limited to –poverty, poor schools, and segregated and under-resourced neighborhoods with few social supports to combat adverse circumstances and outcomes. People are vastly impacted by the structures in which they live and the overlap among. It is the goal of many college-in-prison instructors to shed light on such realities and strategies to overcome them on both an individual and societal level. However, censorship of books regarding systemic inequality and societal structures places incarcerated learners in a situation wherein

Thoughts on Censorship and the Sociological Imagination in Prison

the expansion of the Sociological Imagination (Mills, 1959) is repressed. Indeed, the censoring of print materials about structures of social inequality limits incarcerated individuals' ability to connect their experiences to larger social structures and to work to find solutions.

It is under these circumstances that prison educators must reckon with the fact that although some prison administrators allow universities to administer higher education in prison programs, the prison remains a disciplinary space wherein those who are incarcerated lack the autonomy to freely learn. In these circumstances it is imperative that instructors teaching in prison find alternative ways to support expanding incarcerated individuals' sociological imagination and their ability to access empowerment through knowledge, understanding, reflection, and strategies for change.

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Theorizing Critical Carceral Pedagogies: Teaching Toward the Purposes of Higher Education in and Against Prison

Shawn R. Coon

The prison classroom is an increasingly popular site of political contestation and pedagogical exploration (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Lewen, 2013; Scott, 2013; 2014). Critically-oriented teachers and students might see the prison classroom as a specific site of political struggle in an age of mass confinement (Scott, 2013; 2014). Yet, other engagements are different. Some prison-university partnerships go so far as to provide on-campus students with college credit for traveling into a prison to have class alongside incarcerated people, who attend the same class but do not earn credit – thus potentially creating a form of academic tourism (Castro & Gould, 2019). A number of educators who work in and with prisons continue to discuss issues of power and pedagogy in the context of the carceral state (e.g., Castro & Gould, 2019; Ginsburg, 2014; Kilgore, 2011; Stern, 2014). These scholars specifically draw attention to what extent critical, anti-oppressive, feminist, anti-racist and related pedagogies can fully take root in the prison classroom (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2000; Luke, et al., 1992). In this essay, I argue that educators who are committed to critical pedagogy should look to other sites outside the prison classroom where they can teach against the logics of prisons.

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Acknowledgements: A special thanks to Dr. Erin Castro and the Utah Prison Education Project for all their help with this paper.

The Predicaments of Critical Pedagogy in the Higher Education Prison Classroom

As a teaching praxis, critical pedagogy refers to a broad range of educational philosophies that seek to make visible dynamics of power and oppression throughout society (Freire, 1970). The practice of teaching and learning is not passive or one-dimensional within critical pedagogy. Rather, critical pedagogy proposes that education is always a site of transformation and holds the possibility to both humanize and dehumanize. To address the problems associated with “traditional” pedagogies, Freire (1970) desired to increase students’ critical consciousness, or *conscientization*. To cultivate conscientization or critical consciousness, critical pedagogues practice problem-posing education (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Wink, 2005). Problem-posing education draws from the lived experiences of students and invites them to acknowledge and question their circumstances in the world. The traditional aims of critical pedagogy, regardless of the specific context in which they are engaged, are not without criticism (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998; Luke & Gore, 1992). Feminist-poststructuralist scholars such as Lather (1998) and Ellsworth (1989), take issue with the universalizing nature of critical pedagogy and specifically, the drive for empowerment of the Other.

In her work on what she describes as a pedagogy of “stuckness,” Lather (1998) criticizes the certainty within critical pedagogy to support students in accurately reading and writing the world (p. 493). In the prison classroom, the drive to emancipate is further complicated by the coercion and violent nature of prisons. One question to consider is the following: Can there be conscientization in the prison classroom that isn’t driven by a desire to emancipate? The answer is certainly yes, but it is a delicate and complicated one given the unique power dynamics of the prison classroom, mainly the informational void faced by incarcerated students in their learning and development (Castro & Brawn, 2017). If educators are not engaging critical pedagogy in other educational sites and classrooms, then doing so in the prison classroom – for the specific purpose of emancipation – feeds into the stereotypes and biases about incarcerated people, and specifically that they are in need of a kind of liberation that higher education can provide.

The utilization of problem-posing methods also becomes troublesome within the prison classroom. Part of what makes problem-posing education meaningful is that it is context-specific and therefore looks different across educational sites. The topics that students and instructors explore together vary, but the process is largely the same: identify the problem, reflect, and act (Wink, 2005). While many topics could be part of a problem-position lesson in a prison classroom, problem-posing about incarceration inside a prison has the potential to cause harm to students. This is not a metaphorical sense of harm. Students in prison can suffer harm for violation of rules, regulations, standards, and norms in

prison – the very structures that problem-posing education may encourage students to critique (Thomas, 1995). For example, a critical educator may be tempted to encourage political action on the part of students. Yet, some forms of political action can have enormous consequences for incarcerated students (Scott, 2013; 2014). The consequences for students in prison have the potential to be more severe than those in traditional settings, and may result in further oppression. The room for the equal creation of knowledge becomes slim when within the context of these oppressive institutions.

Theorizing a Critical Carceral Pedagogy in and Against Prisons

Despite the challenges associated with critical pedagogy in prison classrooms, there are numerous and urgent reasons to continue engaging anti-oppressive teaching and learning in carceral spaces with imprisoned students – as well as non-carceral spaces. In her work describing the Education Justice Project (EJP), Ginsburg (2014) provides insight into the dimensions of anti-oppressive teaching and learning in the prison classroom that is driven by incarcerated students. The EJP has demonstrated that thoughtful educational programming in prisons can create community and a level of civic engagement (Ginsburg, 2014). While Ginsburg does not refer to EJP as a product of critical pedagogy, I see the emergence and sustainability of this program as broadly embodying the spirit of anti-oppressive education, and a realistic example for future possibilities.

One central theme amongst many college in prison programs is that prisons and society are inexorably linked. However, it remains a tragic reality that utilizing critical pedagogies in prison classrooms can only challenge systemic oppression to a limited extent. The development of a critical consciousness will not remove a student in prison from their current oppression. A skilled educator can help to emancipate minds, but bodies remain confined. Political action against prisons cannot happen from one site of political contestation: it must happen from multiple sights. Many higher education in prison programs are worthy endeavors that provide and address the vital need for education in the prison setting (Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2017). Higher education in prison programs alone cannot address issues of mass incarceration, surveillance, and the proliferation of carceral logics. The carceral archipelago is too vast and disconnected. One of the greatest opportunities for the work of critical pedagogy in the carceral state can be found in spaces outside of the physical prison. Part of what makes incarceration so powerful in the U.S. is its virtual invisibility for many privileged communities.

I propose that critical educators who want to address problems associated with incarceration look for sites of educational opportunity where conversations about prisonization are not currently taking place. If meaningful change is expected, then a more integrated critical educational framework is needed. It is important to remember that we are all stakeholders in the carceral state. If true emancipation from

carceral oppression is the ultimate goal, then it will take more than just the efforts of those who are currently incarcerated. Alone, the students in prison lack the resources and legal means that are necessary to develop and sustain political action. Thus, non-incarcerated educators have a responsibility to engage the public, and students outside prisons, about carceral oppression. As Castro and Brawn (2017) state: “We are ultimately not changing the space unless we take part in changing the machinery that produces the contemporary prison classroom” (p. 118).

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What are the possibilities and limitations of teaching and learning in prison spaces?

Matthew Anderson

Prison-based education can ride the wave of digital learning opportunities generated in the wake of the COVID-19 shut-down of in-person learning. Though unplanned and fraught with inconsistencies, gaps, and learning losses, the pandemic ultimately forced school administrators and educators to adjust their methods to accommodate remote learning. The trial and error methods of these remote learning attempts have established protocols and infrastructure, creating possible openings for greater access by incarcerated individuals.

Current postsecondary educational opportunities in prison are often limited by students' access to the Internet and devices that connect to it. Additionally, access is curtailed by limited digital-access course offerings by colleges and universities. Many carceral institutions have installed wireless systems throughout their facilities so that incarcerated individuals can download pre-paid music, movies, and emails onto their personal tablets, all without accessing the Internet at large, invalidating arguments that when built for educational opportunities such an infrastructure will be cost prohibitive or impossible, or that wireless enabled devices cannot be safely monitored so as to prohibit using them for non-academic purposes.

A difficulty unique to the incarcerated student is their limited control over their daily routine. Penal institutions maintain an operational status-quo for the masses, disruptions of which can result in the restricting of individual freedom of movement. Illness outbreaks, violence, facility maintenance, investigations, and staff shortages can all contribute to "lock-down" scenarios where through no fault of their own –an individual is physically restricted to their cell or housing unit. A physically restricted student can fall weeks behind when educational opportunities, computers, and material are already limited in regards to access to a specific time, day, and area of the facility. Physical restriction can also mean that students miss webinar classes

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Possibilities and limitations of teaching and learning in prison

and submission deadlines for assignments. These are problems that could potentially be solved through the use of technology.

Utilizing the wireless infrastructure and personal tablet concept could free incarcerated students from the need to attend computer lab-based classes during the limited hours of operation, allow them ample personal time to cover readings and homework, and lessen the impact of facility lock-downs on their progress. It could also allow them to participate in webinars and group work during instructor scheduled times. In the event that a facility situation completely disconnected the incarcerated student from the school for a period of time, access to recorded lectures and group discussions via the tablet could allow them to catch-up. Instructors should expect that situations beyond an incarcerated student's control will arise and would help students by having clearly stated rules regarding extending submission deadlines for these extenuating circumstances.

Remote learning during the pandemic has shown that the inability of students to directly collaborate with instructors and other students is not without consequences for learners. For that reason, schools and libraries within prison facilities should continue to expand accessibility and availability via technology. By its nature, prison is a high-stress, high-danger environment. The culture present in prison does not always allow a student the luxury of relaxing their guard so that they can intensely focus on their work. Though schools and libraries are also not without the potential for disruption, – in general – they are safer spaces, allowing incarcerated people to truly be students. They are places where students from separate housing units can meet, engage, offer support, peer review, and insight. For course work requiring access to technology not appropriate for personal use in a secure facility, such as 3-D printers or audio-visual equipment, school rooms and libraries are necessary spaces.

Prisons already receive much of their educational materials second-hand from state and local institutions. Schools within a prison facility can and should cover the cost of providing students access to functional and modern computers on units or in a lab setting. Prisons should not be limited to just yesteryear's technology. Prison personnel should also review policies regarding personal property and allow students with financial resources to purchase laptops or other relevant items on their own.

Educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals should not be limited to subjects deemed by correction department administration as advantageous to securing post-release employment. Under many current models, courses related to post-release employment fields that have historically hired those with felony records are often the only kind of educational opportunities actively promoted by administration. Academic pursuits related to executive level or academia-based careers are dismissed as improbable and unattainable for felons. The pursuit of education for the sake of education is regarded as frivolous, and in many facilities,

access to classrooms is restricted to students pursuing the aforementioned “felon-friendly” careers. Instead of attempting to force incarcerated individuals into education and career molds that have worked in the past, prisons and learning institutions should review current courses to ensure that the subject material is relevant and real-world applicable, as well as embrace emerging fields. Both prison and post-secondary school administrations should re-evaluate access to education policies regarding individuals with criminal backgrounds, with particular scrutiny on whether or not implicit biases regarding race, gender, age, socio-economic background, country of origin, or the nature of criminal acts committed influences their beliefs about the educational potential of felons and ultimately leads them to withhold opportunity.

By harnessing the potential for remote learning, institutional leaders and postsecondary educators can help facilitate incarcerated individuals making their own choices about continuing education in the context of severe constraints. As with any privilege allowed in prison, however, there will be certain members of society who find ways to exploit or manipulate it. Such incidents are cause for holding the individual violator to account, not for implementing blanket policies that flatly deny opportunities to the majority. Instead, educators should push for meaningful access to technology for incarcerated learners to both explore the possibilities and limitations of use inside prisons.

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.

“Read This and Don’t Get Caught”: Cellblock Intellectuals and the Transformation of Prison Education

Martin Leyva, Christopher Bickel

Much of the literature on prison education stems from educators who teach inside prisons but have never experienced life inside its walls. Written by formerly incarcerated and system impacted scholars, this article highlights the important role cellblock intellectuals play in the creation of a cellblock pedagogy—an informal teaching method that uses dialogue to provide a critical education inside prison. This article draws from interviews with formerly incarcerated students and from our own experiences of incarceration and building prison education programs. We argue that prison intellectuals provide a blueprint for prison education programs that can transform the unjust conditions that wreak havoc on far too many people inside and outside of prison.

Keywords: *prison intellectuals, prison education, prison pedagogy, convict criminology, critical pedagogy*

Old Man Squeaks

Old Man Squeaks: Mind, Body and Spirit

It was a quiet day on the block. I (Martin Leyva) avoided the yard, preferring instead to sit in my cell and read *The four agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz (1997). The agreements are: “Be impeccable with your word. Don’t take anything personally. Don’t make assumptions. Always do your best”. Here I was in prison, trying to figure out what these agreements meant for my life.

As I was reading, an older, stocky, black man, known as Squeaks, came to my cell door and hit me up, “what it do youngster?”

I looked up, and then down to the floor, warning him not to come into my cell. Outside the prison walls, I would have greeted him with open arms. But I was in prison, and there are different sets of rules here. He knows the rules, too, and stopped just short of entering my cell.

“That’s a good book, Indian. It’s an easy read, and easy to agree to those here, but on the outs, nah...” he said, looking at me from the walkway.

“I suppose,” I replied. “You read this book?”

He tells me about reading it back in the late 90’s when the book came out and how he recommends it more for those getting out. “It’s harder than you think, those agreements, but it’s a shitty read,” he laughed.

He looked behind his shoulder surreptitiously and said, “here playa, read this and don’t get it taken away.” Like handing me contraband, he hands me a book with a handmade cover decorated with markings and doodles.

“This is what you should be reading. It’s powerful; it will teach you about oppression and colonization, this fucked up place, you know the shit we need to be reading. When you’re done, let me know what you think.”

He handed me *Prison writings: My life is my sundance* by Leonard Peltier (1999), a political prisoner currently locked up in Federal Prison because of his activism for indigenous rights. Being Native in prison, Leonard is a legend. Although written in prison, his books are banned by prison officials. Its mere possession is

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<https://www.higheredinprison.org/journal/2-1-read-this-and-dont-get-caught>

grounds for disciplinary action. Too many of those and it's off to the hole, a form of solitary torture common in the US prison system.

Not long after Squeaks left, my elder shows up to my cell. "What was Old Man Squeaks doing here?" he asked. I showed him the book.

"That's a great book skin, you should read that twice," my elder said. Had Squeaks shared water or food with me, I would have been sanctioned by my elder for violating strict codes of racial segregation in prison. But, because he shared a book with me, I received a pass for this racial transgression in *The new Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2010).

The above story highlights the importance of the informal education provided by cellblock intellectuals like Squeaks. Though rarely recognized as educators, cellblock intellectuals teach students behind bars who have been pushed out of the traditional education system. For decades, young people have been funneled into the prison industrial complex from schools via juvenile detention centers, adult jails, and prisons. Many will not be educated by the largely absent formal prison education programs, but rather by cellblock intellectuals. This educational process is what we call critical cellblock pedagogy: the process by which incarcerated people read books and engage in deep, intellectual conversations inside prison cells at dining areas, and in prison yards. Despite the important role cellblock intellectuals play in the lives of incarcerated people, there is almost no research on the education they provide inside prison. In this article, we argue that cellblock intellectuals reach incarcerated people when traditional forms of education have failed. Therefore, the teaching content and methods of cellblock intellectuals should be explored to see how they reach students who are often considered unreachable by leaders at mainstream educational institutions.

Using the theoretical traditions of convict criminology and abolitionist criminology, we first offer a critique of conventional prison education programs – specifically programs that are designed more toward teaching personal responsibility and pleasant obedience to oppressive carceral regimes. Second, we highlight the lessons of cellblock intellectuals. Cellblock intellectuals deploy counter-narratives that situate incarcerated people within a long history of transformative struggle against oppression. Finally, using the *Transitions* program as an example, which was founded by formerly incarcerated students at a community college, we show how these lessons can be incorporated into more formal education settings to help students grow their minds and transform the world around them.

Sophisticated Criminals, Political Prisoners and Prison Intelligentsia: A Literature Review

While cellblock intellectuals have been teaching incarcerated people since the inception of prisons, they are conspicuously absent in the academic literature on prison education. Conventional criminologists argue that incarcerated people learn

skills in prison to become better criminals (Harding, 2019; Neminski, 2014). There is the assumption that incarcerated people internalize unfavorable behavioral patterns from fellow prisoners, leading to a more sophisticated life of crime. Neminski (2014) argues that carceral environments reproduce and maintain the “professionalization of crime” (p. 81). Promoting crime and increasing recidivism, Neminski argues that inmate culture and prison policies make “criminals” smarter through socializing with other inmates and suggests that prison failure exacerbates future crime by pushing formerly incarcerated people back into prison upon their release. This literature ignores the important work done by cellblock intellectuals who empower people to pursue their education, and ultimately their freedom. Cellblock intellectuals promote transformative politics and carceral change by helping people become conscious about prison inequality and repression (Ratner & Cartwright, 1990).

The rise of Critical Carceral Studies challenges conventional criminology and provides a more useful framework for understanding the work of cellblock intellectuals, and especially political prisoners. Rodríguez (2006) argues that a thriving prison industrial complex promotes violence and dehumanization and within this context, incarcerated people use their agency to amplify the voices of those trapped behind prison walls, contesting the very system that holds them captive. This is carried out despite draconian prison policies and the accompanying violence. For Rodríguez, revolutionary prisoners are not simply advocating for more educational programs and more humane policies – they are arguing for abolition of the carceral system.

Berger (2014) expands Rodríguez’s analysis by offering an historical analysis of prison organizing during the civil rights movement. Specifically, he positions prison organizing as an important element of the civil rights and black power movements, arguing that. Black radicalism within prison “established prisoners as symbols of racial oppression and conceptualized confinement as a persistent feature of Black life woven throughout the American racial landscape” (p. 6). In perhaps one of the most comprehensive historical analyses of prison organizing, Berger argues that Black prison intellectuals consistently critiqued the prison system as an extension of the institution of slavery and helped lay the theoretical groundwork for the renewed movement to abolish prisons.

In a similar vein, Irwin (2003) demonstrates how the prison system created the conditions of its own breakdown. Faced with punitive sentences and brutal prison conditions, incarcerated people become politicized and join a prison intelligentsia that challenges the revolving doors of the prison industrial complex. Irwin is one of the founding scholars of Convict Criminology: a revolution in criminology that privileges the voice of the incarcerated, critiques conditions of confinement, and challenges the legitimacy of the prison industrial complex. This work has given way to a generation of convict criminologists who have turned traditional criminology on

its head by turning a critical eye toward prison policies and practices that guarantee high recidivism rates.

Our work is situated within an abolitionist perspective and continues the tradition of Convict Criminology. Our experience of being confined in prison and/or teaching incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students reveals a common pattern among all students who successfully transition from convict to college students. They all had mentors in prison, cellblock intellectuals, who encouraged them to read books, expand their minds, and pursue education. This article is an attempt to better understand the work of cellblock intellectuals.

Methods

This article draws heavily from our experiences inside and around the prison system. In addition, our article draws from Martin Leyva's master's thesis that documents the experiences of formerly incarcerated students as they transition from prison cells to college classrooms (Leyva, 2018). Conducting face-to-face interviews, Martin interviewed nine men and women about their experiences both in prison and on the outside campus at various educational institutions. The participants ranged in age from 29 to 58 years old, and represented a wide range of racial groups that included, from Black, to Latino, and to White. Collectively, the participants had served over 120 years inside juvenile detention centers, adult jails, and prisons. In highlighting our own experiences as well as the experiences of formerly incarcerated students, we privilege the voices of those who have experienced the pains of prison walls, bars, and steel doors.

Many of the stories contained below come from our years of experience within the prison system. While in prison and/or while teaching in prison, we kept journals of our experiences. We have reconstructed the relevant stories from each of our respective journals. When we recount our stories, we use our real names. When using data from Martin's thesis, we quote formerly incarcerated students, add brief descriptions, and include pseudonyms.

Positionality

We draw heavily from our personal experience inside and outside of the prison system to inform this work. Martin Leyva is formerly incarcerated and has served a combined eight years in the California Department of Corrections, which is now known as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Christopher Bickel is system impacted and has taught courses inside prison, as well as taught courses for formerly incarcerated students. Beyond experiences with incarceration, collectively we have spent decades working with prison education programs and building a prison-to-school pipeline in California. Martin Leyva has spent 15 years building educational programs for formerly incarcerated students. He is the founder of the Transitions program, which provides a summer bridge

program supporting formerly incarcerated students to attend community college. He is also currently the Project Rebound Coordinator at California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM). Project Rebound provides mentorship, academic counseling, and advocacy for formerly incarcerated students in the California State University System. Christopher Bickel is an Associate Professor who has spent 25 years advocating the transformation of juvenile and adult penal institutions. He is currently the director of the Transition to College program that empowers at-risk youth in continuation and court schools to attend college. He has also taught sociology classes inside the federal prison system.

Traditional Prison Education

There are a few official ways to obtain a college education in prison. For example, Coastline Community College in Fountain Valley, California offers correspondence education to 35 California state prisons, federal prisons, and county jails. Correspondence courses are typically implemented in the form of educational packets provided to incarcerated people through the mail. Students do not have access to tutors, no one-on-one instruction, and no classroom time. Instead, these courses are self-paced and students are expected to move through them at their own speed and will. Without teachers, tutors, or educational support staff, it is easy to become discouraged and stop out. When Martin Leyva sat down with Isaiah, a formerly incarcerated young man, Isaiah explained the difficulty of packet-based, self-paced postsecondary education:

It was packet learning you know what I’m saying, but it was like everybody was cheating, everybody was passing around [material], so everybody would take the courses and then, like, keep the curriculum, booklets for the following semester and sell them, and everybody was pretty much passing it around. And like with the change that was going on in my life, I just felt convicted every time. It was like people would be right across from me, cheating, and it was [like], dang man! I didn’t want to cheat, you know what I’m saying, and then one time somebody asked me if they could look at my answers and it was just hard, I couldn’t say no, and then I was like, I can’t do this, so I’m just not gonna; I’m not going to do school until I get home. Then I got to California City in 2014 and it was the same thing. But I just told myself, you know, just stay in your cell, just do your work, go and do your quizzes, and your test but then after that I was like, I’m good man. It was just hard, it was just hard, no one to teach you, so it was like when I get out I’m going to go on and finish college.

Correspondence courses via packet-based, self-paced learning embodies what Freire (1970) called the banking model of education. Freire writes, “instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the “banking” concept

of education, in which the scope of action allowed students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 58). For Isaiah, the packet-based education involved little interaction with professors. He expressed that he was expected to learn the information in the packets and regurgitate it later for an exam. There was little room to discuss the material he was learning with professors, which discouraged him from furthering his education. The packet provides the right answers and later students regurgitate these answers during exams. In addition to distance-based packet learning, much of the face-to-face formal education in this prison relies on the memorization and regurgitation of basic material. This style of learning is familiar to those behind walls because it is the same method used by secondary schools, which pushed them out of formal education in the first place (Lynch, 2014). This form of education is inherently oppressive because it denies students their own voice and understanding of reality. Within packet-based self-paced education, there is little opportunity to challenge the course material or to ask relevant questions to a human in real time. Even in face-to-face prison classes there is often little space to question the material, let alone the teacher, as strict rules of behavior and respect for authority are rigorously enforced by prison guards. Within these “banking” models of education, students play a passive role in the knowledge production process. The curriculum and teaching strategies are often determined with little input from students. It makes me wonder if the purpose of most prison education programs is to produce pleasantly obedient captives easier to control inside and outside prison walls rather than promote independent critical thinking.

This lack of access to and value of critical education can be seen in prison book bans across the country. It is common for prison officials to ban books that focus on inequality, specifically around issues of race, gender, economics, and sexuality (Dholaki, 2022). Prison book bans have preceded the recent Republican efforts to ban Critical Race Theory in schools, and further ban books that expose oppression and injustice in the United States. Based upon our experiences, books like, *Angela Davis: An autobiography*, *The kite runner* or *Lies my teacher told me*, are frequently banned inside prisons. Arizona, for example, maintains a 306-page list of banned books and periodicals. Prison officials often argue that such books represent a security risk, but often fail to explain the arbitrary nature in which books are banned (Wilson, 2021). As a prison educator, prison officials frequently told me (Christopher Bickel) to avoid controversial topics like slavery, racism, and inequality in my sociology course as it might create racial tension on the blocks and lead to prison riots. This kind of censorship denies incarcerated students opportunities to experience education beyond banking education.

“You Don’t Belong Here”: The Lessons of Cellblock Intellectuals

“Take a look around, tell me what you see, son?” Big Mitch asked while we walked the yard.

At the time, all I saw was a gun tower with a green back (prison guard) looking down wearing dark aviator glasses, holding a Mini-14 rifle. I (Martin Leyva) saw towering barbed wire fences, a dusty dirt track field devoid of vegetation.

“I see a bunch of convicts, what do you mean?” I asked, confused at the question. My answer reflected my position in prison, a warrior ready to act. “I see enemies, dudes who don’t give a fuck about...”, Big Mitch stopped me mid-sentence and smiled. “You know what I see, I see fathers with no guidance, I see boys with no fathers, I see a bunch of poor people with no access to quality lawyers. I see dope fiends who need treatment rather than prison, I see men who can’t get jobs and have to commit crimes to get by.”

As I listened to Big Mitch, I am reminded of the words I’ve heard since I first landed in juvenile detention decades ago. I heard the same in jails and prisons, words like “criminal, offender, hopeless,” and other labels designed to disparage those behind bars.

“These men here, like you, don’t deserve to be here, we need jobs, money, treatment, we need to earn a livable wage, and we need to stop letting our sadness and trauma dictate our lives,” Mitch said, pausing to look over the yard.

This was one of the first times I had ever heard of a conversation like this. My elder was also a spiritual advisor to our prison organization, known as a gang to prison officials. Usually, the conversation was about looking out for our Native brothers. However, this time around, Big Mitch was advocating for everyone in the joint.

“They are not our enemies; our enemies are all the politicians who design laws and policies that sent us here, it’s the cops who push the white man’s agenda and torment our community and target us.”

As I was listening, I looked over at Black, Latinx, and Native men caught in this vicious cycle of war against ourselves. Big Mitch kept schooling me about how prison is designed to segregate us and control poor folks.

“Why do you think only three guards can manage a building with 100 incarcerated men?” He asked, rhetorically. “It’s because they got us policing each other with their rules. We gotta stop doing the work for them. You got to stay out of this place, brother, you don’t belong here.”

Cellblock intellectuals counter the stereotypical representation of incarcerated people in mainstream criminology. They speak to issues of inequality, the history of people of color, and the ways power structures prison politics. Many were incarcerated during the height of the “get tough on crime” movement in the 1980s and 1990s; they are the political prisoners of the drug war. Many are serving unprecedented sentences, sentences measured in decades unseen in other parts of

the industrial world. They have witnessed first-hand the draconian and apartheid-like nature of the prison system. Racially segregated, cell block intellectuals carry the ability to transcend, if only temporarily, racial boundaries in prison, smuggling their “criminalized” books across the racial lines of *The new Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2020). They engage in conversations with other captives about the state of the world, hoping their knowledge can help others escape the revolving door of the US prison system. When Big Mitch told me, “you don’t belong here,” I was offended. I felt like he didn’t think I was cut out for prison. Mitch, however, saw something I had not yet seen: my potential, and the criminality of the system that poisoned that potential.

Many cellblock intellectuals received their high school diplomas while confined. Before incarceration, however, many were pushed out of traditional schools and consequently traveled the school-to-prison pipeline. As a result, they experienced an academic distancing that separated them from traditional academics. Academic distancing describes the perils of education growing up in poor and working-class communities, especially communities of color that includes: repeated suspensions and expulsions, alternative schools, or being pushed out of school altogether (Leyva, 2018). Despite how cellblock intellectuals were pushed out of traditional systems of education, they insist on the power of education. These cellblock intellectuals played an increasing, yet unseen role in providing education to incarcerated people—especially in light of the exodus of college education programs from prison during the “get tough on crime” movement (Burke, 2021).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated people. President Clinton signed away access to college via Pell Grants for prisoners even with substantial evidence that education reduced recidivism rates (Page, 2004). In 2016, President Obama implemented the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program that allowed a select number of colleges and universities to provide Pell Grants to eligible incarcerated people. The success of prison education programs coupled with the role that cellblock intellectuals play in prison suggest the need to better understand the methods cellblock intellectuals use to educate incarcerated people. When educational opportunities are severely limited in prison, cellblock intellectuals provide an informal education in the cell blocks, on the yard, and in the libraries. They are the ones tutoring students for their correspondence education. They educate those who have trouble learning in traditional settings.

One of my (Martin Leyva) “professors” in prison was Squeaks, a veteran Crip, who prioritized the education of others. No one questioned his intent; he had been doing it for years. He is one of the reasons why I pursued my formal education upon my release. “Mind, body and spirit Indian,” Squeaks used to tell me all the time when he saw me in the yard. He always pointed to his head, two or three times as if to emphasize “think.” Squeaks was a prison radical. He and the other cellblock intellectuals had no problems with fighting the system. They attempt to transform

the confines of prison by speaking truth to power. They are conductors on the underground railroad of critical prison education.

As educators, cellblock intellectuals are the keepers of banned books. These books are highly valued commodities in prison, especially critical books such as *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), *Always running* (1993), *My life is a sundance* (1999), *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963), and countless other books. However, prison guards and administrators seize banned books on a regular basis, justifying their actions with a cult-like mantra repeated over and over again: “safety and security.” Cellblock intellectuals are experts at navigating prison policies. They disguise banned books as bibles or romance novels. They make their own “institutionally acceptable” book covers. Risking punishment, cellblock intellectuals are fully committed to the cause of liberating minds, and helping people break the chains of mental and physical captivity (Freire, 2000). They are the modern-day abolitionists, helping people escape their captivity.

“Knowledge Tears Down Walls”: Cellblock Pedagogy

“Economics, youngster!” Squeaks explained, as though he was a college professor during office hours. “You know how much it costs to run this joint? They need our labor; they need us to be empty-headed, so they can deposit their lies!” Squeaks continued, “The schools aren’t useful, they have an agenda that is counterproductive, they produce a labor pool of poor working-class people.”

Squeaks was my (Martin Leyva) first introduction to names like Paulo Freire and Karl Marx. He broke down class-consciousness and banking models of education. He slid me Freire’s, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, and told me to read it. I didn’t understand it. He told me to read it again, and then broke it down for me in a language I could understand.

“Schools only teach to the top, maybe 3% of students,” placing a flat hand high to signify the top of the hierarchy. “The rest of us are managed and controlled. We are put out on the streets to fend for ourselves, to make do with what little they give us.”

Squeaks was a revolutionary – precise, and poetic with his words. “They have us right where they want us”, he continued. “Their schools tracked us here, the teachers fed us bullshit, and we blame ourselves for our own demise.”

Squeaks worked in the laundry room, making less than 50 cents an hour. He understood the painful reality that only two quarters an hour separated him from the same experience his ancestors survived on the plantation. Twice a week, we walked together during night yard. “We do their labor, we build these walls, we fill these places because they know how to control us. They are the means of production! The bourgeoisie, young’n. We are *Lumpenproletariat*! The underclass, we need to use their weapons against them!”

As he talked, he was always pointing toward that something, the buildings, the machines, the concrete and steel. He pointed at the guard uniforms, badges, and weapons, highlighting the costs of it all. “All that is money, youngster, that we produce at pennies on the dollar. We build, we make, we break our backs for them, they got it figured out!” he said, shaking his head.

Squeaks shared his knowledge with me, making sure to differentiate it from education. “Education opens doors, son, but knowledge tears down walls; they don’t want us having knowledge.”

Squeaks was relentless in protecting books, making sure guards never took them away. He never held his tongue, and wasn’t afraid to talk shit to cops. I respected his courage, and more importantly, his wisdom. I was honored to walk the yard with him, and during these conversations he planted the seeds that eventually grew into my associate’s degree, then bachelor’s degree, then master’s degree, and soon a doctoral degree. Squeaks was my first professor and one of my best.

For decades, young people between the ages of 13 and 18 years old have been funneled into the prison industrial complex at historically unprecedented levels (Austin et al., 2000; Nellis, 2023). While in prison, many will be taught by cellblock intellectuals, like my professors’ Squeaks and Mitch. This educational process is critical cellblock pedagogy, a method of teaching that offers a critical look into social issues, drawing from personal experiences and the insights of criminology, sociology, psychology, history, and world politics. Cellblock pedagogy is rooted in the experience of cinder block cages, in tiny cells where people bear the full brunt of state punishment. Cellblock intellectuals make sense of the confined world around them and resist by sharing banned books and creating knowledge during walks on the yard, gatherings at the dining halls, and group discussions on the cell blocks.

Cellblock intellectuals share the habits of critical educators described by Freire (2000) in the book, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. They are willing to challenge the status quo and critique the rules and policies that undergird the system. They are the radicals highlighted by Berger (2015) in his book *Captive nation*, who see the prison system as an extension of slavery, rather than a tool to fight crime (Berger, 2014). Cellblock intellectuals expose the roots of inequality to understand their captivity. They humanize the dehumanized by turning a critical eye toward the system. For cellblock intellectuals, it’s not nearly enough to talk about the rehabilitation of “convicts” without first pushing for rehabilitation of society as a whole. My mentor Squeaks, for example, was homeless on the streets and grew up in poverty. He was never given a first chance, let alone a second chance. Cellblock intellectuals point to the criminality of a country where 22% of children grow up in poverty, where homelessness is rampant, and where there exist pandemic levels of police brutality. Big Mitch and Squeaks always showed empathy to those who grew up in poverty and those who know the horrors of a cinder block cage. As cellblock intellectuals, they emphasize how knowledge exposes injustices within the system

and most importantly, how to change it. Cellblock intellectuals are the first to write grievances to protect books and writing materials. They organize others when faced with the brutality of prison officials. Perhaps more importantly, they work hard to teach the next generation that they don’t belong in prison.

Many confined individuals suffer inner turmoil about their intelligence and lack confidence in their abilities. Still, they want to learn, and so they engage in conversations with “cellblock professors” out of respect, admiration, and curiosity. Operating under the assumption that all students can learn and grow, cellblock intellectuals focus on emotional intelligence and help convince people that intelligence is not some fixed, unchangeable facet of their lives. Instead, intelligence can be grown through effort, reading books, conversation, and dialogue. When speaking of their educational background, many of the formerly incarcerated students I (Martin Leyva) interviewed said things like, “I thought I was a lost cause,” or “I wasn’t like the smart kids,” or “I’m not book smart.” However, overtime, formerly incarcerated students began to see that intelligence can be grown, and that their background, their street knowledge, can be deployed to learn in more formal educational settings. Cellblock intellectuals are a critical component of this mental transition to what Dweck (2016) calls the “growth mindset.” Dweck (2016) writes, the growth mindset, “is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others” (p. 7). For many of the students we have taught it is not academics like Dweck who teach these lessons of educational growth, but rather cellblock intellectuals who help incarcerated people believe that they have the capacity to learn.

After spending nearly 30 years behind bars, Big Che, a 54-year-old community college student, explains the role of cellblock intellectuals in prison. They would share the books with somebody that showed an interest, you know cause they would pick who they would take under their wing. And there were a lot of dudes that they didn’t mess with [elders]. But you know you were hanging around with this dude, even on the yards they were over here, we were over here playing basketball or working out or whatever. And after a while, they say “hey what’s up man, what’s happening, how are you doing? I’m doing alright, how about yourself?” And or you’d hear them talking about a book, and it’s “Hey what’s the list look like to get that book? Oh, there’s like two dudes ahead of you, I’ll put you on the list, you wanna read that? Well, I got another one right here that’s available right now by Carlos Castaneda or whatever, ya know. There were a lot of people that were involved in the Chicano movement back then. And so they um were really into Chicanismo. And they were really into um education was there was an emphasis on education ya know. And it just evolved into even more, it evolved into something more sophisticated because we had to study and break down DNA and language and all kinds of shit. Not just that but you

had people breaking barriers, there are self-taught dudes that could speak French and German like two or three, they were extremely powerful, they had nothing but time to study.

Whereas traditional educators rely heavily on the banking method of education, cellblock intellectuals rely more on the “dialogical method,” a problem-solving education that invites students and teachers to become co-creators of knowledge. Freire and Shor (1987) argue that “Dialogue is not a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; the dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom and to raise awareness about relations in society at large. Dialogue is a way to recreate knowledge as well as the way we learn” (p. 57). Inside the prison, cellblock intellectuals engage in dialogue to expose how inequality shapes their lives inside and outside of prison. Personal experience figures prominently in these discussions, as cellblock intellectuals listen to the stories of those they teach, and in the process, recognize how they are being taught in the process. Cellblock intellectuals become repositories of knowledge and stories, not only from the books they read, but also from the intellectual discussions they have daily with other incarcerated people. These interactions based on mutual respect help inspire curiosity among incarcerated people and lay the foundation for future learning, propelling many people, like Big Che, into college upon their release.

K-Roc, a 44 year-old White man, explains how prison punishment and cellblock intellectuals sparked his intellectual curiosity and inspired him to study while in prison. He had spent roughly 12 years in and out of jail on various charges. He explained that after having been disciplined on his last prison term for “petty shit,” he decided to make a change, and in the process, got assistance from cellblock intellectuals:

After that I was like that’s it I’m done, and I stayed clean and sober the rest of the time I was in there [jail], and it was at that time! I had been trying to get my hands-on education books, stuff that would help me, ya know, feel okay... I used to get up every morning at 3:30 when they served us breakfast and I would stay up and I would study Spanish and I would teach myself Spanish. The guys that were in there, they would give me the stuff to study and I would study when it was really quiet. I needed my quiet time and I needed to feel like I was moving forward in life and I was always reading books that would help me open my mind.

For K-Roc, the books provided by cellblock intellectuals started him on a journey to college. K-Roc ended up in the *Transitions* Program at Santa Barbara City College for formerly incarcerated students.

Listening to Big Che and K-Roc, it’s clear that cellblock intellectuals play a vital role in the lives of incarcerated people. Their critical approach to education and the methods they use to spark intellectual curiosity behind prison walls. Their use of dialogue to build knowledge, their intimate knowledge of the insecurities of those

behind bars, their deep understanding of inequality, and their belief that intelligence can be nurtured lays the foundation for an intellectual curiosity that can break down prison walls. The methods deployed by cellblock intellectuals provide a blueprint for education programs for currently and formerly incarcerated students. In the next section, we turn attention to the *Transitions* program to provide an example of an educational program grounded in the principles of cellblock pedagogy.

“I Am a College Student”: Transformation and *Transitions* Program

One by one, students enter a typical college classroom. Some are fifteen minutes early, some are ten minutes early, some are five minutes early, but all are on time. They linger outside the room, backs to the walls of adjoining buildings, watching to see who is walking in the classroom. As they enter the room, the back rows fill up quickly; the corner desk is prime real estate, as it provides maximum distance from the professor and a 180° view of the room. The room is silent. Hard stares and the looks of distrust cover student faces.

I (Martin Leyva) greet them, “How are you? Welcome to Transitions.” It is more than a handshake; it is a prison handshake, inverted hand, palm-to-palm, fingers roll directly into a fist bump. “Orale, gracias,” one participant says in a cautious yet curious tone. I respond, “My name is Martin Leyva. The professor will be here shortly, but I want to be the first to welcome you.”

The professor walks in. The students size him up like fresh meat walking on the prison tier for the first time. There are no bars in the classroom, but the ghosts of prison continue to haunt the classroom.

“Welcome to Transitions,” the professor announces. “Welcome to your first day of college and this summer bridge program. I look forward to working with all of you...” Panic sets in as the students hear his words: curriculum, syllabus, papers, and names of books, projects, and presentations. As the students listen to the professor, you can feel the walls around them rising as they peep from the corner of their eyes, looking at their new academic setting.

One student displays his swastika on his neck. Another has his neighborhood tattoo blasted on his cheekbone: a “BRV” in old English letters – Bravados gang – a gang which one of its leaders just got sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. Another student had a “BLG” tattoo on his neck – Big Locos Gang – a rival gang to BRV. Black, Brown, White, female and male, young and old staring at the professor as he gives his welcome and expectations; it’s like a prison roll call. There is a clear discomfort in this setting; individuals are sitting tense, tapping fingers lightly on the desk. It is the first day of school.

These new college students once walked the yards of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Many, if not all, have a history of drugs, alcohol, violence, and gang involvement, both in and out of prison. For formerly incarcerated students, college is a strange and unfamiliar place.

In 2008, six months after my (Martin Leyva) release from prison, I co-founded the *Transitions* program at Santa Barbara City College. The *Transitions* program started as a support group for formerly incarcerated students. The seeds of *Transitions* were planted when I approached two other parolees on campus, who I frequently saw at the parole office. Not long after we met, we began to talk about issues hindering our success in college (Leyva & Bickel, 2010). In prison, I would not have been able to talk with them because of the rules governing conduct among races. They were Black, and I am Chicano and Native.

In our support group, we shared stories similar to how we used to talk to cellblock intellectuals on the yard. We talked about our fear of sounding stupid in class that hindered our ability to participate, even when we had a lot to say. In these moments of vulnerability, we exposed our anxiety about how others in the classroom viewed our past criminal activity as though it was some fixed character deficit (Diseth et al., 2008). Our tattoos, way of speaking, and demeanor marked us different from other students on campus. Many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals have a need to do things on their own, a product of years of institutional indoctrination that taught us our individual choices were at the root of our incarceration. Asking for help, then, can be seen as a sign of weakness among us (Ross & Richards, 2003). In *Transitions*, however, we echo Dweck's (2016) insistence that "asking for help," is a powerful learning tool, and a key characteristic of the growth mindset.

These early conversations in the support group gave birth to the *Transitions* program. Rooted in the methods of cellblock pedagogy, the *Transitions* program accepts roughly 25 formerly incarcerated students to participate in the Summer Bridge program, which introduces formerly incarcerated people to student life on a community college campus. Unlike other post-incarceration programs, *Transitions* is a voluntary program. Nobody is mandated to attend by the courts or probation officers. To be a part of the program, students commit to attend classes four days a week, and participate in community activities once a week.

At the root of *Transitions* is an insistence on providing a critical education. During the summer bridge program, students take a college readiness course and a sociology course that focuses on social justice. While prison officials are often hesitant to allow critical books and educational programs in prisons, the *Transitions* program encourages students to think critically about their lives, using student experiences as a jumping board for larger critical discussions. Through engaging in dialogue, students share their experiences with racial profiling, prison abuse and trauma, and the difficulties of navigating life on the outside – as many face poverty, police surveillance, and systemic racism.

The *Transitions* program transcends the racial borders found within the CDCR. There is no segregation by race or affiliation. There's no separation of prison gangs. There's no rules governing interactions between races. In prison, crossing

racial lines can lead to physical violence, and in some cases, death. While most incarcerated people disagree with these unwritten rules in prison, few can challenge them. In the *Transitions* program, both the academic content of the classes and the community building activities transform these prison codes, much in the same way that cellblock intellectuals transcend, albeit temporarily, racial boundaries. The goal of *Transitions* is not simply to encourage students to get good grades, graduate, and find a good job. While these are valid goals, this kind of education does little to transform the prison industrial complex and the society that perpetuates it. Instead, *Transitions* draws from the lessons of cellblock intellectuals by teaching students to grow their minds, pushing them to realize we are not simply products of an oppressive prison apparatus, but also, we have the ability, as Squeeks reminded me, to break down prison walls, and abolish the system entirely.

In addition to the academic curriculum, *Transitions* offers community-building field trips that challenge student insecurities and encourage empathy and compassion. Students have participated in ropes courses, horseback riding, rock climbing, and attended museums and sporting events. When students begin to see, and more importantly feel, how these activities build community, they begin to feel a part of something larger than themselves. This is the beginning of their transformation.

Ida, a White woman in her mid-forties had spent roughly nine years in prison over three terms. Before enrolling in the *Transitions* program, she never thought she would be in a college classroom: “I drove by the college just about every day and said to myself, someday I’m going to enroll. It never happened. I thought I was a lost cause. I could never bring myself to drive into college.”

That all changed the day Ida was talking to a friend about college. Ida admitted she felt like college was an impossible dream. However, she explains:

I received a phone call, and it was this guy; “hey, I heard you wanted to go to college?” And he told me about this summer program, and I liked what I heard, and then he told me that he would meet me at the college, but I knew I wouldn’t drive in, so I picked him up and the next thing I knew, I was signed up and starting classes. It was that quick, scary, but quick.

Ida shared that enrolling in school was so overwhelming, and at the same time, so “amazing” that she cried in disbelief. “Yes, I was scared, nervous, and the feeling made me cry, but they were tears of joy. It’s hard to believe that I had just signed up for college; I am a college student!”

Many students shared they were scared to enter college for the first time. It was overwhelming to them, especially given their background. They experienced a distancing from academic institutions in their early lives, and assumed they weren’t “smart” enough to enroll in college. Moreover, they feared the enrollment process, as if it would expose their insecurities. K-Roc, for example, explains that the paperwork just to enroll in college seemed overwhelming. He could have easily walked away.

However, at *Transitions*, he was met by another formerly incarcerated student there to support him, making sure his paperwork was completed. K-Roc describes his feelings at the time: “I mean it was kind of like, it was a little scary, and it was kind of cool, but it was as ya know, like the first day of *Transitions* when I walked into that room and I saw everybody [formerly incarcerated students] in there—I was home.”

Many formerly incarcerated students shared that it was easier to be in prison than to be on the outside and going to college. In prison, they had achieved a level of respect, and they knew the rules that governed their actions. But once they left the prison walls and had to navigate the outside world, many felt lost and worried they would be sent back to prison because of the many barriers they face on the outside.

The *Transitions* program provides peer counselors, formerly incarcerated students who have already completed the summer bridge program, to help students not only navigate campus life, but also confront the internal self-doubt they feel attending college classes. Peer counselors identify with the lack of confidence that formerly incarcerated students experience on campus. Similar to cellblock intellectuals, these peer counselors help provide students with the resources they need to thrive on a college campus. Like cellblock intellectuals, they reaffirm the belief that everybody can learn, and help students surmount the many obstacles along the way. Since its founding in 2008, the *Transitions* program has expanded to two additional community colleges. Roughly 280 students have graduated from the program, and of those students, 85% have stayed free from prison. For that 85%, the journey through academia has not been easy, but it has been worth it (SBCC, 2017). Many of the participants in the *Transitions* programs have already been educated within the prison, but do not see the connection between lessons learned on the cellblocks and the more formal education taught at a community college. Once released from prison, a person reverts back to feeling incompetent, because the type of education offered in prison is more informal, and not as valued outside the prison walls. In the classrooms of the *Transitions* Program, the lessons of cellblock intellectuals are valued and can be built upon, allowing personal transformation to occur with the ultimate goal of social transformation and justice.

Conclusion

In our work, we frequently attend conferences organized by formerly incarcerated students. In a recent conference at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), there were roughly 400 attendees from across California. 95% were formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students. During the conference, students voiced the countless struggles they had to endure to attend college. Some experienced drug addiction, while others endured physical abuse, and most continue to deal with the trauma caused by their incarceration. Yet, here they all were at CSULA, as students, not convicts, trying to navigate their way through higher

education. The story of education for formerly incarcerated students does not start at the doors of community colleges or universities. Instead, it begins in tiny cells and on prison tiers with cellblock intellectuals, who share books, help students complete their GED’s, and teach students how to transform their lives despite the confines of prison. Concrete, steel, batons, pepper spray, and block guns did not stop the flow of banned books and knowledge in prison. Cellblock pedagogy is dangerous precisely because it unveils the hidden nature of incarceration and does not rely on prison officials to thrive.

As we rebuild an educational infrastructure for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students, the lessons of cellblock intellectuals provide a blueprint for educational programs, like *Transitions*. The critical lessons of cellblock intellectuals and the methods they use provide a beacon guiding the creation of more prison education programs, especially those run by formerly incarcerated people. These programs, however, should not simply be about lowering recidivism rates or creating pleasant, law-abiding people. Cellblock intellectuals are not simply concerned with individual rehabilitation, but rather they hope to teach the knowledge necessary to transform the world, and to challenge the oppressive conditions that have forced so many people inside prison walls. My (Martin Leyva) mentor, Big Mitch, passed away recently, but the lessons he taught are alive in the curriculum of the *Transitions* program. We encourage other educators to heed the lessons of cellblock intellectuals to not only transform the lives of students, but also to recognize the power of knowledge, in the words of Squeaks, “to tear down walls” and build a more just society.

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The Carceral Classroom as a Site of Multiple Fantasies

Rachel Oppenheim

This article investigates the complex fantasies circulating within the school of a women-designated facility at a jail. Employing a critical theoretical framework, I examine the position that education occupies within the U.S. legal system, how stakeholders conceive of the carceral classroom, and the ways that incarcerated people are positioned as learners and knowers. I argue that the fantasies of educators in jails and prisons should be analyzed, as should their pedagogical practices because even the most justice-oriented programs run the risk of reinforcing the coercive practices and repressive ideologies that they aim to combat.

Keywords: *carceral education, critical theory, gender, pedagogy*

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For several years I taught at a large, urban, northeastern jail as a member of a volunteer organization that provided non-credit-bearing academic and enrichment classes to adult incarcerated people at a women-designated facility. Before our organization began working at the jail, the only postsecondary classes that were available to adult women were also not credit-bearing but were vocational in nature: programs that included custodial maintenance and cosmetology. My fellow volunteers and I, by contrast, taught courses focused on a variety of academic topics: including memoir, performance poetry, the Harlem Renaissance, Macbeth, children's literature, and financial literacy.

During a conversation with one of the administrators in charge of programming at the jail, I asked what he thought the programs he supervised accomplished. His answer was straightforward: "Good programs are good security. If you keep them engaged, they're less likely to cause problems." Later, a Deputy Warden who was also responsible for educational programming corroborated this sentiment, remarking, "Keep them busy so they don't keep you busy." The comments of these administrators revealed that for the two men in charge of programs at the women-designated jail, the central purpose of these programs was security. As I spoke to both men, I came to believe that this goal undoubtedly affected the types of programming that were implemented under their watch. It seemed to me that they had selected programs based on their ability to keep those incarcerated at the jail busy and under control rather than on the skills, knowledge, or intellectual growth they might impart. And, while my own organization held a more expansive view of educational programming—one that did not center on security—I knew that we too held particular goals for the women with whom we worked. These goals shaped our pedagogy, our interactions with students, and the courses we chose to offer. The history of and attitudes toward correctional education in this country can be closely linked to underlying beliefs about the nature of incarcerated people, their rights, their intellectual capabilities, and their ability to be "reformed." In this article, I

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examine the complex discourses surrounding education in the carceral context and I investigate the ways these discourses position incarcerated people and circumscribe the opportunities they are afforded. Different stakeholders enter the jail or prison classroom with vastly different *fantasies* about what its purposes should be and what objectives it should accomplish, fantasies that are tied to broader systems of justice and injustice and that have material consequences for incarcerated people.

All classrooms are characterized by multiple fantasies, with each stakeholder carrying her vision for what role the space should play and what aims its students should seek. However, the prison classroom holds a distinct place in the public consciousness and in the imagination of correctional staff. Unlike many educational spaces, there remain some fundamental doubts among both the public and correctional staff about whether the prison classroom should exist at all. It is also a unique, often contradictory space, an institution-within-an-institution, and a “site of contradiction” (Castro & Brawn, 2017) that may be less repressive or differently repressive than the prison as a whole. The hopes that non-incarcerated teachers and administrators hold for its students are invariably shaped by notions of criminality, rehabilitation, and often redemption, and can foreclose interrogation of the larger systems of power and oppression that plague our criminal legal system. These notions influence pedagogical and curricular choices and impact the lives and experiences of non-incarcerated volunteers and incarcerated students in both concrete and ethereal ways. Moreover, incarcerated students hold fantasies for their own education, which alternately serve to maintain, disrupt, and complicate the fantasies that others hold. I am interested in asking what teachers’ and students’ fantasies are regarding education in jail and investigating where these fantasies intersect and collide.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory

Critical theory allows us to recognize systems of power and oppression and is a framework through which we can both critique and challenge those systems (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1981). According to critical theory, individuals “have been acculturated to feel comfortable in relations of domination and subordination rather than equality and independence” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 436). Critical theorists work to uncover dominant ideologies that have become commonplace and to interrupt oppressive structures by making them visible and revealing their deleterious effects on both individuals and society (Giroux, 2011).

Critical educators specifically analyze the ways dominant ideologies are enacted and oppressive structures reified in educational settings, tracing “how power and ideologies of power weave through the hegemonic values and practices of education” (Cherryholmes, 1993, p. 11). They examine the ways schools and classrooms reinforce systems of domination and injustice, even as they purport to disrupt them (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Giroux, 1981). Such authors argue

that, in making visible those injustices, educators can facilitate critical consciousness, thereby creating spaces that are liberatory rather than oppressive (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Freire wrote, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83). Such pedagogical approaches support students to effect change and actively combat structures that oppress them and their communities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). As I investigated an educational setting situated within a carceral institution, critical theory allowed me to explore the complex, multifaceted relations of power in that setting and helped me understand the ways h systems of oppression operated, even in an alternative program that was designed to disrupt them.

Fantasy and its Intersections with Society and “Reality”

When we fantasize, we imagine, hope, and aspire to a particular set of conditions, events, or ideas for ourselves and for others. Fantasy portrays what might be and is profoundly intertwined with what we think of as real. Butler (2004) explained, “fantasy is not equated with what is not real, but rather with what is not yet real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real” (p. 185). Thus, rather than viewing fantasy as merely illusory, it is useful to position it as a way to imagine what could and what may be. We map our fantasies onto our current circumstances and upon those we encounter – those fantasies both anticipating and creating a different version of the world. “‘Fantasy’ and ‘the real’ are always already linked” (Butler, p. 192).

We not only hold fantasies for ourselves, but also for others. In so doing, we impose our assumptions about what others are entitled to and who or what they may be. Specifically, it is important to analyze the fantasies that dominant members of society hold for those who are typically marginalized (Walkerdine, 1990). Such fantasies influence policy, practice, and interaction—fantasies can therefore affect members of oppressed groups in concrete ways. So too, when teachers fantasize about what they want their classrooms to be, they display hopes and betray assumptions about what their students desire and what they need and/or want. Classrooms can therefore be seen as regulatory spaces in which the fantasies of educators are mapped onto the pedagogical arena and upon the bodies of their students. Students enter those same classroom spaces carrying their own sets of fantasies, which inevitably reinforce, contradict, or complicate those of their teachers. In the carceral context, such fantasies reveal a great deal about how these different parties conceive of incarcerated people, their intellectual abilities, and their possibilities.

Literature Review

Foucault (1977) pointed out that a fundamental role of the prison is “as an apparatus for transforming individuals” (p. 233) and, for many, education is seen by many as an ideal avenue toward such transformation. Many of the authors who have studied education in prison settings have designed their studies to measure the effects of education on rates of recidivism (Bouffard, et al., Bozick, et al., 2018; 2000; Nuttall, et al., 2003). The assumption that underlies this research is that the purpose of educating people who are incarcerated is to deter them from returning to prison after release. A limitation in these studies is that education programs are restricted to those that allow incarcerated students to earn their high school equivalency or GED (Nuttall, 2003).

Historically, those who have studied education in carceral settings have done so from the position that schooling has the power to rehabilitate (Brewster & Sharp, 2002; Cecil, et al., 2000; Nuttall, 2003). Such authors often begin with the assumption that most people who are incarcerated are deeply flawed individuals, apathetic learners who have failed within regular schools (O’Neill et al., 2007), and have “poor self-concepts and negative attitudes toward education” (Vacca, 2004, p. 297). These authors argue that education has the power to “counteract the effects of poor educational achievement and lowered employability commonly found among correctional populations” (Bouffard et al., 2000, p. 4).

While it is indeed crucial that jails and prisons provide incarcerated people with educational opportunities, the notion that education alone can transform lives ignores structural inequalities and can easily invite complacency among those who might otherwise work toward greater change in our carceral system and society. Specifically, Castro (2018) argued that the language of reduced recidivism may “contribute to state violence that is disproportionately enacted against people of Color” (p. 3). Those that tout the rehabilitative power of education do not acknowledge that schools themselves can perpetuate underachievement, disproportionate discipline, and criminalization (Delpit, 1995; Noguera, 1995).

Increasingly, scholars in the field of prison higher education have addressed this conundrum and encouraged more expansive, holistic programming (Karpowitz, 2005; Lewen, 2008; Wilson, 2007). Warner (2007), for example, juxtaposed European prisons, in which education is often broad-ranging, with U.S. prisons, in which diverse courses that “directly address criminogenic factors” are privileged by correctional staff (p. 172). He contended, “at the heart of ... a good penal policy is recognition of people’s full humanity, their individuality, autonomy and potential, and acceptance of them as full members of the larger society” (p. 181). Stern (2021) concurred that, even in jails and prisons—spaces in which “human connection is contraband” (p. 18) – the classroom can be a “sacred and liminal space” (p. 19) in which human connection can be affirmed and incarcerated students can be treated with value and dignity.

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Authors who have advocated for this broader view of education in jails and prisons demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the contextual factors that shape the ways that incarcerated students engage with school. Wilson (2007) argued that educators must take incarcerated peoples' histories and contexts into account in the design of programs. Ghering (2000) concurred that we should view education as only part of each incarcerated person's multifaceted experience and pointed out that recidivism is a rather blunt statistical instrument that does not recognize "shades of improvement" (p. 198). Ghering urged scholars and policymakers to look to other factors to create a more complex picture of the effects of education in carceral settings and to observe how schooling interacts with other aspects of the prison experience.

Recent literature describing and analyzing the landscape of higher education in prison further expands perceptions of education in carceral settings, and has offered theoretical complexity to the role that schooling plays in such settings (Castro & Gould, 2018; Heider & Lehman, 2019). Such authors have broadened scholarly notions of what is possible in the prison classroom. They have demonstrated that prison higher education programs that facilitate high-quality education can be impactful (Evans, 2018; Heppard, 2019; Moore & Erzen, 2021).

The above authors contend that a more expansive approach to education can present possibilities for the prison classroom where respect, reciprocity, and inclusiveness can be cultivated. Yet, others are skeptical that critical education is possible within the walls of oppressive, dehumanizing institutions (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Cheung, 2021; Colson, 2013; Rafay, 2013; Rodríguez, 2006; Scott, 2013). The latter scholars have offered incisive critiques of the ways that carceral education unfolds in practice and have pointed out that even the most progressive and radical prison classrooms can replicate the severe power imbalances of both prison and society at large.

Rodríguez (2016) argued that prison education is "politically domesticating and delimited" (p. 80). He presented higher education programs in prison as both complicit in and sustaining of the punitive carceral regime, arguing that it is disingenuous to claim promise and intellectual freedom in a setting where both are illusory. Rafay (2013), too, challenged the notion that radical teaching is achievable in prison. He argued that in proposing such pedagogical education initiatives in prison risks affording incarcerated students a substandard academic experience and further intellectually marginalizing them.

Others have balked at the notion that the prison classroom provides a unique opportunity for emancipatory education. They point out that while prejudices and unequal power dynamics beset every pedagogical setting, this is especially true in carceral settings (Colson, 2013). As Cheung (2021) noted, "Depending on one's race, gender, class, ability, and other positionalities, it is likely that well-meaning teachers in prisons perpetuate carceral violence" (p. 51). Prison presents intense

limitations about which educators must be keenly aware if they are to promote engagement, growth, and criticality in their classrooms (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Scott, 2013). Such authors position the idea of enhanced agency through carceral education as unreasonably idealistic and they critique the naiveté of those who tout the emancipatory capacities of schooling in carceral settings.

Methods

I conducted this qualitative inquiry in 2009 at a women's-designated facility of a large, northeastern jail. As a researcher, I focused on the discourses that circulated within educational spaces of the jail and how those discourses positioned incarcerated people and shaped their experiences. I was specifically concerned with how different stakeholders' fantasies influenced participants' schooling and their self-perceptions. The following questions guided this research:

- What discourses circulate in educational settings in this women's-designated jail facility and in what ways are students discursively produced within these educational settings?
- How do alternative educational practices reproduce and/or disrupt fixed and binary depictions of incarcerated students?

I entered this study with a deep familiarity with the setting. I had taught classes at the jail for a number of years, and therefore my research—the ways that I viewed and analyzed the discursive productions in this setting—was influenced by those prior experiences. So too, my own subjectivity as a White, middle-class, Jewish, educated, nondisabled, cisgender woman impacted the way that I read the research site and shaped the data that I generated. Moreover, my position as a person who was not incarcerated—my ability to come and go from the jail—inevitably shaped my research and my relationship with those who were unable to leave. Fine, et al. (2003) wrote, “insiders carry knowledge, critique, and a line of vision that is not automatically accessible to outsiders” (p. 189). So too, those insiders carry the burdens attendant to their own identities as accused or sentenced people living under a regime that is designed to control and subdue them. While I was afforded the benefit of the doubt within the walls of the jail, the actions that my students took, including their decision to participate in this research, were under constant surveillance. For them, the stakes were astronomical while for me they were much less so.

The larger project from which I draw this analysis used a variety of data collection methods. For this analysis, I used interviews with non-incarcerated teachers and incarcerated students in an alternative educational program run by non-incarcerated volunteers. This voluntary, non-credit-bearing program offered evening academic and enrichment classes to adult incarcerated participants, many of whom had no access to other academic programs at the facility. Over the course of

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sixteen weeks, I conducted one-hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine incarcerated students and six non-incarcerated teachers.

The students who participated in this study ranged in age from 21 to 60. The vast majority of students in the alternative program were Black or Latinx and most had not yet completed high school, nor earned a GED. Over half of the students were previously incarcerated and most were mothers or grandmothers. I recruited student participants by going to classes and presenting my study to those in attendance, and nine agreed to be interviewed for this study. I thoroughly explained the study and IRB process both verbally and in writing, and assured them that their anonymity would be preserved by using pseudonyms and disguising any other identifying information. Additionally, I worked to forefront participants' voices and opinions by performing member checks, and involving them deeply in the data analysis process.

My own place in this study was further complicated by my position as a teacher at the jail in which I was conducting research. My analyses were refracted through the assumptions that I brought to bear as both educator and researcher and the ways that I positioned students were affected by this dual role. As I both taught and conducted my study, I strove to preserve a vigilantly self-reflexive stance with regards to my role, power, and positionality and to reconcile my own aims and motivations with my ethical commitment to avoiding exploitation. I, therefore, included measures in my study that helped me to do so, such as performing member checks, providing participants with transcripts from interviews and sharing my initial analyses, allowing them to critique my hunches and my preliminary findings.

In addition to providing raw transcripts to each of the participants whom I interviewed, I also provided them with the initial themes that I saw emerging. I informed them that they were welcome to dispute or question any of my findings, and that their critiques would strengthen, as opposed to weaken, those findings. I began the initial stages of data analysis while I was still collecting data and therefore my data collection and analysis were cyclical processes that informed and modified one another. I focused my analyses on how the discourses circulating "make possible and limit 'who' the subject can be, and what s/he can mean, and what s/he [sic] can make happen" (Youdell, 2004, p. 204). As I analyzed the data, I used thematic codes, paying particular attention to how incarcerated students and their classrooms were discursively produced. I sought connections as well as contradictions, looking for the ways that participants repeated and resisted dominant discourses.

Analysis

In the next sections, I describe the alternative jail classroom as a contested space by investigating the fantasies that non-incarcerated volunteer teachers and incarcerated students held and how those fantasies may have shaped their classroom experiences. I first highlight perceptions of the women's educational goals, then focus on the fantasies that circulate regarding their voice and self-representation.

My research demonstrates that, while the alternative program was in many ways a welcome antidote to the jail's typical educational programs, non-incarcerated volunteer teachers nonetheless exhibited fantasies that worked to limit incarcerated students and confine their goals. I explain how fantasies of redemption are particularly pernicious in carceral spaces, as they underestimate the role of systemic injustice, place the onus of rehabilitation on incarcerated people themselves, and flatten the complex desires that students bring to the classroom.

“Making Change”: The Multiple Fantasies of Incarcerated Students as Learners

Most of the teachers in the volunteer organization with which I worked were politically involved both within and beyond the realm of criminal justice. Their shared political commitments affected individuals' fantasies for the impact that their work would have upon their students. When I asked my colleagues what they hoped they could accomplish by teaching in a jail, most expressed that their work could combat injustices inherent in jails and prisons and they cited “making change” as their motivation.

Stephen, a cisgender white man in his 20s, told me that he wanted to join the organization because, “prisons seemed to be less about safety and well-being and more about social and racial control,” and he imagined that education could be an antidote to such control. Another cisgender, twenty-something white man, Mike, concurred that he taught in prison in part, “to combat racism.” Stephen, Mike, and others saw their task as both immense and crucial. Their fantasies stemmed in large part from their political and ideological beliefs and they conceived of the prison classroom as a site of resistance rather than simply an educational space.

When they cited racism and systemic inequality as motivations for their work, non-incarcerated volunteer teachers seemed to fantasize about their own role in combating such injustices. In so doing, they ran the risk of positioning their students as the victims of an intractable criminal justice system and themselves as virtuous agents of change working to disrupt that system. Students' gender may have contributed to such tropes, as the goals that many imagine for incarcerated women are vastly different than those for men and tend to produce women as vulnerable and needy (Zazitow, 2004). The volunteers undoubtedly wanted the best for their students, and they clearly understood the ways in which they were constrained by an unjust and repressive system. However, in so doing they may have framed them as victims of this system and centered themselves as catalysts of student change and academic transformation.

While many hoped that their work would have a systemic impact, non-incarcerated volunteer teachers also held aspirations for their students' academic growth. David, a Black cisgender man in his 20s, explained, “There's a particular kind of joy ... you hear teachers talk about the ‘aha moment’ where you see a student

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understand something that they didn't previously understand. And seeing that happen with somebody and being responsible for that is a totally euphoric experience."

David took delight in watching his students expand their academic skills and horizons. Sara, a cisgender Latina volunteer in her 30s, commented, "As a teacher you want to make change and that's why we go into this You want to see your students grow as students and as people. And that's what keeps us going." Sara and others acknowledged that they were often combating histories that were rife with educational failure and frustration. They also saw a great deal of possibility in their students and expressed the hope that they would continue to embrace learning.

While non-incarcerated volunteer teachers recognized their students' potential and forefronted their intellectual growth, many expressed that motivating students and expanding their self-conceptions were perhaps even more imperative. Sara explained, "If I can make somebody think about something differently or have a different emotional response or reaction to something than they thought they could, then my job is kind of done." Sara's goal of inspiring her students and expanding their horizons was a unique—and arguably important—way to envision the correctional classroom. Sara imagined expansive educational goals and possibilities and she positioned her incarcerated students as capable and deserving of classroom experiences that emphasized learning for its own sake, something that those in jail and prison are rarely afforded.

As a group, the non-incarcerated volunteer teachers acknowledged that the lofty goals that they held for what they could accomplish as educators were indeed fantasies and that the realities of their classrooms did not often live-up to those expectations. When I asked David what he believed women gained from attending classes, he was frank:

I think for most of the students they get two hours that are more interesting than the other twelve hours of the day. We're not trying to give them skills—job interviews, workshops ... It's not what we're doing. We're creating academic opportunities that give people a sense that learning can be fun and interesting and something they're good at and something they want to continue doing. At the very best, I think that's what we do.

The organization's aim was not to provide students with concrete, job-readiness skills, but to instead imbue them with a more intangible—but no less important—love for different kinds of learning, and receptiveness to broader academic and intellectual endeavors. This was a fantasy that many non-incarcerated volunteer teachers shared, but, like David, they also understood that students might have come to school for a variety of other reasons, including boredom or the desire to see their friends and partners. As David acknowledged, much that occurred in his penal classroom—as in the classrooms of his fellow non-incarcerated teachers—was beyond his control. His fantasies helped to shape the school space, but they were merely one piece of an intricate network of histories, assumptions, expectations,

pressures, and dreams circulating within that space. In the following section I further explore the extent to which non-incarcerated volunteer teachers sought control—and sought to cede control—over their classrooms and the effect that such desires had on their relationships and interactions with students.

Ceding Control: The Paradox of Choice in the Carceral Classroom

Another way that non-incarcerated volunteer teachers' ideals were complicated by students' own fantasies was, ironically, their emphasis on student choice. Most volunteers were acutely cognizant of the power imbalances that existed between themselves and their students. These non-incarcerated teachers seemed to believe that, by ceding control to their students, they could at least partially fulfill their own fantasies of combating racism and subjugation in the criminal justice system. Greta, a white woman in her 20s, explained, "When it's working well, the classroom is created by both the teachers and the students. And they take a lot of leadership in making the classroom run well." She and other non-incarcerated teachers believed in shared power and they preferred to imagine themselves as collaborators, rather than leaders, within the classroom.

However, the volunteer organization's embrace of student decision-making presented somewhat of a paradox: while non-incarcerated teachers worked to give students voice and leadership within the contexts of their classrooms, the kinds of courses that they opted to teach were not the ones students would have chosen—and therefore student voice was at least partly dismissed. Non-incarcerated volunteer teachers undoubtedly saw students' ability to share control of the classroom environment as "empowering," as a way to position those students differently than they were positioned elsewhere in the jail. Yet, when I interviewed students, many said that they preferred courses that would provide practical skills, ones that would help them to find jobs or get into college once they were released. In other words, while they enjoyed their evening classes, many expressed that they would like classes that would help them to re-enter society and the labor force—classes centering skills that non-incarcerated volunteer teachers had chosen to avoid in favor of broader intellectual aims. The courses that teachers offered, while influenced by discursive notions of empowerment and student voice, seemed to dismiss students' actual desires and downplay their needs.

A middle-aged, Black student, Donna, explained why she had begun attending classes while in jail:

To be ready to go on the outside and not repeat the same revolving door. If I don't stand up and adjust my life on a very serious basis, the good things that God has given me will be taken away from me...I was in line today and I seen the teachers coming and it made me feel good to say, "I'll see you in class." I have to put myself in society ... be a productive member of society again.

The Carceral Classroom as a Site of Multiple Fantasies

Donna sought to become a “productive member of society” and she hoped for classes that would help her to halt her cycle of repeated incarceration. Another student, Shauna, agreed, “I’ve never been a sit-down person. I’ve always been productive. That’s why I enjoy these classes. It makes me feel like I’m being productive.” Both of these women saw school as a way to take concrete steps toward preparing for life on the outside, as well as an antidote to their feelings of helplessness. In interviews with other students, many anticipated that their classes would impart skills that would help them to re-enter society and to play an active role in their communities. Such aims contrasted with the more ephemeral goals that members of the volunteer organization held for their work as educators. Of course, just as the goals of the non-incarcerated teachers were shaped by discursive ideologies regarding progressive, student-centered learning, we must acknowledge that students’ fantasies of becoming “contributing members of society” were likely influenced by raced and gendered notions of shame surrounding crime, incarceration, and family abandonment, as well as the lure of the redemption narrative. Discourses circulating in the jail, the media, and their own communities constantly reminded them that they should focus on productivity and should downplay “frivolous” pursuits—intellectual or otherwise. Nonetheless, listening to these women articulate their anxieties about their employment prospects and their fantasies for an education that would prepare them for the outside world led me to see the ways non-incarcerated teachers’ focus on shared leadership complicated—and was complicated by—students’ desire to become productive members of society. Indeed, teachers’ emphasis on shared power and student voice may have ironically led them to disregard students’ desires and dismiss their very real anxieties. In the case of both teachers and students, participants’ fantasies were shaped by dominant notions of what it means to teach and learn in a carceral space, and those competing fantasies may have constrained what was possible within that space.

As these conflicting fantasies regarding the aims of the jail classroom reveal, both incarcerated students and non-incarcerated teachers enter their classrooms with complex histories and carry a variety of motivations, many of which can disrupt one another’s lofty ideals or complicate their well-laid curricular plans. In the following section I present another paradox: the fantasy of self-representation and its tendency to both imbue incarcerated students with a sense of agency and to objectify them.

Visibility and Voyeurism: The Fantasy of Self-Representation in the Carceral Classroom

Self-representation was a fantasy that motivated both volunteer educators and the students in their classrooms. Members of both of these groups believed that incarcerated people should have the opportunity to voice their histories and struggles, as well as represent themselves in their own words. While this shared goal seems laudable, I argue that we should scrutinize its connections to notions of

visibility, vulnerability, and voyeurism, as well as the assumptions behind those who uncritically promote it. While non-incarcerated educators may be motivated by their own curiosity or by simplistic fantasies regarding student “voice” and empowerment, students may have quite different motivations. They may indeed desire to be heard, but may also have been conditioned to believe they are expected to bare their lives and experiences, either to satisfy others’ curiosity or to explicate their histories of criminality and incarceration. These disparate motivations have consequences for the educational space that non-incarcerated teachers and incarcerated students occupy together and can constrain what is possible within that space.

Students’ Desire to be Seen and Understood

It is not difficult to understand incarcerated peoples’ desire to express themselves on their own terms and in their own words. As my observations and interviews revealed, the experiences of incarcerated students were marked by degradation and dehumanization and it was exceedingly difficult for them to assert their individuality and define themselves as whole, decent humans.

One evening Angel, a young Black woman who was one of the most dedicated students in the evening alternative classes, brought a small, nondescript writing notebook to class that was filled with photographs. She said that a group of her close friends had lovingly put an album together as a gift that they hoped would help her to endure her time behind bars. Angel told me, although she could not explain why, that it was against jail rules for incarcerated people to have photographs of themselves. Undeterred by this restriction, her friends had attempted to disguise the photos by pasting them into a notebook. When the package arrived, the officer on duty in the mailroom said that if Angel wanted to keep the album she would have to eliminate all evidence of her own face. Angel complied and went through the album with a marker, blacking out her own face in every picture. When she showed it to me and I flipped through the pages, I saw picture after picture of young women smiling for the camera alongside Angel’s blacked-out face. According to Angel, the album was important to her because it was proof that she had once been happy and surrounded by those who loved and cared about her. Yet the images of her face—the evidence of her own joy, camaraderie, and personhood—had been excised.

From interviews with Angel, I knew that her sense of self had already been worn down by decades of abuse at the hands of her father and her individuality had been further stripped when she entered jail. She told me that before she was incarcerated her clothing and appearance had been important aspects of her individuality. She was crushed when they were summarily taken from her and traded for baggy sweatpants, t-shirts, orange slip-on shoes, and short cornrows. She noted that the photo album was one of the last vestiges of her former identity, yet even this small relic was more than the jail would allow. Her story is a telling example of the ways the criminal justice system quite intentionally manipulates incarcerated

people's sense of self. On the one hand, they exist under heightened surveillance and are constantly *visible*, their comings and goings monitored by video cameras and an ever-present battalion of officers. However, in spite of this relentless supervision, they are also remarkably *invisible*, their distinct selves erased by policies that include a ban on photographic evidence of their faces.

When a person's self has been stripped away and she has been treated as just one of thousands of bodies, it may be crucial for her to author herself from her own perspective. As one student, Roxanne, remarked when we discussed the idea of distributing a book of poetry that she and her peers had created, "I would like that! So people could see that at least some of us are not lost in jail. And our minds are free. They might like to feel us through our words." Roxanne and others believed that people's opinions about incarcerated people might transform if they were privy to their true words, emotions, and histories.

Teacher Fantasies of Students' Self-Representation

Those who teach incarcerated people often share this fantasy of education as an avenue for incarcerated students to author their own narratives. Indeed, courses offered by the volunteer organization included poetry, screenwriting, and autobiographical narrative. These and other courses gave participants the opportunity to share their stories and narrate their experiences in their own words, from their own perspectives. Such courses are common in carceral settings. There are a number of anthologies of prison writing and memoir (Burton-Rose, Pens, & Wright, 1998; Lamb, 2003; Scheffler, 1986), as well as many programs that focus on helping incarcerated people to "tell their stories" (Stanford, 2004). Those who seek to provide incarcerated people with a space to tell their own stories may do so because they understand that those in prison have historically been the *objects* of others' limited, detrimental narratives rather than the authors of their own stories. However, one might also question the preponderance of such programs. There is an apparent desire among non-incarcerated educators to see incarcerated people reveal their innermost thoughts and lay bare their struggles. And, while this might seem liberating for incarcerated authors, it can also be seen as an act of voyeurism on the part of those who work with them. Incarcerated people are already subject to heightened surveillance—the gaze of officers and video cameras constantly upon them. Those who ask them to bare their souls and record their histories are responsible for both maintaining that ever-present gaze and multiplying its sources. As Foucault (1977) noted, "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing" (p. 62).

When I spoke to members of the volunteer organization, most described their work at the jail as selfless. However, some acknowledged that their aims were not utterly altruistic. Mike, a multiracial man, explained: "It's not entirely unselfish.

It's interesting. It's an adventure to get to go and have that backstage pass to jail. To see what it's like." He admitted that working at a jail provided him a vantage point that most were not afforded and he revealed that curiosity was one of his incentives as an educator.

Greta described teaching as a "story-producing" career. She said, "I'm not gonna pretend that teaching in jail is un-exotic. To me it's very logical that what's exotic about it would make for a captive audience and a good dinner party moment." Incarcerated participants themselves hoped that sharing their stories would change others' narrow perspectives. However, did non-incarcerated teachers see their volunteer work as a titillating peek inside the jail's walls—fascinating, provocative "dinner party" fodder? It is important to scrutinize the motivations of educators whose fantasies for the prison classroom include enabling students to tell their stories in their own words. While increasing opportunities for self-representation may be a goal that they share with their incarcerated students, non-incarcerated teachers' motivations can stem in part from voyeurism. They might, in turn, perpetuate the unending gaze to which incarcerated people are already subjected and might succeed in simply feeding their own curiosity.

Conclusion

In this article I analyzed the nature of schooling in a women's jail by examining the fantasies that stakeholders brought to an alternative educational program. I specifically explained the ways fantasies of both empowerment and redemption work to obscure structural injustices, placing the onus of rehabilitation on incarcerated people and discounting their desires and needs.

Non-incarcerated volunteer teachers fantasized that their work would help disrupt codified narratives and structural biases within the criminal justice system, and that their efforts would work to "make change" within those repressive systems. The non-incarcerated teachers believed that by giving incarcerated students the opportunity to express themselves, that they could help them position themselves in broader, more complex terms. Yet, even educators with more expansive fantasies risk mirroring the controlling, coercive, and objectifying measures of the institution as a whole. As the example of self-representation revealed, calls for student voices, although they might seem "liberating," may serve to further objectify incarcerated people and exploit their experiences. So too, by over emphasizing student empowerment, non-incarcerated teachers may discount students' desire for concrete, skills-based courses, ironically circumscribing rather than expanding their choices.

In their article on sexuality education, Fine and McClelland (2006) introduced a framework of *thick desire*, arguing that even private, intimate desires are inextricably tied to laws, policies, and institutional structures. Like the young women highlighted in that article, the incarcerated students with whom I worked held "a stew of desires for opportunity, community, pleasure, and protection from

coercion and danger” (p. 326). Their desires—including their fantasies regarding education—were connected to broad institutional structures that curtailed their lives in myriad, complex ways. They were denied fundamental medical and mental health services and their basic nutritional needs often went unmet. Inadequate re-entry services meant that they would have few employment prospects once they were released and severely limited resources with which to support their families. They were often faced with homelessness, addiction, and poverty—intimate, individual needs that could nonetheless be tied to wider policies and structures.

Faced with these thick desires and living within an institution and a society that were not meeting those desires, many of these incarcerated students mapped their desires onto the educational space. They fantasized about a jail classroom that would fulfill their need for visibility, to become valued, contributing members of society and to be prepared for reentry. Fine and McClelland (2006) argued that as educators, we must acknowledge that students come to school with histories and requirements that reach well beyond the lessons that we teach and the curriculum that we hope to enact. It is also crucial to recognize that education cannot meet those thick desires and fantasies on its own—that broader structures must be interrogated, reimagined, and disrupted in order to address incarcerated people’s complex circumstances and needs. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge students’ thick desires and understand the ways in which they contribute to their fantasies for educational programs.

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Table 1 *Interview Participants*¹

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Age range	Role
Angel	black	female	20s	incarcerated student
David	black	male	20s	volunteer teacher
Dodson	white	male	50s	Department of Corrections administrator
Donna	black	female	50s	incarcerated student
Greta	white	female	20s	volunteer teacher
Mike	white	male	20s	volunteer teacher
Sara	Latina	female	30s	volunteer teacher
Shauna	multiracial	female	30s	incarcerated student
Stephen	white	male	20s	volunteer teacher
Thomas	white	male	40s	deputy warden

¹ The information included in this table was collected verbally during interviews with participants, all of whom self-identified their race/ethnicity and gender. Pseudonyms were assigned by the author and roles were identified by the author. Ages are approximate based on the author's knowledge of participants, rather than self-reported.

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A Symphony of Solidarity: Abolitionist Pedagogies and the Beloved Community

Johari Jabir

Social logics and practices that determine reward and punishment are at the root of compulsory imprisonment, but these logics, explained here as “carceral logics,” are embedded in nearly every social institution. Carceral logics can limit the liberatory vision of higher education programs in prisons. Abolitionist pedagogy confronts the limits of language embedded in carceral logics and replaces the vocabulary of alienation with a poetics of solidarity, of radical each-otherness. Each limitation is also an opportunity for improvisation, starting with how we reclaim our incarcerated students (understood in this article as “learning partners”), as members of the Beloved Community.

Keywords: *carceral logics, abolitionist pedagogy, radical each-otherness*

A Symphony of Solidarity

While there is a lower class, I'm in it
While there is a criminal element, I am of it
While there is a soul in prison, I am not free
– Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*

If I had my way, I'd tear the building down
– Clara Ward and the Clara Ward Singers, *If I Had My Way*

I

The road to Stateville Correctional Center is a revelation. After driving several miles on Highway 55 South, the exit onto Joliet Road is a long thoroughfare with gas stations and fast-food chains clustered at every intersection. Approximately one mile after passing these intersections I encounter Joliet High School, a sprawling new campus that says WELCOME to the children of Illinois who really matter. But there is no time to contemplate the educational disparities of Illinois on the road to Stateville, when in the very next block I see Lewis University, standing high off the road like “a city on a hill.”

The crosses etched onto the small buildings of Lewis University are a testament to the school's Catholic origins. These two institutions, Joliet High School and Lewis University, seem underwhelming when I make a right turn into the horseshoe driveway of Stateville Correctional Center. The driveway is a subtle climb, forcing my gaze upward toward the security building, which is shaped like a tiny chapel with a steeple on top. Medieval scenes start to bleed into modernity. An apparition of a tall male guard with a stern face and hands clasp like a priest sits in the watchtower atop the security building. Behind the security entrance stands the plantation-style “main house”. The popping sounds of gunshots from any one of the surrounding shooting ranges bounces off the barbed wire fences like an enemy attack from the First World War. I pause and think, “someone lives here.”

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<https://www.higheredinprison.org/journal/2-1-a-symphony-of-solidarity>

I arrive at Stateville as I do every Thursday morning for my class on “African Americans and the Civil War.” We begin our class with a round of check-ins and as usual, students turn the check-in question back onto me. In this moment I feel deeply moved that here, in one of the most monstrous tombs in American society, the students are so alive in their humanity that they remind me that we, as Black men, matter. Our mutual reflections of each other in the classroom cuts through, even if only temporarily, the barbwires that separate the inside from the outside. We matter to each other. “I am 55 today,” I tell them. They respond immediately with smiles, applause, laughter, and congratulations, though not for long. Quickly, they proceed to teach me about the illusory nature of “time.” If I could sum up their insights about time it would sound a lot like an observation made by George Jackson in his autobiographical letter from prison; “I’m pressed for time—all the time” (1970, p. 3). I never get used to what I see at Stateville: so much Black beauty and brilliance, bursting with love and aliveness even as here, each day is a walk through the valley of the shadow of death. According to the Illinois Department of Corrections Quarterly report, dated January 1, 2023, African Americans make up over half of the prison population, followed by Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Native Alaskan, then White (Illinois Department of Corrections, 2023, p.1a).

Even as the road to Stateville gives the illusion of a prison outside of city view, in reality, the warped mix of monasticism and state sponsored plantationism mirrors the violent precarity of Black life in America—although—it imprisons the poor and disenfranchised of every creed and color. Anti-Blackness is the lynchpin that fastens the racist logic of carcerality, but Black identity is not the sum total. The society’s relationship to incarceration and justice framed in vengeance is a reflection of how we think about ourselves in relationship with others. Much of this thinking is embedded in our primary social institutions.

II

The carceral Logic and Social Institutions

If religion was a thing, money could buy

The rich would live, and the poor would die

- Mahalia Jackson, *He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands*. 2:35

The paradox of education is precisely this -- that as one begins to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person.

- James Baldwin, *A talk to teachers*

Compulsory incarceration in America is premised upon a *carceral logic*, described here as a punitive reasoning and practice of social alienation and perpetual punishment (Nagel, 2022). Carceral logic is not limited to the prison walls but

rather the inverse: carceral logics permeate the fabric of social institutions that determine deservedness on the one hand and disposability on the other. Moreover, the connections between the free and the captured, land and water, prison space, and private property, make up the various carceral geographies that define the nation (Moran, 2014). In an ultimate sense, coming to terms with carceral logics is essential to understanding how society is organized in service of what the late bell hooks (2015) described as, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 4). And, I would add to this nexus of race, capitalism, and patriarchy, the role of religion; specifically, America’s brand of Christian theology.

With rare exception, America’s most influential religious institution, the Christian Church, espouses carceral logic in theologies of chosenness, which stems from the settler colonial roots of America (Fea, 2011). Not only did the early founders of America view their settling in the colonies as the promised land, but understanding themselves as the New Israel identified America as a divinely chosen nation. While it is easier to see how this aspect of America’s identity fares with white racism against Black, Indigenous, People of Color communities, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, it becomes clearer that people within BIPOC communities can also embrace and deploy carceral logics for the sake of post-racial diversity, success, and achievement. For example, one current popular Black gospel song champions, *favor ain’t fair* (Stratton, 2019). The broader context of the song celebrates the message that God shows favor to *some* but may not be fair to *others*, and such is the reality of God’s favor. These fictions of God’s favor, while they explain how some people are divinely deserving of the good life, they exemplify the limits of a race-only analysis. When used to justify chosenness and/or even favor, Christian theology can be weaponized against the poor in favor of the rich. Yet, the church’s complicit role in perpetuating carceral logics should not be conflated with religion itself, and certainly not with good religion, as enslaved Africans foretold. As the world’s greatest gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson sang, “if religion was a thing money could buy, the rich would live, and the poor would die” (Jackson, 1958, 2:35).

An important distinction must be made here with respect to religion: for the purposes of this article, religion is engaged as a human instinct, one that Charles H. Long (1986) describes as, “orientation, how human beings come to terms with their ultimate existence” (p.7). Thankfully, a number of grassroots religious organizations are attempting to counter the traditional approach to “prison ministries,” which have tended to reinforce the messages of unworthiness to persons incarcerated. Yet the specific attention to the historic violence of punishment and containment with respect to colonial Christianity is necessary. In their recent volume on abolition, Joshua Dubler and Vincent W. Lloyd (2020) state the urgency in naming the problem of America as a “Christian prison nation,” while also lifting up the possibility

that “religious ideas, practices, and communities play in destroying the mammoth carceral state and its attendant carceral culture,” replacing it with structures of “mutual care” (p. 3).

The church is not the only institution to espouse and practice carceral logics, as they are present within K-12 and postsecondary education systems. Despite the legal victory of *Brown v. Board* in 1954, public education remains an economically segregated reality in America (Breyer, 2019). The economic disparities that prevent a truly democratic public school system are reflective of district assignment, taxation, tracking policies, and zoning practices designed to protect the rich at the expense of policing the poor; all of which have direct bearing on the pathways of imprisonment (Williamson et al., 2021).

Pervert the Language: Punk the Frame

In Marlon Rigg’s 1991 music video, *Anthem, Affirmations, and Non, Je ne Regrette Rien* [no, I regret nothing] a voice chants repeatedly over the music, “Pervert the Language.” A common danger for doing solidarity work in collaboration with social institutions of power, such as the university or the church, is the casual way people are reduced to objects of liberal causes. Too often, this pitfall happens at the level of language, which has to be “perverted” —i.e., reflected on and changed — in ways that reframe prison education work in terms of collaboration, or even a matter of community. In an attempt to reach for the language and practice of solidarity, we might describe those we serve in higher education prison programs as “learning partners.” In the spirit of Paulo Freire (1970, 1983, 2012), we are all students working together in solidarity. Understanding those we serve through prison education programs as Learning Partners is one way to pervert the language even if such perversion resides as an “infra-politics”, animated in the grassroots organizing of anti-prison activism (Kelley, 1994, p. 8). In keeping with Robin D.G. Kelley’s discussion of “hidden transcripts” and “infra-politics” in *Race rebels: Culture, politics, and the Black working class* (1994), the terminology required to pursue grants and institutional support can contradict an abolitionist vernacular that moves us closer to the practice of solidarity; a proximity of solidarity articulated by Eugene Debbs, “while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free” (Salvatore, 1984, p. 295).

Higher education programs in prison are often challenged by the contradictions of sponsorship. Even as colleges and universities sponsor higher education classes in prisons, some of these same institutions have policies that do not allow formerly incarcerated students to enroll in degree programs on campus. There is also the problem of language. Our various knowledge tools are, by default, infused with forms of deficit framing. Trabian Shorters (2021) argues for Asset Framing, which he describes as a model that uses narrative to describe people in accordance with their assets and aspirations before noting the challenges and deficits

(p. 3). The students we serve in carceral contexts are people; people with names, families, pasts, and knowledge. Eddie Ellis's "Open letter to our friends on the question of language" (2007) explains the dehumanizing vocabulary deployed in public discourse, "We are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners, and felons — all terms devoid of humanness, which identify us as 'things' rather than as people" (p. 1). Attending to the terms we use is an important step in resisting the temptation of replication, of transporting the institutional values of hierarchy and exclusion into the carceral context. As the authors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, state concerning the ideological assumptions often embedded in anti-prison work, when we are not mindful of the words we use, even our best intentions mean, "people in prison always remain 'inmates' or 'prisoners,' just as women who experience gender violence are relegated to the status of 'victims' and their advocates and helpers become categorically more capable than the objects of their charity" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 46). I call attention to the troubling reality of language here knowing there is no perfect consensus of terms.

The call to pervert the language is one invested in the power to play against the assumed power of definitions and categories, currents of power that stand to reconstitute authoritative top-down acts of power. I draw from Marlon Rigg's (1991) notion of "pervert the language" to inspire a mindfulness-based practice of listening and even asking our learning partners how they feel about such language. In this instance, the perversion, the subtle act of undermining terms of erasure through conscious visibility, lies in the very asking of the questions as an act of consideration, a reminder to those we work with that their opinions matter about these issues.

There is no singular unanimous answer here. Similar, although not identical to the ways BIPOC communities internalize racism, dismantling colonial education and building emancipatory education requires time, patience, and space for our students to embrace learning and knowing on their terms.

Carceral logics are so pervasively embedded in public discourse, that working people, and the critical labor they perform, are rendered disposable. As an example, consider the early days of the COVID19 pandemic, and how public discourse from elected officials and healthcare specialists designated some forms of laborers as "essential workers." Yet, the labor inequities exposed during the pandemic revealed how quickly some of these "essential workers" were in fact, disposable when it came to protecting them, or providing them with basic healthcare. It was especially revelatory to see how teachers, particularly public education teachers working in the poorest neighborhoods had all along been serving as nurses, social workers, and other forms of care providers for children whose parents fell under the category of "essential workers."

As laboring workers in the enterprise of prison education, we are not simply a detached ensemble of individual personalities, intellectuals, writing comfortably from a perch outside the prison classrooms, but we are more akin to how Methodist

Bishop Halford E. Luccock describes a symphony: “No one can whistle a symphony. It takes an orchestra to play it” (1955, p. 1). The melody and rhythm that anchors our symphony is solidarity. In the tradition of Black music-making, we insist on improvisation, spontaneous creative meaning-making and mobilizing now and “until”.

III

Abolitionist Pedagogy: A Syllabi Mixtape

Abolitionist pedagogy does not simply begin in the classroom, but with the care and intention exercised in the crafting of a course syllabus. Stating course goals, objectives, and expectations are rudimentary for syllabi, but a poetics of care in the approach to syllabi-making is a way of tapping into the artist within all of us. Doing so embraces the energy of creativity as a bridge to our radical each-otherness. “Our suffering is our bridge to one another,” writes James Baldwin (1979, p. 110). The inclusion of poetry and song lyrics provides a personal touch of care and hope. Poetry and music perform a “magical” function on the page: they use words as modes of conjure, of summoning the power of *ashe* - the power to make things happen.

In the early days of the mixtape (circa. 1970/1980s), a carefully curated cassette tape playlist of selections was an act of affection and affirmation. A carefully curated syllabus is a step in replacing education systems of combat and caging with structures of care and compassion, a life-giving strategy that encourages life-long learning. As such, my improvisation of the syllabi mixtape has the potential to have a longer shelf life than the course itself. The bits of poetry, incantation of a song, or an image can linger like a sweet fragrance in the desert of disposability. Our learning partners are no exception to the fact that humans cannot live by ideas alone, but the aliveness of life asks for ways of connectedness, being together against alienation, which is a form of *love*.

In his efforts to redirect the Catholic Church’s priorities toward the poor, the martyred El Salvadorian Bishop, Oscar Romero (1980) used the Spanish word, *acompañar*, which means to accompany. Reflecting on Romero’s *acompañar*, Staughton Lynd (1997), in *Living inside our hope*, writes, “To Accompany another person is to walk besides that person; to become a companion; to be present” (p. 7). Thinking of presence in this context corresponds to Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2022) framing of Abolition as a form of presence in which the tearing down of structures that take away our lives are replaced with life-giving institutions. As such abolitionist pedagogy is the practice of presence as an accompanist to our learning partners. It is a radical practice of each-otherness. Thinking of accompaniment in a musical context invokes a phrase, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen,” from the title of an essay written by George Lipsitz (1990, p. 615). The phrase can be applied to teaching methods as a way to invert hierarchical structures of power. To be clear, however, the

prison learning space is not an automatic easy space of transformation, as an *a priori* reality can make certain concepts appear as blockages. For example, historicizing gender, specifically the construction of black masculinity has, on the one hand been challenging for some students. Wrestling with multiple forms of masculinity as a historically situated concept allowed students who initially rejected the frame to consider how the carceral context connects to historical constructions of race, gender, and nation.

Educators in prison contexts are often expected to use language as a position of authority *over* incarcerated students in order to appeal to carceral logics of blaming and shaming people for social problems. And yet, we are not bound by this framework in terms of how we choose to relate to our learning partners, we can see them not as problems to be solved but as unfolding human mysteries with infinite possibility. We are all people with dreams, passions, and innate yearnings to realize our God-given freedom. As Bettina Love (2019) writes,

The practice of abolitionist teaching is rooted in the internal desire we all have for freedom, joy, restorative justice (restoring humanity, not just rules), and to matter to ourselves, our community, our family, and our country with the profound understanding that we must demand the impossible. (p. 7)

For the course on African Americans in The Civil War, the syllabi was designed with headings from the lyrics of spirituals sung by the nation's first Black regiment, The First South Carolina Volunteers. A sense of surprise and curiosity emerged from this structural concept, as students made a new connection in terms of history, Black masculinity, soldiering and singing. Moreover, having these lyrics provided students with a framework by which to compose their own lyrics from their perspectives. Most of the lyrics were love songs and, like the people we studied, were concerned with 'freedom dreams,' to invoke Robin D.G. Kelley's (2002) landmark text on the Black radical imagination (p. 6).

IV

Love & Abolition: Toward the Beloved Community

Sitting in a jail cell on April 16, 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. composed his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which was the seed for his 1964 book, *Why we can't wait*. The "fierce urgency of now" King stressed in his speech at the 1963 March on Washington, is critically relevant here and now (King, p.1). As is often the case with popular sound bites of King's words, America seems to be convinced there could be a Beloved community without love itself. Here, I speak of love as a generative form of spiritual and political power, an embracing force of accompaniment, of participating in another's beautiful becoming. In his discussion of love and philosophy, Richard Gilman-Opalsky (2020) writes, "if love is the great power that philosophy proclaims it to be, then politics, which is fundamentally

concerned with power relations in the human world, has got to take up the question of love” (p. 83). People incarcerated are not the forgotten, as the tactics of state violence and punishment would have us think.

Instead, persons held captive in penal institutions comprise a critical mass of the “We” in the Beloved Community. Abolition cannot be realized without them, as they are us. Describing Dr. King’s notion of the Beloved Community, Betina Love (2019) writes [the beloved community] is “a community that strives for economic, housing, racial, health, and queer justice and citizenship for all” (p.8). The daily suffering and dying of people incarcerated at the hands of the state is neither individual nor isolated, but is our social death, to invoke Orlando Patterson’s (1985) discussion of social death and slavery (p. 38). Singular state-by-state prison reforms give the illusion of progress, and reformist arguments are especially popular among well-meaning celebrities. For example, influenced by the advocacy of Kim Kardashian, former president Donald Trump signed the First Step Act in December of 2018, which, on the one hand limits mandatory minimums for low-level drug offenses, allows for retroactive sentence reductions for individuals incarcerated under the 100 to 1 crack cocaine disparity, and expands services of rehabilitation for federal prisons (Federal Sentencing Alliance, 2019, p. 36). On the other hand, not only do such reforms become part of the brand of a celebrity like Ms. Kardashian, but these reforms occlude the wave of racial violence unleashed by Mr. Trump’s rhetoric during and following his presidency. The surge in police violence against some groups in society and the criminalization of homelessness and reproductive care are directly related to the carceral crisis. In addition, several corporate institutions ranging from phone technology companies and privately owned clothing manufacturers profit from the misery of our learning partners.

The work of prison education, a labor of Love and Abolition cannot afford to wait for the promise of tomorrow’s liberal reforms or celebrity advocacy. The authors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, make clear a point made earlier in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois:

It is not enough to release people from chains. Just as Du Bois challenged the notion that slavery could be explained as a discrete institution, leaving intact existing political and economic frameworks, abolitionists today call into question the prevailing assumption that mass incarceration can be effectively addressed without analyzing the root causes of injustice and the impact of other systems of oppression, including, in the first place, global capitalism. (Davis et al., 2022, p. 46)

Higher education in prisons has a *higher* calling, a moral imperative that does not simply seek to create successful prison education programs, by which I mean replicating the status quo power relations of institutions of higher education. Michael Lerner’s (2019) mediation on “Revolutionary love” is what I have in mind here (p. 40). The pernicious global capitalism and xenophobia is a politics designed

to produce isolation, violence, and death. This can only be replaced by a born-again socialism anchored in love, compassion, and kindness toward each other and the planet. As such, higher education prison programs are important practices toward replacing learning cages with classrooms of compassion, replacing social institutions of profit and dominating power with sanctuaries for people and the planet ultimately resulting in a world free of a nationalized prison system and even the need for prison education. Integrating our learning partners into an immediate vision of the Beloved Community expands toward more openness and inclusion, rather than defaulting into ideological positions that contract inward to the point of exclusion. Understood as an Abolitionist vision of radical imagination, prison education *could* be an invitation to work with guards, administrators, and other actors in the carceral space, as well as trauma specialists, yoga instructors, and radical priests from various faith traditions. Examples of Black music throughout the long fetch of Black struggle are useful in the continued vision and practice of Abolition, Revolutionary Love, and the Beloved Community.

The lyrics of a slave folk spiritual that state, “*oh freedom over me. And before I’ll be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my lord and be free, and also, no more auction block for me, many thousands gone*” (Herder, 2001, 60), enslaved Africans sang about freedom before Lincoln signed his Emancipation Proclamation, and they carried their ancestors into that imagined freedom. Following the death of King, as the society was beginning to renege on the incremental progress made during the modern Civil Rights era, Black musicians were singing of a society where, “everybody is somebody,” as was the founding creed of Rev. James Cleveland’s Gospel Music Workshop of America (Marovich, 2021), founded in Detroit, 1968. Moreover, Curtis Mayfield’s lyrics performed a radical hope for a democratic society,

*People get ready,
There’s a train comin’
You don’t need no baggage
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the wheels hummin’
Don’t need no ticket
Just get on board
(Mayfield, 1965)*

The image of the train harkens back to the music of slavery and the role of songs in abolition, where folk spirituals were coded by enslaved Africans and the Underground Railroad. Hearing Black music in this way is to envision radical possibilities manifested in *real time*. Such a vision resonates with Paul Gilroy’s (1993), “politics of fulfillment,” which he describes as, “the notion that a society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left

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unaccomplished” (p. 112). Realizing the radical promise of democracy involves the pulling down of its strongholds, prison structures and carceral logics that justify systemic social alienation and ruthless practices of profit. It means, in Abolitionist terms put forth by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), being “present rather than absent, building life-affirming institutions” through relationships of love” (p. 51). Thinking of the first generation of Black sharecroppers in Reconstruction and after, the limits facing higher education in prisons entails confronting our limitations with improvisation.

Bishop Oscar Romero said, “there are many things that can only be seen through the eyes that have cried” (qtd. in Williams, 2022, p. 27). Inevitably, those heartfelt moments will emerge when our learning partners look into our eyes as they describe the inhumane conditions of the cell, the unfit food and water, and their exploitation by communication corporations. When this happens, we can look back into their eyes and affirm Clara Ward’s (1962) gospel song, “If I had my way, I’d tear the building down.”

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Prison Pedagogies of Place: Leveraging Space, Time, and Institutional Knowledge in Higher Education in Prison Teaching

Logan Middleton

By exploring qualitative accounts of how prison educators teach on the inside, I argue that the emplaced dimensions of higher education in prison classrooms afford rich opportunities for innovative and collaborative pedagogies. In particular, I trace how incarcerated students leverage their spatial, temporal, and experiential knowledges of the prison for the sake of more holistic and innovative learning. These accounts, in turn, provide critical insights into how prison educators can better consider place alongside students when teaching in everyday higher education in prison contexts.

Keywords: *pedagogy, teaching, learning, place, space*

As higher education in prison continues to grow as an academic field and as an educational enterprise, it is important to maintain a focus on the contextual dynamics that comprise the “place” of higher education in prison (HEP). Only through continuing to research the situated activities of how educators and students teach and learn together on the inside—and in the nested contexts of HEP, the prison, and the carceral state—can we better trace how these practices coalesce to make up the work of higher education in prison. Doing so responds both to Castro and Brawn’s (2017) call for “emplaced praxis” and Slater’s observation from the inside that prisons are “underestimated as sites of learning and knowledge acquisition” (Castro et al., 2015, p. 25).

In this article, I argue that the emplaced dimensions of HEP classrooms afford rich opportunities for innovative and collaborative pedagogies. Place is a useful lens for exploring how people teach and learn in prisons because it can illuminate “how location creates possibilities for world-revealing and world-making practices” (Carlo, 2016, p. 60). Even in sites of extreme dehumanization, the materiality of place can open avenues for critical learning and engagement. Through qualitative methods, I detail how incarcerated students work with prison educators to leverage the unique spatial, temporal, and interpersonal aspects of life on the inside to bolster teaching and learning in HEP contexts. The aims of this intervention are threefold: (1) to extend and ground notions of place in HEP scholarship through qualitative approaches; (2) to provide more situated glimpses at how people teach and learn in prison education environments; and (3) to encourage higher education in prison scholars to push beyond anecdotal and reflective methods in their research.

Inside Teaching on the Inside: A Literature Review

We cannot understand the material structures of the prison—and how the spaces of prison education operate—without a clear sense of what prisons do. As “death-making institutions” (Kaba, 2021), prisons warehouse millions of Black, Brown, Indigenous, poor, queer, trans, and/or disabled people. These structurally violent sites work with other institutions of policing across the prison-industrial complex to construct barriers between society and those imprisoned within them.

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Even on the inside, incarcerated people's speaking, writing, and sociality are "isolate[d], silence[d], and contain[ed]" by what Cavallaro et al. (2016)¹ describe as the Carceral Communications Framework, networks of discursive and administrative control (para. 4). These means of physical isolation, surveillance, and punishment produce social death, those networked processes that alienate (incarcerated) people, destroy their personhood, and sever their relational bonds (Guenther, 2013, p. xx).

In these regards, the prison's material structures and bureaucratic regulations are designed to obliterate incarcerated people's relationship to space, time, and other people. As narrated by Davis III (2018), an imprisoned student at Wesleyan University's Center for Prison Education, these mechanisms of control entail extreme surveillance, "random stop and frisk searches," and segregation from other incarcerated students (p. 3). Analogously, political prisoner Ray Luc Levasseur observes that the state power of the prison "works within the temporal logic of endless sameness—a grinding repetition of motion, sound, and vision that convinces the imprisoned that their very subjectivity is in question" (as cited in Rodríguez, 2006, p. 213). This particular temporality is only one among many in the prison according to Wilson (2004), who notes that incarcerated people "move to a variety of temporal rhythms" (p. 79): the rigid day-to-day schedules set by prison administration, the progression of calendar days, months, and years; events related to court dates and legal appeals, and unstructured time spent in their cells. Each of these temporalities regulates how incarcerated people navigate their worlds in everyday contexts.

Prison education, by contrast, is broadly described as a generative, collaborative, and humanizing endeavor (Castro et al., 2015; Davis III, 2019; Hall, et al., 2019; Perry & Roy, 2019). I take issue with this broad-based characterization as prison education is often populated by white saviorism, carceral logics, and neoliberal bootstrap narratives about education. Nonetheless, HEP literature broadly outlines what spaces of prison education are and what they should do. Many of these purposes have to do with the affective dimensions of social engagement afforded by educational programming. Such spaces are constructed by the critical and dialogic exchange of ideas among participants (Roy, 2018, p. 38). Though not exclusive to prison classrooms, these sites engender potential for "collective and meaningful" engagement (Jacobi, 2010, p. 71), in which incarcerated people can "create space for individual and collective agency and solidarity" (Hinshaw & Jacobi, 2015, p. 86). Individuals can co-develop strategies to combat the isolation of prisons themselves (Parchuc, 2018), and in doing so, leverage the social and collaborative dimensions of

¹Throughout this article, I draw on the writing of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. It is crucial to center the experiences of these individuals not simply as a matter of representation but because these folks have institutional knowledge about prisons and prison education that outside people do not.

education to cultivate relationships, circulate texts, and build communities (Jacobi, 2016; Hall et al., 2019; Roy & Perry, 2019). As spaces are co-created and constituted by the practices that transpire inside of them (Enoch, 2008), writing, literacy, and education are processes that can make carceral environments like prisons more hospitable.

Spaces of prison education are not just empty sites of learning but are themselves composed by a range of practices, aims, and goals. At the same time, however, our (spatial) understandings of prison education must be more situated, expansive, and populated by people and their everyday practices if we are to cultivate more rich theorizations of prison pedagogies. I am particularly guided by Castro and Brawn's (2017) call for "an emplaced praxis that considers the situatedness and lived realities of participants, the construction of educational space, and negotiations of power and ethics in the prison classroom" (p. 102). As the authors elaborate, our stories of teaching must be enriched by and indebted to the particular dynamics of the spaces in which people create knowledge as well as the fine-grained details of their lives. This call is echoed by Barrett et al. (2019), who speak to the dynamism of HEP contexts where people are always engaging in affective, material, and social practices in their learning. Just as critically, Slater (2015) encourages prison education practitioners and scholars to take stock of how incarcerated people engage in collective study across informal spaces outside of the classroom (as cited in Castro et al., p. 25). These accounts direct us toward better making sense of those situated interactions among people and place on the inside. Learning always extends beyond the formalized space, time, and practices of the classroom, and so we must develop more nuanced understandings of how people work within and around the constraints of the prison.

Theoretical Framework: Space, Place, and Situated Practices

To advance the lines of thinking developed by Castro and Brawn (2017), Barrett et al. (2019), and Castro et al. (2015), I draw upon theories of space and place from geography and adjacent fields. Critically, these frameworks serve to highlight how lived environments play multiscalar, yet always-present roles in how "geographies of (in)justice significantly affect our lives" (Soja, 2010, p. 20), ranging from the planetary to the bodily. Given the reach of the carceral state—from the prison-industrial complex to the prison to carceral logics—the malleability of these theories illuminates how interactions among actors and their material environments can produce situated acts of meaning-making in carceral settings. Applying such notions of space and place also enables me to foundationally acknowledge prisons as sites of violence and recognize how their constraints can open possibilities for collaborative teaching.

While both "space" and "place" are useful to this exploration of how HEP educators and students teach and learn, it is first necessary to parse distinctions

between these concepts. Following Massey (2005), “[S]pace is the product of interrelations” and exists neither “prior to identities/entities [nor] their relations” (p. 10). In this regard, space is not just empty terrain, but is rather composed of and populated by interactions between people, tools, cultures, and practices. These understandings of space from geography extend to place as well. Space is “always unfinished and open” (p. 111), but places are “spatio-temporal events” (p. 131) located in particular contexts. Put differently, place maintains a situatedness, specificity, and experiential uniqueness (Massey, 1994) that differentiates it from space.

Moreover, place not only exists in, and as reciprocal relationship with the people and practices that comprise it, but it is transformed by such activities as well. As Lueck (2021) contends, “[Places] are (re)shaped by the trajectories of occupants as well as visitors, tourists, and researchers that pass through them” (p. 118). Centering such multidirectional relationships between people, places, and movement is crucial for making sense of the mutually constitutive connections between people’s actions and their environments. Per Carlo (2016), place “influences—and maybe even generates—communicative acts” (p. 62). We cannot understand how people enact meaning-making practices, themselves “actions with a history” (Scollon, 2001, p. 5), without investigating how place shapes these contextual engagements.

For these reasons, I find place to be a suitable lens through which we can more comprehensively theorize prison education. The following analyses highlight how college-in-prison instructors and students draw upon place-based expertise to enact situated teaching and learning.

People, Places, and Things: A Research Methodology in Six Parts

The stories in this article emerge from a larger, qualitative, IRB-approved study² designed to explore the relationships among prison educators’ literacy practices, their teaching lives, and prison abolition. Throughout this project, I conducted 33 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 15 Midwest Prison Education Project (MPEP) educators who worked with students at Eastern Correctional Facility (ECF) across credit-bearing and extracurricular programs.³ This research was conducted between June and December 2020.

Research Site

The site for this research was the Midwest Prison Education Program. A self-described “comprehensive college-in-prison program” (Midwest Prison Education Program, 2021, p. 5), MPEP is affiliated with the College of Education at

² The overarching study for this research is IRB #20913, approved June 8, 2020.

³ The Midwest Prison Education Program, Eastern Correctional Facility, and Midwest University are all pseudonyms.

Midwestern University (MU). The bulk of MPEP's on-site programming is located at Eastern Correctional Facility (ECF), 45 minutes away from the university.

MPEP is relatively small; around 70 students participate in the program in classes that average 12-15 students in size. In spite of these numbers, MPEP hosts an array of curricular and extracurricular learning options. For-credit course offerings have included classes on machine learning, Islamic architecture, business policy, Russian revolutions, Latinx social movements, and more (Midwest Prison Education Program, 2021, p. 16). So too is there a breadth of non-credit bearing programs that students can opt to participate in: writing, math, and science workshops and a bilingual language education initiative, among others.

Although there are a handful of tenured faculty, tenure-track faculty, and adjunct faculty who teach with MPEP, the majority of the program's educators are Midwestern University graduate students. These individuals, whose home disciplines include social work, mathematics, sociology, Spanish, history, and more, are often drawn to the program through their interests in community engagement and social justice.

Lastly, it is crucial to mention some of the structural and interpersonal dynamics present among students within MPEP. ECF is a medium-security men's-designated prison, and many incarcerated individuals, largely Black and Brown, have spent a great deal of time locked up there. Many MPEP students have known each other for years. Some students participate in the same courses and extracurriculars, work together, and live together in the same cell blocks. Others have earned associate degrees together at ECF, as MPEP requires students to have accumulated 60 credit hours of lower-division coursework before applying to the program. These relationships among students, and between students and educators, are more longitudinal than similar relationships in mainstream universities and are key to teaching and learning within the program.

Researcher's Role

I worked with MPEP on the inside and outside for five years. While I first served as an on-site writing consultant with the program's writing and math tutoring initiative, I went on to coordinate and facilitate writing workshops at ECF. In my MPEP work outside of the prison, I facilitated cross-program teacher training and participated in service work pertaining to program governance. Across these roles, I cultivated close relationships with MPEP students and educators. Unsurprisingly, I knew and had worked with many of my study's participants through our collective teaching in MPEP. These shared experiences certainly deepened the breadth and depth of my data collection. More importantly, they helped me develop a felt, multidimensional sense of the program and to render its actors' accounts with fidelity, depth, and care.

It was for these reasons that I selected MPEP as the site for this research. I felt particularly well-equipped to carry out this study due to my administrative and pedagogical familiarity with the program, my connections with MPEP educators and students, and my understanding of the space of the prison itself. Logistically speaking, MPEP was also the closest HEP program to Northwestern University, which was an important criterion for research site selection due to my limited travel resources as a graduate student.

Focal Participants

In this article, I zoom in on the teaching accounts of two MPEP educators: Simone and AB. I chose to focus on these participants because their recollections of teaching at ECF speak most to the spatial, temporal, and interpersonal affordances of prison education. So too have they accumulated a range of pedagogical experience within and outside of MPEP. While both had taught for four years in MPEP, Simone had taught for 10 years on the outside and AB had accumulated over 20 years of teaching experience in mainstream university settings. In MPEP alone, Simone and AB have taught credit-bearing courses; served as math and writing tutors; facilitated math, science, and writing workshops; and led computer programming sessions and reading groups. This cross-disciplinary range of expertise helped each cultivate responsive and expansive teaching repertoires. As STEM researchers and instructors, I believe that Simone and AB's disciplinary ways of knowing conditioned them to approach problem-solving through collaborative and innovative means.

Currently an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at California State University, East Bay, Simone worked with MPEP as a math graduate student at MU. Between tutoring with MPEP's Writing and Math Partners, facilitating math workshops, and leading credit-bearing pre-calculus and calculus courses at the prison, she spent hundreds of hours working with students on mathematical problem solving. Although she focuses on mathematics in research and teaching, Simone completed her undergraduate degree in education. She taught across a variety of math contexts in which she has worked concertedly with students in small-group settings.

AB is an MU Professor Emeritus of Mechanical Science and Engineering. He is also a visiting scientist at the Cornell High Energy Synchrotron Source (CHESS), an NSF-supported research facility whose personnel conduct "synchrotron radiation ... in Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Environmental and Materials Sciences" (Cornell High Energy Synchrotron Source, 2021). At CHESS, he conducts experiments and data analysis pertaining to the performance of structural materials used in aerospace applications. While working in these contexts, AB collaborated with MPEP's Math and Science Workshops initiative, facilitating workshops on "The Mathematics of Tuning" and "X-Ray Diffraction of Structural Materials." He has also helped facilitate sessions with MPEP's Python programming working group.

Data Collection

I used a three-tiered approach to qualitative interviewing in which I interviewed participants up to three times, enabling me to tailor subsequent interview questions to the participant at hand (Flowers, 2019). I solicited pedagogical and curricular documents from educators that they used in their MPEP classrooms, specifically. To triangulate and deepen the richness of my data (Kinloch, Burkhard, & Penn, 2017), I invited my participants to share with me any syllabi, assignment prompts, lesson plans, and notes they had used in their teaching at the prison. Doing so granted participants agency in the research process, helped me honor their pedagogical expertise in our interviews, and contributed to the collaborative ethic of the project. Each successive interview I conducted with participants built upon their previous responses and contributed to greater depth of inquiry and conversation across the study. Importantly, these methods were developed in response to COVID-19. Due to the pandemic, all interviews were held remotely and video recorded through Zoom.

The first set of interviews I conducted were modified life history interviews (Pritchard, 2016; Vieira, 2016). During these sessions, I invited participants to share experiences related to schooling, education, and their literacy practices and lives. This work enabled me to holistically understand individuals as complex, multifaceted people always operating in the context of socio-historical trends (Sheridan-Rabineau, 2009; Vieira 2016). The second round of interviews I conducted were stimulated elicitation interviews (Prior, 2004; Durst, 2019). Here, I constructed follow-up interview protocols around individual MPEP educators' teaching documents in addition to data from my first round of interviews. As Prior (2004) observes, stimulated elicitation aids interviewees in "trigger[ing] and support[ing] memory as well as serving as a source for new reflection" (p. 189). By bringing into interviews select teaching materials supplied by participants in advance—notes, syllabi, and assignment sheets—this method assisted interviewees in recalling the situated dynamics of their teaching work at the prison in our discussions. The final round of interviews centered higher education in prison and prison abolition more broadly. Through these conversations, I asked participants to reflect upon how they navigated state power in their teaching work at ECF and posed questions relating to the overarching goals of HEP and abolition. These data demonstrated to me how carceral logics shape teaching and learning in prison education environments.

I constructed my data collection practices in conjunction with critical disability studies methodologies by trying to displace what Kerschbaum and Price (2017) call an "ideology of a normative bodymind" (p. 99). Although disability rarely came up in interviews, I prioritized approaches to qualitative research that centered disability as ever-present, embodied, and material phenomena (Kerschbaum & Price, 2017). To account for the manifold ways people read and process

information, I sent my interview protocols in advance (Miller, 2016, p. 38). During interviews, I verbally posed questions to interviewees and typed them through Zoom's chat function as a means of honoring the "multiple ways of knowing, producing knowledge, and representing that knowledge" specific to disabled people,⁴ and especially neurodivergent people (Jackson, 2020, para. 15). These practices helped foster, per Hubrig and Osorio (2020), a "culture of access ... that prioritizes access for nonnormative bodyminds" (p. 96).

Data Analysis

I approached data analysis through narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It was through storytelling that many interviewees narrated their own educational and literate trajectories as well as their teaching experiences. These accounts were often interspersed with considerations of place: a recounting of the physical location of teaching, when it happened, who was in the room, and what they did. As such, my analysis was guided by looking and listening for such spatio-temporal events, or moments in which relationships crystallized between people, place, and practices. I found this holistic approach to be more instructive for my analyses than applying coding schemas, which would have directed me toward individual, decontextualized codes as opposed to composite portraits of rich activity (Patel, 2019, p. 271). I also engaged in processes of member reflection with my interviewees (Tracy, 2010; San Pedro, 2019). After sharing completed interview transcripts with participants, many provided clarifications, revisions, and marginal comments. These exchanges helped participants re-contextualize their teaching experiences and yielded new information relevant to the study. I also sent drafts of this manuscript to Simone and AB to solicit their feedback. These engagements with participants contributed to the co-creation of knowledge instead of just confirming that my own interpretations and analyses were "correct" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). These processes additionally functioned as a matter of ongoing consent. As Ferris (2018) observes, consent in research ethics must be negotiated and continual, not bound up in a single consent form.

Limitations

Place is incredibly situated, continually produced through the dispositions, habits, and practices of the people within it. Yet due to COVID-19, I was unable to deploy ethnographic methods at ECF and thus, this article does not feature fine-grained narratives about how MPEP educators and students leverage the constraints of the prison to engage in educational work. Relatedly, the perspectives of MPEP

⁴ I am intentionally using the framing of "disabled people" because it is politicized terminology that these authors use in their work. They prefer this framing as opposed to "people with disabilities" because they see disability as central to and inextricable from identity for disabled people.

students are nowhere to be found. These individuals possess valuable contextual knowledge of what's possible (or not) in these spaces and how best to navigate their constraints. And so even as I was able to access traces of emplacement in prison classrooms through the smooth computer windows of Zoom interviews—material and spatial considerations are still present in digital research—this study would have been more rich and equitable had I been able to talk to students, in person, about some of their place-based practices.

How, then, did MPEP educators navigate these place-based constraints with students? In the following sections, I take a long view of how Simone and AB enacted pedagogies that allowed students to harness the depth of their interpersonal relationships with each other—and their institutional knowledge of the prison—to successfully learn.

Simone: Place, Pedagogies, and People

Because on-site programming in the MPEP is a relatively small-scale affair, Simone came to know students and their interests fairly well. In addition to conversations about mathematics, she routinely talked to students about the MPEP work they were doing in other programmatic contexts, such as community anti-violence facilitation, bilingual language learning, and more. Aside from deepening her working relationships with MPEP students, forging these multifaceted connections helped her obtain a more rounded view of incarcerated and nonincarcerated students at large.

This relationship building also helped Simone co-create responsive math programming in MPEP. Curricular offerings in math and STEM topics were not widely available when Simone began her work in the program. Yet through her ongoing work and connections with students, she came to understand that many were interested in learning calculus. In turn, Simone worked with others to create math programming in MPEP. Over the following years, she and other math graduate students co-developed and co-taught algebra, pre-calculus, and calculus courses at the prison. In doing so, they ensured that these curricula mirrored those of analogous math classes at MU, something that Simone found important since many MPEP students had expressed concerns that they were receiving “easier” or “watered-down” versions of campus courses due to deficit thinking around incarcerated people (Dean et al., 2019). Therefore, she used the same assignments and materials in her math courses at the prison as those she used at Midwestern University.

At the same time, Simone's goal was not simply to reproduce MU courses at ECF. As she explained in interviews, she strove to adapt and improve these curricular offerings through her work in MPEP, especially given the connections she maintained with students. For instance, the pre-calculus course that Simone taught at MU was a large lecture with hundreds of students. Due to the size of the class,

peer learning was fairly limited to iClicker remote activities and pair-and-share discussions. On campus, she was also bound to the pre-calculus curriculum of her department as she was required to use shared lecture notes to ensure that examples were consistent across course sections.

Teaching the same class at ECF to a much smaller group of students opened an array of pedagogical possibilities. Due to time and technological constraints, for example, Simone typed up her lecture notes and printed them out to give to students at the beginning of her MPEP math courses instead of delivering lectures during class. These shared notes served as a starting point for students and enabled more time for collaborative problem-solving as opposed to mainstream transmission models of (math) education. Rich discussions also transpired in special, dedicated times for student support. Because many MPEP students had limited experience in math coursework, Simone and other math educators worked to create robust office hour sessions. These pedagogical supports, in turn, can be directly traced to the space of the prison and the place of the MPEP classroom. Since e-mail correspondence was not an option for MPEP students, this mathematical work had to be conducted in the form of additional in-person sessions, an offer that most students took Simone up on. In offering these scaffolds, Simone hoped that instructors, facilitators, and tutors across MPEP programs would be able to support students' emerging trajectories into and through calculus.

And so even as prisons restrict the movement, sociality, and the formation of relationships (Cavallaro et al., 2016), Simone still managed to leverage the interpersonal dynamics created by the prison to cultivate innovative pedagogies. One story Simone offered was particularly striking on this front. She explained that she had read about physics instructors who implemented a "two-stage quiz" in one of their classes, in part because students performed poorly on the first few quizzes of the semester. This revised approach to test-taking, however, built collaboration into the process. In the two-stage quiz, students completed the quiz per usual and turned it in, only to be handed the same quiz again immediately after. During this second attempt, students could talk to their peers to complete the same assignment. The grade students ultimately earned was the average of both quizzes.

Simone stated that two-stage quizzes would not have been possible to implement in her mainstream MU math courses, in part due to the curricula in place. But she wanted to try out this approach to assessment in her MPEP calculus course at ECF. She recalled that MPEP students responded well to the two-stage quiz model, pointing out that such a collaborative approach to test-taking made assessment feel less high-stakes for students because it promoted communal learning at the expense of individual performance. In fact, her expectations for the two-stage quiz were exceeded in the classroom:

We had the next exam, and students took their exam and turned it in. And the students who were done went, and they were waiting in the hall, and, I think somebody actually asked if they could see a blank copy because they were doing the same thing out there, even though it wasn't for credit.

While Simone obviously deserves credit for her flexible pedagogy here, my own experiences with MPEP tell me that we should also attribute this ethos of collaboration to how MPEP students navigate place. At its best, prison education can facilitate rich, collective processes of cohorted learning amongst students. As MPEP is a relatively small program, many of its students have cultivated deep, longitudinal relationships and a spirit of interdependence in their work. In fact, a handful of MPEP students who enrolled in Simone's math curricula addressed these dynamics of collaboration in a conference paper they co-authored with Simone and another MPEP math educator. As members of MPEP's inaugural calculus cohort, the co-authors describe in the paper how they relied heavily on each other to complete math problems, "[seeking] each other out in their living and recreation areas to study together and work through challenging [material]" (Dean et al., 2019). As Bryan, one of the MPEP student co-writers articulates, those in the cohort banded together to deepen their calculus learning by re-clarifying mathematical ideas and processes to one another; these moments of re-teaching helped forge a strong ethos of "camaraderie and community" (Dean et al., 2019). Though it is not my aim to romanticize the interpersonal connections that incarcerated people build with each other, the affective bonds that incarcerated people cultivate on the inside certainly played a role in the success of Simone's pedagogies, as stated directly by her student collaborators themselves.

AB: Repurposing Space, Reappropriating Tools

Given his expertise in engineering and computer programming, AB found a home in MPEP's Math and Science Workshops. In this program, he facilitated science workshops and worked to cultivate Python programming expertise with interested students. AB and his collaborators ran STEM workshop sessions like semi-structured, open-lab environments. He would provide a bit of context and instruction before turning students loose to tinker with coding in their own projects. In the case of the Python Programming Group, participants had met on and off since 2014 (MPEP, 2021, p. 12), and so there was a wide range of Python and programming expertise among members. When AB started working with the group in 2017, he encountered some students who were novice coders and others who had become proficient in Python and other programming languages. Throughout these lab sessions, he'd bounce between small groups to assist with coding projects. As AB observed, these workshops resembled his own "journeyman type of training"—how he described his mechanical engineering apprenticeships in which he was paired with senior engineers to learn how to install industrial equipment. Newer participants in the Python Programming Group were able to receive more directive instruction, but

many others used the time to work on their own self-directed endeavors. Between the small-scale setting of MPEP's computer lab and students' relative independence in working on projects, AB pointed out that these experiences reminded him of when he mentored graduate student researchers as a professor.

What was particularly exciting for AB in working with this group was how more seasoned students demonstrated increased autonomy and responsibility for the programming sessions over time. AB spoke to the state of the open labs just before the COVID-19 led to MPEP's suspension at ECF:

The senior programmers had just taken over the programming lab. I mean, really taken it over. I was with the intro group, and the senior programmers were just coming and starting to do the instruction, spontaneous instruction. A collaborative moving ahead. I think that willingness to see the more experienced students really step forward in education is something special.

Given the long-term relationships among MPEP students, it is unsurprising that these social connections outside of the classroom contribute to a heightened sense of camaraderie inside of it. AB himself deeply values this spirit of collaboration, noting "At the synchrotron facility where I work, nobody does anything alone. Impossible. You can't accomplish anything alone."

These dynamics were on full display in an experiment that AB helped facilitate at ECF in a math workshop titled "X-Ray Diffraction of Structural Materials." AB knew he wanted to dedicate this workshop to conducting an experiment with students, especially since that was how he had previously covered such topics in mainstream educational settings. Typically, he would have outside students use laser pointers to shine polychromatic light on DVDs and CDs. Because different colors of light have different wavelengths, the experiment allows students to measure and calculate the spacing of tracks on DVD and CD disc tracks. In doing so, students learn about the foundations of diffraction through hands-on, mathematical means.

Of course, AB recognized that the constraints of the prison would make this experiment difficult to enact. Given how materials such as books and articles are subject to extreme surveillance in carceral settings, he knew that it would be near impossible to bring a laser pointer into the prison. Yet, he came to realize he could use white light for the experiment at ECF instead of using a laser pointer. AB also considered the math expertise of the focal students with whom he would be working. As he explained, MPEP students had the required trigonometry expertise to carry out the experiment. Even given this substitution of tools and the general precarity of the prison environment at ECF, AB felt that the experiment would work successfully in MPEP.

What ultimately made the experiment successful at ECF, however, had less to do with AB's pedagogical expertise and more with the place-based knowledge of

MPEP students. Here, I will let AB's narration of the experiment speak for itself (for spatial and diagrammatic clarification, see Figure 1 on page 119):

We were trying to grab stuff around the computer lab and figure out how to put something together and make it work. So it was just people talking together: "Let's try this, let's do this, let's try this, let's do this." Maybe there were some rough sketches on the board, but it was just fashioning things. We had a CD and a DVD from the office downstairs. They were able to set up the projector and stack books in front of the projector in order to get this thin slit of light, and then they had a pen that one stack of books was sitting on. I had a little paper protractor to measure angles, printed on a piece of paper on a handout. And so you laid that piece of paper on the table. The CD or DVD is resting on the pen perpendicular to the table, and then the light hits it, and a rainbow shines down on the—that's diffraction, right by the tracks. But it is diffracted, and you see multiple red lines, multiple blue lines. So they picked a line, and we measured the angle. After a little programming, a little Python, they assessed the track spacing.

There are many noteworthy aspects to AB's narration here. Foremost is how MPEP students leveraged their spatial and institutional awareness in conducting this experiment. The resource room in which students worked was one of three locations in the education building in which MPEP students spent a concerted amount of time. The students who participated in AB's workshop knew the room's contents and its spatial configuration exceedingly well, certainly more than AB and ECF staff. Because of this know-how, MPEP students knew what supplies were needed to improvise the experiment and where they were. Secondly, it is crucial to draw attention to the material means through which the experiment's participants "make do" with adapted technologies. It goes without saying that digital projectors, stacks of books, and pens are not the default tools and items used in conducting x-ray diffraction experiments. Yet both MPEP students and AB made use of everyday items, from annotated pieces of paper to writing utensils, to complete this mathematical work.

While instructors always need to enact flexible pedagogies, these circumstances for learning at ECF—in which everyday objects and sociality are prohibited—are extreme. And so, I would contend that the way MPEP students and educators maintain an adaptive, nimble, and yet still curious approach to learning is especially unique to carceral settings. Though I am loath to say that this unfolding of scientific improvisation could not happen anywhere else besides MPEP, I believe incarcerated students' spatial and embodied knowledge of their surroundings is what made this experiment so successful.

AB seemed to think so too. Reflecting on the experiment, he was quick to give credit to MPEP students. He also expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for their collaborative ethos, noting:

The coolest part was when they were just working together, setting it up, putting it together, cobbling together this experience. And collecting the data would have typically taken three hours, right? They got the data collected in 15 minutes by putting a pencil down, putting books on top of the pencil, hanging this disc, getting these little rainbow patterns. Wow.

Prison Pedagogies: A Discussion

These narratives provide a rich account of how two MPEP educators mobilized place-based dimensions of teaching in prison contexts. Not only do both instructors build their curricula in response to the material and temporal constraints of the prison, but they also do so alongside the incarcerated students with whom they work. In her implementation of the two-stage quiz, Simone cultivated teaching practices that encouraged students to make use of one of their greatest resources for the assignment—their longstanding connections as incarcerated people and learners. In AB's experiment, students reconfigured the tools and space of the room to successfully complete a light diffraction experiment. Across both stories, we do not see conventional pedagogies-in-action: assignments, activities, and subject matter. Instead, we see Simone and AB's stances of openness, flexibility, and improvisation, which helped to establish a learning structure in which MPEP students could thrive.

Accounts of teaching that more intentionally and concertedly focus on place, then, stand to provide concrete examples of how student collaboration on the inside foundationally drives prison education. In the cases of both AB and Simone, each instructor creates space for MPEP students to engage in collective study in which students are guided by their own interests, support each other's learning, and rely on the place-based dynamics they have cultivated over time. That said, I cannot overstate enough that these classroom dynamics do not produce egalitarianism. The asymmetrical power dynamics between nonincarcerated instructors, incarcerated students, prison staff, and the prison still animate prison classrooms. These moments of co-learning, however, in which the typical roles of student and educator are destabilized, have the potential to briefly rupture the violent spatiotemporalities of the carceral state.

In the realm of HEP literature, these findings extend Castro and Brawn's (2015) theorization of emplaced praxis. Even as the authors contend that the material dimensions of the prison limit possibilities for critical pedagogies, they also acknowledge that challenges to teaching and learning on the inside cannot be solely attributable to the space of the prison classroom (p. 116). In this regard, AB and Simone's accounts empirically demonstrate how the constraints of the prison classroom shape education. They also reveal how incarcerated people leverage institutional knowledge to work around such limitations. If emplaced praxis necessarily draws upon the "lived realities of participants" (p. 117), then these MPEP

educators' teaching stories highlight how the contextual and place-indebted expertise of incarcerated students is crucial to successful prison pedagogies.

This research additionally builds upon of Rahe and Wuebben's (2019) emphasis on carceral space and writing. In this piece, Rahe (now released from prison) calls for a reexamination of incarcerated writers' "relationships to writing tools" (p. 5). AB's recollections, though, lead me to suggest that the constraints of carceral space can guide incarcerated people toward deeper, more transformational considerations of tool use. The CD, projector, pen, and books that MPEP students used to co-construct the experiment are all tools of "writing" to varying degrees. Yet in the context of this workshop, the value of these tools rested not with their capacity for producing alphabetic text but for establishing necessary height for the experiment, anchoring other materials, and other logistical functions. In this regard, continued research into emplaced praxis must consider how incarcerated people use everyday items for alternative purposes when learning under extreme material constraints.

In pedagogical settings too, I contend that HEP educators should more consciously attend to place in their own work on the inside. It can be useful to discuss with incarcerated students how they have come to work within (and around) the confines of the prison classroom: through writing, embodiment, tool use, and more. To this end, it would be beneficial to ask students to take stock of their histories with/in the space, in what contexts they have inhabited it, the objects and tools within the space, and what situated practices comprise it. These exercises might seem peculiar to both outside educators and incarcerated students—the former because they often teach in randomly assigned classrooms in mainstream university contexts and the latter because they regularly deploy this kind of situated knowledge. But if instructors and students can surface and collaboratively operate from a shared understanding of place, this know-how can guide both groups toward creating more innovative pedagogies that center the lived expertise of those on the inside.

In spite of its limited scope and scale, this article demonstrates how place constitutes much more than the material structures and infrastructure of a given location. In the context of HEP, place is not just the death-making institution of the prison but consists of the always-in-motion people, tools, and practices of those within it. As evidenced through the accounts of Simone and AB, HEP educators adapt their pedagogies to these place-based dynamics—the size and configuration of the classroom, how students relate to each other, and what tools are available (or not)—to mobilize responsive teaching practices. So too do incarcerated students collaborate when leveraging knowledge to work around the material constraints of the prison. Given that both of my research participants co-constructed their curricula and classroom practices in concert with MPEP students' expertise, this research highlights how pedagogy is not just produced by teachers for students. Instead,

Simone and AB's stories highlight how teaching is just as much indebted to those community knowledges, skills, and dispositions that students bring to the proverbial table. Within these narratives, we not only see how the interpersonal connections that emerge from considerations of place are vital to teaching but how the emplaced knowledge of students facilitates learning in the first place. And so even as the material limitations and immense trauma of prison environments still ought to be acknowledged, these modes of engagement can still serve as guides for instructors hoping to co-construct more collaborative and ethical pedagogies.

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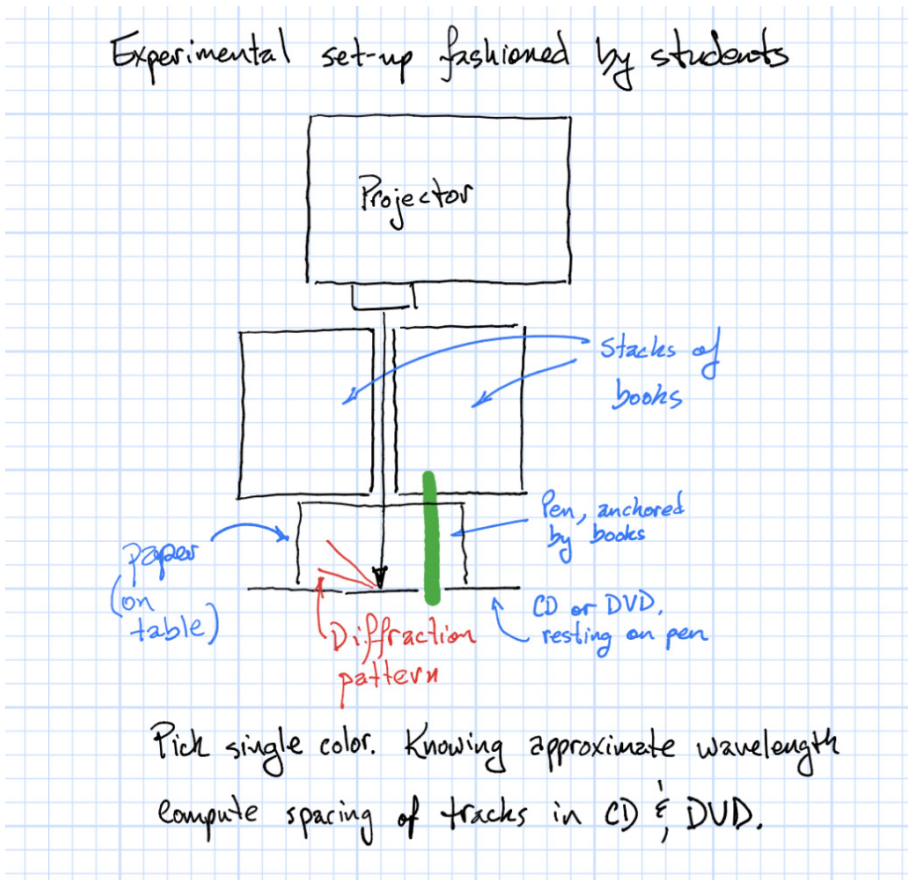
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Figure 1.

Experimental setup fashioned by students.



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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The *Journal of Higher Education in Prison* (est. 2019) is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes exclusively on topics and issues relevant to the field of higher education in prison. In so doing, it provides the field a forum to discuss praxis and the ways that theory can and should inform teaching and learning in prison. At its core, this journal is rooted in a desire for a world where systemic punishment is not a central feature of life in the United States.

As the field of higher education in prison continues to receive public attention, practitioners, teachers, students, and other stakeholders have a profound opportunity to contribute to and shape public and academic discussion on the practice of teaching and learning inside prisons.

In general, we invite Articles, Book Reviews, Letters to the Editor, and Contemporary Perspectives that provide imaginative visions for postsecondary education inside prisons (including pathways to/from higher education in prison) and that are not anchored in the study of crime or criminal behavior. Authors are invited to submit conceptual, empirical, theoretical, historical and pedagogical manuscripts, that approach field, foundation-building, teaching, teacher training, pedagogy, policy, and practice from a variety of perspectives, frameworks, and positionalities, such as, research-based, case study, systematic literature reviews, or meta-analysis, and/or policy analysis.

In considering higher education in prison, we especially seek manuscripts authored and/or co-authored by: incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, directly impacted people, co-written essays among diverse stakeholders, and other collaborative configurations.



ALLIANCE

FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON