

## Precarious Citizenship: Ambivalence, Literacy, and Prisoner Reentry

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### KEYWORDS

prisoner reentry; literacy narratives; citizenship; academic literacy; ambivalence

The experience of being ‘in the mainstream’ is a concrete sensory experience of literally being in tune with a ‘something’ that’s happening [...] The experience of being ‘in the mainstream’ is like a flotation device.

—Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*

I met Conroy at a coffee shop in a southern college town.<sup>1</sup> A white man in his 60s with a thick, lolling drawl, Conroy had brought a stack about five inches high of syllabi and multiple drafts of papers he wrote for the college classes he took in prison. The material was dense: Althusser, Freud, Marx, Fanon, Crenshaw. This was no watered-down curriculum, and Conroy describes, as many of my other research participants have, the camaraderie that developed in the classroom between men who struggled together to engage with the arduous texts. He describes with matter-of-factness how quickly he became an important presence in the classroom and in the higher education in prison (HEP) program as a whole. The program director even asked him, specifically, he tells me, to sign up for a first-year writing class so that he might act as a model for the other students, a kind of covert embedded tutor. Conroy says he enjoyed helping several men with their writing, academic and otherwise. He never says directly that he is proud of the work he did in those classes, but judging from the stack of papers he has saved and the pride in his voice when he talks about not only *his* successes but those of the students he mentored, it is clearly meaningful to him to have his academic skill acknowledged and valued by the people he respects, particularly the program director.

But when Conroy was released from prison, he was in his early 60s with no college degree and a criminal record. He serves on the HEP program’s advisory board, is well-connected to academics and activists in his community, is active in local politics, and is one of the most astute people I’ve had the pleasure of having a conversation with, but he says he can’t even get a job at Wal-Mart. When we spoke in 2015, he was living in an RV behind his mechanic’s house because he couldn’t afford rent. He was getting by on his small social security check and by selling cannabis to a small number of trusted clients. “I really didn’t want to go back to selling anything. I didn’t think I’d smoke again, I had such a distaste for it,” he told me. “But that’s it, in a nutshell, I just persevere, I persist. That’s all I can do.”

Stories like Conroy’s trouble the literacy myths that surround higher education in prison. The public support for higher education opportunities for currently (and, to some extent, formerly) in-

carcerated people has been building exponentially in the last decade. In 2015, the Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, offering Pell grants to some incarcerated students on an experimental basis for the first time since 1994. In 2021, the Consolidated Appropriations Act more permanently restored Pell eligibility for incarcerated students. As public support has grown, the value of academic literacy<sup>2</sup> for incarcerated students is framed slightly differently by different stakeholders. For corrections officials, HEP programs reduce recidivism rates by giving incarcerated people credentials they can use on the job market once they are released. For HEP program administrators, academic literacy offers opportunities for community-building, empowerment, and critical and personal reflection. Despite these differences, nearly all stakeholders agree that HEP programs should aid incarcerated people in reintegrating into mainstream society upon their release. As Alexandra Cavallaro argues, academic literacy has been deployed to address our nation's anxiety around the inclusion of people with incarceration experience within the citizenry. In public dialogue, across varied stakeholders, literacy is imagined as a mechanism through which incarcerated people might be made into productive, compliant citizens. As Cavallaro puts it, "In many educational contexts, there is frequently an easy conflation of literacy education and the production of good citizens" (2).

In this essay, I explore the ways formerly incarcerated people themselves imagine the relationship between literacy and citizenship. Feminist sociologist Sasha Roseneil argues, "[I]f we are to think seriously about citizenship and belonging—and the possibility of their transformation—in contemporary conjecture, we need to think *psycho-socio-analytically* about their affective politics, about the relationships between subjective experience relational and intersubjective dynamics, and socio-historical processes and power relations" ("Vicissitudes," 231). In other words, an analysis of the relationship between literacy and citizenship requires an account of the embodied, first-hand experiences of those whose citizenship and inclusion are of concern. Here, I take up Roseneil's call by analyzing the experiences of three formerly incarcerated people who participated in HEP programs and how literacy figures in their experiences with reentry<sup>3</sup>. This essay is part of a larger IRB-approved study involving 20 formerly incarcerated research participants who either took college courses while incarcerated or who enrolled in an institution of higher education after their release from prison.<sup>4</sup> The study consists of qualitative, semi-structured interviews about participants' experiences with prison, higher education, and reentry, as well as their beliefs about education, criminal punishment, and justice. All participants gave informed consent for their responses to be used in scholarship with an agreement that their identities would be kept confidential. My approach to these interviews is informed by abolitionist feminism, which aims to center the lived experiences of directly impacted people in order to create greater justice in society. I approach these narratives as rhetorical performances produced in the moment and shaped by the situation itself (my positionality as audience, responsibility for representing a HEP program and incarcerated people generally, etc.). I want to present their words with as little filter as possible in order to allow their expertise and perspectives to inform, rather than to be objects of analysis. The research participants represented in this essay are:

- Conroy, a white man in his 60s from a college town in the South. Conroy had some college experience prior to his incarceration, but he did not earn a degree. He was incarcerated

multiple times. During his most recent incarceration at a minimum security state prison, he took college courses for credit, and after release, he served on the college's advisory board. Conroy was interviewed for this study in 2015.

- Grace, a white woman in her 40s from a mid-sized Midwest city. Grace had some college experience prior to her incarceration, but she did not earn a degree. During her incarceration in a maximum security state prison, she participated in two different HEP programs, earning an undergraduate degree. After her release, she enrolled in a graduate program but did not finish. Grace was interviewed for this study in 2015.
- Saul, a Black man in his 40s from a large Midwest city. Saul was incarcerated at the age of 15. During his 19 years of incarceration, he earned his GED and enrolled in credit-bearing college courses through several community colleges and one HEP program. Saul was interviewed for this study in both 2015 and 2018, but this essay focuses on our 2018 interview.

The transition out of prison, known commonly as prisoner reentry, echoes dissonantly through my interviews as a point of tension between the promises and realities of a second chance. In our conversations about the value of academic literacy in their lives, it is most often participants' stories about reentry where this largely positive narrative falters, as it does in Conroy's above. While prison literacy is receiving more attention in composition studies, few studies have taken up the role of literacy in reentry. One notable exception is Patrick Berry's *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, which includes a chapter on the experiences of one former student after he is released from prison. Berry concludes that expecting literacy to solve social problems is unrealistic, particularly for formerly incarcerated people who face myriad legal discriminations in their efforts to reintegrate in the world outside of prison, including housing, employment, voting rights, and many others. But for Berry, HEP programs offer an alternative space within the prison and an opportunity to reimagine oneself and society. Here, I build on Berry's work, offering narratives with a slightly more conflicted perspective on literacy and reentry. To be clear, all of my participants are enthusiastic supporters of higher education in prison programs. They are emphatic that educational opportunities for incarcerated people must be protected and expanded. The value of ethnography is in its specificity, and I offer these narratives not as a claim that this research is more true than Berry's, but as also true, to hold alongside more straightforwardly positive literacy narratives. Like Berry, I agree that narrow definitions of success in HEP programs based on upward mobility are unhelpful, and I agree that attention should be paid to the value of HEP while students are still incarcerated. Certainly, there are tremendous benefits to participating in HEP, even for students who are serving life sentences. At the same time, it is important to attend to the experiences of reentry and the ways students' academic literacy is taken up and imagined through that difficult transitional period.

Across my interviews, reentry is experienced as a significant rupture in the lifeworlds of my participants. It is a challenging time marked by disorientation, as the competencies and strategies that helped them navigate prison life are often no longer as useful. Indeed, for those who served longer sentences, the disorientation can be quite literal as their world expands beyond the few paved yards they are allowed to traverse on a daily basis. Following Kate Vieira, I am interested in the ways my research participants take up academic literacy as a navigational technology (27) and the ways

literacy, actual and imagined, creates pathways and barriers for their movement from prison to the next phases of their lives.

For Conroy, Grace, and Saul, literacy is taken up ambivalently.<sup>5</sup> For each, their academic literacy offers pathways to meaningful connections and, to some extent, mainstream inclusion. For Grace and Saul, it also offers pathways for upward mobility. But each also convey some distrust with regards to academic literacy and the pathway to inclusion it seems to offer. This ambivalence, I argue, points to tensions in the connection between academic literacy and mainstream citizenship and inclusion. By analyzing the ambivalence my participants expressed about both academic literacy and inclusion in mainstream citizenry, I hope to offer insight into possible interventions for, as well as limitations of, academic literacy for people with incarceration experience. My aim is to call attention to the ways literacy and inclusion/exclusion are invoked, and to urge composition scholars to more critically address the question of academic literacy as citizenship training for marginalized students. If increased access and participation are goals of HEP, and higher education in general, then we must grapple with the unique and shifting ways citizenship is both practiced by and denied to formerly incarcerated people, including those with advanced literacy.

## LITERACY'S CRUEL OPTIMISM OF CIVIC INCLUSION

Over the last decade, the United States has been witnessing a striking shift in ideology about criminal justice, which was brought about both by the important activist work of organizations like Critical Resistance, Prison Policy Initiative, and others, but also by the economic and social crisis of mass incarceration. The United States simply cannot afford to keep locking people up at the current rate, and increasingly, states and municipalities are being forced to reckon with the unsustainability of overly punitive policies and with what to do with people once they have been released from prisons and jails. This crisis of mass incarceration has produced what appears to be a crisis of inclusion, as the assumptions about who should be forgiven, by whom, and to what extent remain largely uncertain. While calls for criminal justice reform, including increased access and support for formerly incarcerated people, has gained significant and increasing support, the enthymematic arguments for these reforms continue to rely on a logic of relative innocence through reference to what Marie Gottschalk calls the “non, non, nons”: people convicted of non-violent, non-sexual, non-serious acts (xvi). These individuals are gaining relative acceptance and inclusion within the democratic imaginary and in public discourse, but legal and material inclusion continues to lag behind. Further, this relative forgiveness and inclusion takes for granted that those who fall outside this relative innocence are deserving of long, harshly punitive prison sentences and permanent exclusion from employment, education, and other areas of public life. While the notion of a second chance is gaining traction, the question of who gets that second chance is still very contentious.

As Robert Asen suggests, citizenship should be recognized “as a fluid, multimodal, and quotidian process” (203). Thus, even formerly incarcerated people whose legal status defines them as “full citizens” may not enjoy the full protections of civic and social inclusion. Danielle Allen similarly defines citizenship as “basic habits of interaction in public spaces” (5). She goes on to show that social and

political order is maintained not only through institutions but through “deep rules’ that prescribe specific interactions among citizens in public spaces” (10). These paradigms of citizenship suggest ways to consider the practice of citizenship beyond privileged acts, such as voting, but they also point to the ways that exclusion from full citizenship is enacted in everyday ways. Ediberto Roman argues, “The typical point of demarcation or basis for distinction—national borders—was not the basis for and does not adequately explain the subordination of some groups within the national boundaries” (10). Of course, the alienizing function of the prison, creating precarious citizenship for those inside national borders, has deep connections to racialized methods of exclusion. Just as Ersula Ore shows that lynching was a spectacle that maintained the racial hierarchy inherent in American citizenry, the carceral regime and its various forms of dehumanization and legal discrimination is a mechanism that maintains racist social and legal exclusions, particularly for Black and Indigenous people, in the United States. As Stephen Dillon argues, “By racial terror in a genealogy of the prison, scholars have come to understand the barracoons, coffles, slave holds, and plantations of the Middle Passage as spatial, discursive, ontological, and economic analogues of modern punishment that have haunted their way into the present” (114). That white people find themselves entangled in this system does not make its racialized function any less true.

As the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion for formerly incarcerated people shifts, academic literacy in the form of HEP becomes a central mechanism for determining one’s worthiness for inclusion. Romana Fernandez writes, “Imagining literate selves allows us, whoever we may be, to envision

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community, nation, and ultimately world [...] Imagining literacy allows us to project a future self with yet-to-be-acquired skills and a yet-to-be-defined professional life” (11). In other words, the way we imagine literacy for ourselves and others is intimately connected to the way we imagine our

community and its boundaries of inclusion. As Amy Wan has shown, as a field, rhetoric and composition has outlined a variety of ways that literacy is imagined to shape participatory citizenship and inclusion<sup>6</sup>. I agree with Wan that we as literacy educators and scholars must unpack the unspoken assumptions about the citizenship we imagine ourselves to offer access to.

In my conversation with Conroy, I asked him to speculate on what higher education in prison programs could do to mitigate the forms of exclusion he was experiencing after release from prison. I wondered if these programs might make efforts to extend their work and support beyond the prison walls, but Conroy seemed skeptical of this idea:

Gives you false expectations of what reality is going to give you. You’re still going to be outside looking in. You might permeate that bubble for a bit, but when you come back out of that bubble, you know, you’re back in the reality of where you’re living. I think it’s better to, like, to make an analogy? You go over here and do some heroin, then you leave and the heroin wears off. It’s diminishing returns, or an investment in pain, so to speak. The reward

you get for that short period of time is more than decimated by the withdrawal from it afterwards.

For Conroy, the value of HEP is in its ability to offer an escape from the repetition and violence of prison life. His experience with HEP has little to do with how it might impact reality. By continuing a person's contact with the program, he feels it would only be giving those individual's false hope about the reality of their lives outside of prison, "an investment in pain," because they simply will not have the opportunity nor the inner resources to use their experiences with an education program to create a meaningful life for themselves inside the "bubble" of the mainstream.

Put another way, Conroy's warning is an implicit critique of HEP's "cruel optimism," what Lauren Berlant defines as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (94). For Conroy, the object of desire, mainstream inclusion and financial security, is an unattainable fantasy. Maintaining a connection to that fantasy, though it may have helped him survive prison, is as noxious as heroin. Hope is a common theme around which prison educators rally, desiring to instill a sense of purpose and agency for their students for whom stark despair is never far. What Conroy is suggesting, then, is that this is precisely the benefit of prison programs, providing a fantasy of inclusion, community, and recognition that, in reality, will never come.

But there is an inherent ambivalence in Conroy's perspective on literacy and reentry. On the one hand, he recognizes the material and social limits of literacy and suggests that the hope inherent in the pursuit of literacy, in the end, does more harm than good. On the other hand, his success with academic literacy and his connection to university professors is clearly important for his narrative and sense of self, especially in contrast to the version of himself reflected by the state and some of his family members. Conroy's perspective on hope is also ambivalent. When I asked how he was handling what sounded like a very challenging time in his life, he said:

It's by no means easy. I'm used to traveling, I'm used to the so-called finer things of life and all the trappings that go with it, and it's just evaporated. It's just gone. But we keep struggling and move on. You know in *Shawshank Redemption* where he said, hope is a good thing and in a final analysis hope might be the only thing? I'm paraphrasing, but that's a very true statement. That's what it is, that's what you have to do. Just keep pressing on. If you stop, then you'll be consumed, you'll be destroyed. And that happens to a lot of people in this situation.

Conroy argues that higher education in prison is still worth it, because even if the experience is just something fun that is quickly forgotten, it is still an opportunity to make contact with positive people. My research and experience with HEP keeps me from fully agreeing with Conroy's assessment, but I want to honor the truth of this skepticism and what it reflects about his lived experience. His narrative also offers an important counter to the under-examined assumptions about higher education as a tool for increased agency, access, and inclusion for formerly incarcerated people. Wan rightly points out that composition's "ambient" citizenship promotes a sense that citizenship and access to political agency is equally available to all students who are willing to work for it. Instead, Wan concludes that "[p]articipation through literacy skills allows for the sense of being equal, maybe even the illusion of equality. But I wonder if it is possible that in investment in this narrative is dangerous

because we imagine that equality and full citizenship can be accessed via classroom-cultivated literacy” (31). In other words, without attending to the fact that different forms of participatory democracy are available to different students, compositionists perpetuate the bootstraps myth of full citizenship, where any diminished or denied inclusion is an individual failure. Alexandra Cavallaro rightly points out that these problems and contradictions persist in HEP programs, noting that they often fail to account for the ways citizenship eludes incarcerated students in spite of their educational pursuits. It is important for prison educators and HEP programs not to promise more than they deliver, but I also argue that in order for higher education to be “worth it,” it must offer more than fleeting feelings of companionship and temporary escape from the monotony and dehumanization of everyday prison life (2–3). If the purposes of higher education attend primarily to the emotional needs of incarcerated students while they are inside, these programs risk becoming mere supplements to the white supremacist carceral regime that trades in cruel optimism.

## ACADEMIC LITERACY AS FRAUGHT COMMUNITY

Unlike, Conroy, Grace had material and social support after release, but reentry was still a very challenging experience. For herself, she identifies meaningful inclusion in a community as the most challenging part of reentry. Grace had a lot going for her in prison. On top of the bachelor’s degree she earned, she had respect, a relatively well-paying job (by prison standards), and was a tutor for other incarcerated women.

You learn how to create this life that is really meaningful, one that is important, and then I didn’t have anybody. I had no friends. In one day. And you’re not supposed to keep in touch with them. So I’m not supposed to talk to them, and nobody out here understands what I’m dealing with. They all think I should just be happy that I’m not in prison. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing out here. And I have nobody I can talk to about that because people think that you’re not happy. But I would have rather gone back to prison. It took me years to get over that feeling. And I think that if, with everything I had, I had this problem, what about other people who don’t have anything?

That pull back to the meaningful life crafted in prison is something several research participants have shared with me, but it is rarely addressed in research about reentry. Grace argues that rather than reentry, with its emphasis on employment and housing, we should be talking about reintegration. Grace says, “How do we make sure that people are able to find a community where they feel like they’re valued, they feel like they’re still important? Because they had that when they were in prison. It is a community. And I think to not acknowledge that does more damage.”

And Grace is acutely aware of the ways formerly incarcerated people are excluded from mainstream society. She tells me that when she got out of prison, she had no intention of telling anyone about her incarceration. She wanted to keep her head down, do her parole time, and leave the state as soon as possible. But as invitations to talk about her experience came to her, Grace recognized that her experience in prison and ability to speak thoughtfully about it endowed her with a certain fraught expert status. Grace ultimately decided that coalition-building, or at least increased public

understanding and empathy, are important and require formerly incarcerated people sharing their stories. Grace's first experience with public disclosure, however, was painful for her. She was interviewed for a local newspaper article:

I was not at all prepared for that. I mean, I agreed to it, I knew what was happening, but I was still very naïve. They were just beginning their online thing, so the story was online and the comments were just awful. [...] I literally just sat in my room and cried for three days. I was not prepared for how brutal these people were who didn't even know me, you know? And I thought at the time I was doing this good thing, trying to share my story. And that just completely backfired and I was just devastated by that.

This experience threw into sharp relief the contrast between the respect and community Grace experienced in prison and the lack of community in reentry. She would have to navigate this new hostile world to put together a new kind of life and identity for herself. After some years of struggle, Grace seems to have put together a meaningful community on the outside. She brought a friend to our interview to advocate on her behalf, should the interview go badly, and to provide emotional support. We conducted the interview at her workplace, a community center where she works, appropriately enough, in community development.

One of the ways Grace attempted to navigate reentry was through continuing her education. She had received a lot of support from former HEP instructors, both while incarcerated and after she was released. It made sense, then, to continue developing this part of her identity as a student and scholar. In the disorienting break between the community of the prison and the lack of community on the outside, literacy was a handy navigational tool.

But the transition from the HEP program to attending college on a traditional campus was more difficult to navigate than she imagined. She realized that the expectation for prospective graduate students is that because they have an undergraduate degree, they must be familiar with campus culture and the bureaucracy of higher education. Because Grace completed her undergraduate degree while incarcerated, her university experience was very different: "[W]hen you're in prison it's all taken care of for you. They fill out the financial aid forms for you, they do all the enrollment. They

tell you what classes you're going to take. They order the books for you. Literally every single thing is done or you. So you don't know how to function in that world when you get out." Grace describes the feeling of trying to orient herself on campus, unable to

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figure out where to park and feeling overwhelmed by the size of the place. Like many people incarcerated in the 1990s during the rise of the internet, her digital literacy confidence level was low, so the online admissions and financial aid processes were intimidating and unwelcoming. She was expecting class sizes to be comparable to the classes she had taken in prison, which were capped at 15, but when she arrived on the first day, she found that the class had about thirty students enrolled.

I literally had a panic attack on campus. Walked out the door and was like, I can't do this. I



couldn't breathe. I couldn't drive home. I had to call my grandparents to come get me. All those people, I just felt so intimidated. I felt like everybody's going to know I was in prison. And I'm not smart enough to be here. I don't know what I'm doing. So I also didn't understand that if you're not going to go, you actually have to drop those classes. Just not going completely screws you for the rest of your life. So I paid for the classes, paid in full for the classes, but I didn't actually drop them, so I had three Fs on my record to begin with.

What emerges from Grace's story, implicitly and explicitly stated, is that from her perspective, there is "such a stigma around college campuses against people who have been incarcerated before." She continues to be shocked that there is a separate admissions review for people who have criminal backgrounds. In "Going Public—in a Disabling Discourse," Linda Flower argues that our field's celebration of rhetorical empowerment through critique, self-expression, and advocacy fails to recognize the risk associated with publicly disclosing that one identifies with a marginalized group (137). In her inquiry into the identity disclosures of students with learning disabilities, Flower finds that the decision whether or not to disclose "pits the option of getting the help and accommodations they may need against the socially hazardous outcomes of being labeled LD" (138). Grace, keenly aware of stigma, seemed reluctant to identify publicly as formerly incarcerated in this instance, and she tells me she knows people would tell her that she can't expect special treatment just because she's been in prison. Also, given her lack of knowledge about the workings of universities, the risk associated with disclosure was likely greater than the possibility that it would get her the help she needed. As Flower points out, disclosure is intensely rhetorical by nature and "demands not only self-expression but also understanding rhetorical situations, constructing new meanings, and creating a dialogic relationship with others" (147). Grace didn't know to whom to appeal, much less how to construct a successful argument in that situation. Years later, she tried once again to earn her master's degree in criminal justice, but she says that a series of health problems and her struggles with statistics (she tells me it was only after failing the course twice that she learned that the campus had a math tutoring center she could have utilized) led to her dismissal from the university.

Academic literacy presented itself as a clear navigational tool in Grace's attempt to build a meaningful community for herself, but her lack of experience with the "hidden curriculum" of higher education created insurmountable barriers. She could not literally navigate the campus, much less the various bureaucratic processes without potentially making herself vulnerable to ridicule and rejection. Grace's intellectual life, like Conroy's, plays an important role in the narrative she shares with me, and her success in her HEP programs and continued connection to college faculty are important identity markers for her, so much so that applying for a master's program was one of the first things she did when she was released from prison. Grace's ambivalence toward academic literacy emerges in response to the spoken and unspoken ways she is marked as an outsider in the traditional academy. The college campus and its bureaucratic structure communicate to her that she is unwelcome, that she is a misfit.

## THE COSTS OF MAINSTREAM INCLUSION

Like Grace's story, Saul's story on the surface fulfills all the promise of higher education in prison, but his experience with reentry reveals deep ambivalence about the form of inclusion advanced literacy offered to him. When I spoke to Saul in 2018, he had been out of prison for almost five years. He was off parole and had a white-collar job with a tech company, a job that he got specifically because of his experience with a higher education in prison program. The job was downtown, and in our conversation, "downtown" emerged as an important metaphor for the mainstream, the privileged, and full citizenship. But Saul's relationship with "downtown" was fraught.

I've come to realize that most often although I'm doing everything that I know how to be, like, fully integrated? I feel like I don't fit. I sense in people that they sense the difference in me. [...] And it's noticeable to me. There've been certain situations where it's more obvious to me that someone sees me as different. For an example, I work downtown, and downtown people . . . downtown people can be a little different from everyone else [...] They seem to live in a world of privilege. It cloaks them so they are totally covered in this privilege blanket. [...] I barely even get eye contact in passing. It's so funny because it's so noticeable. Like you're attempting to not see other humans. It's amazing to me. I've literally seen people walking on the same side of the street, notice me because I'm standing in front of the building for a smoke break, I see them notice me, they'll cross and then cross back once they [get past me]. Like, hmm, that was a little suspect. Was that all for me? [laugh] People don't like to sit next to me on the train either. Like, sometimes, it can . . . hurt my feelings a little bit. To the point where 99% of the time I won't even attempt to sit down on the train just because . . . it bothers me, it gets under my skin to where it's like, I see them see me, and then, like, I need to choose to go somewhere else rather than take this seat next to this guy.

Saul had a middle-class, stable job, his own apartment, and he was getting ready to be married and become a father for the first time. His academic literacy provided him access to mainstream citizenry in many of the ways we tend to imagine in composition studies, yet his exclusion remains in subtle social gestures and felt senses. I asked what it feels like, this sense that others can sense that he doesn't fit. He tells me it's an "old feeling," one he experienced early. As an example, he shares a story about a time when he was a child, walking from his mostly Black neighborhood to the movie theater in an adjacent white neighborhood, where he was stopped by the cops and questioned about what he was doing there. Similarly, when he goes downtown for work, he says he feels distrust from those around him, a sense that "the areas that I go, the people that I have to interact with don't really want me in those areas interacting with them." I asked if he meant people who haven't been to prison, or white people, or "downtown" people. He said, laughing, "I guess the irony is that most of those people are people that haven't been to prison, that are white, and that actively enjoy that privilege blanket."

Saul's reentry experience is marked by a limit to his reintegration into mainstream society, a limit he is uncertain he will ever cross. This limit is dictated, at least in part, by a convergence of alienizing and carceral logics. Karma Chavez defines a logic as "a structure of thinking that thereby structures expression" (5) and alienizing logic as "a structure of thinking that insists that some are

necessarily members of a community and some are recognized as not belonging, even if they physically reside there” (5). For Saul, anti-Blackness is the alienizing logic that marked him as an outsider, as suspect, as dangerous long before he was ever incarcerated, when he was a child, and it continues to structure his access to full citizenship. By the same token, carceral logics, or structures of thinking that support punitive approaches to difference and deviance, deepen Saul’s exclusion through a kind of common sense that people who have been convicted of crimes should be, to some extent, permanently punished through exclusion to economic, civil, and social power. For Saul, “reentry” into mainstream society is impossible, as it would require that he was included in mainstream society to begin with.

In some ways, Saul’s experience is the opposite of Conroy’s. Conroy uses literacy to define himself as something other and against his incarceration, but he is excluded from the material benefits of advanced literacy. Saul’s literacy grants him access to material benefits and middle-class income, but he lacks the social acceptance within mainstream society that Conroy enjoys (and that he, as a white man, had greater access to prior to incarceration). But Saul’s incomplete integration is not merely the result of other people’s subtle (and not so subtle) social rejection of him. Saul understands that fully integrating into the mainstream requires that he himself accept the alienizing and carceral logics that mark him as unworthy of belonging. He would have to reject his prison experience, as Conroy so eagerly does. But Saul feels ambivalent about severing that part of his identity.

***“I can say today, I like me. I kind of know and did a lot of work to figure out who I am and to be comfortable in that, like, oh, you’re this guy. I like that guy. So how do I, and knowing that my prison experience aided in that revelation, that acceptance, how do I get rid of that and hold on to who I’ve become? I don’t know if it’s possible.”***

On the one hand, you would think I want to get as far away from prison, the thoughts of prison, that experience, that I want to fully immerse myself in the world and be encompassed in everything worldly and leave the prison stuff behind. But the realization that I was there for so long . . . . At one point, I was literally incarcerated longer than I was alive. The bulk of my life was incarcerated. So, that experience has helped form and is a part of the foundation of who I’ve become, who I am now. And before I was locked up, I didn’t like myself much. I couldn’t *love* me. I was arrested four months before my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and got out a month from my 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. I can say today, I *like* me. I kind of know and did a lot of work to figure out who I am and to be comfortable in that, like, oh, you’re *this* guy. I like that guy. So how do I, and knowing that my prison experience aided in that revelation, that acceptance, how do I get rid of that and hold on to who I’ve become? I don’t know if it’s possible.

For Saul, for reentry to be complete and for him to feel like “a normal person” would require more than his own immersion into the mainstream. It would require that the mainstream itself shift to

accommodate him, to reflect that love and acceptance he has for himself, including the entirety of his experience. According to Cavallaro, most HEP programs, doubly sponsored by the state through the prison and the university, imagine normative citizenship as the goal of literacy and assimilation as a marker of the redeemed “good citizen” (3). HEP programs engage in what Eric Darnell Pritchard calls *literacy normativity*, the use of literacy “to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textscales that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm” (28). In the case of HEP, literacy normativity may be deployed in an effort to help incarcerated people, and Saul would agree that having a “downtown” job is preferable to financial precarity. But the price of assimilation into a mainstream that is not itself just is painful. Any literacy program that focuses on individual achievement with little or no critical interrogation of ambient citizenship is complicit in the painful exclusions inherent to the mainstream.

## IMPLICATIONS

Producing participatory democratic agents is the *raison d'être* of most higher education in prison programs. But as these case studies suggest, the credentialing and normative functions of higher education do not necessarily lead to increased civic or social inclusion, nor does academic literacy necessarily translate to successful reentry and integration. For composition scholars and practitioners, this suggests a need to, as Wan says, directly confront unequal access in our pedagogy and acknowledge the limits of personal volition in achieving full citizenship. Wan explains, “In order for writing classrooms to enact citizenships that matter, we need to recognize the ways that our

***“What forms of belonging are we practicing in our classrooms? What social imaginaries do we maintain or create anew? As literacy brokers, educators are also brokers of access to mainstream inclusion. We are implicated uncomfortably in the oppression of those structurally excluded.”***

idealized notions of citizenship are complicit in the citizenship that already exists” (178). Erica Meiners similarly critiques the university for its role in what she refers to as a “punishing democracy” (vii), marked by a shift in the state’s resources from education and empowerment to incarceration, thus exacerbating historical inequalities, particularly for Black Americans: “That is, these institutions do not merely reflect existing structures of power but reproduce and even exacerbate them: Studying the relationship

between prison and schools thus enables us to dive into the structural question of how the state invests in punishment, how it disinvests in communities hit hard by crime, and how its economic and educational policies therefore fuel the prison-industrial complex” (18).

What forms of belonging are we practicing in our classrooms? What social imaginaries do we maintain or create anew? As literacy brokers, educators are also brokers of access to mainstream inclusion. We are implicated uncomfortably in the oppression of those structurally excluded. The simplest solution to this discomfort is to modulate our promises to our students, and certainly we

should not suggest that literacy is a key that will open all doors. But simply including caveats to our teaching abdicates the power literacy does have in creating and maintaining ways of thinking and being. While a full pedagogical and institutional solution is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to suggest that we literacy scholars and composition teachers must resist the flattery of narratives like the one that suggests our work can solve the complex knot of problems inherent in oppression. Further, while acknowledging our limited power to disrupt as agents of the state, we must look to our own classrooms and ask what civic imaginaries and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion are brought into being there. Incarcerated people are by no means the only ones productively excluded from the democratic imaginary, subject to state violence, and treated as superfluous and disposable. But I argue, along with Meiners, Andrew Dilts, and others that the same carceral logics of punishment and control, of security and exclusion—these hallmarks of neoliberal risk society—are shared across a host of various modes of exclusion. So while the alienation, humiliation, and violence experienced by incarcerated people may appear to be extreme examples, the ambivalent experiences with literacy described by Saul, Grace, and Conroy are likely not all that different from the ways folks are making do against other, interrelated mechanisms of civic exclusion, including in our mainstream college writing classes. If, as Meiners suggests, the university has had a role in creating that reality, then it must have some ability to shift that reality, though there are significant political and administrative restraints to doing so.

For Conroy, Grace, and Saul, literacy holds a peculiar role in their reentry narratives. In each, academic literacy holds some important orienting power. For Conroy, his academic success is a source of pride and an important pillar of his identity, which he holds in contrast to the criminalizing narratives that keeps him economically, socially, and politically marginalized. But Conroy's academic literacy is also a false hope, an "investment in pain," that fails to fulfill its promise. For Grace, academic literacy was supposed to be a continuity from prison to reentry, something she excelled at and used to orient her path to reintegration into mainstream society. But Grace found higher education disorienting, and rather than helping her to integrate, her experience with academic literacy reiterated her outsidership. Saul's academic literacy did lead him to a kind of middle-class, mainstream inclusion, but it was a provisional inclusion that required that he hide or repudiate essential parts of himself. A full pedagogical solution is beyond the scope of the analysis I've presented here, and frankly, I do not believe any curriculum or pedagogy could fully solve the forms of exclusion Conroy, Grace, and Saul experienced, at least not any curriculum that would be allowed at most accredited universities, much less inside prisons. Literacy is powerful, but it is not all-powerful. It is a gate that opens but also locks.

Ramona Fernandez asserts that the way we imagine literacy *matters*, particularly for the most marginalized, who seek literacy as a path to a future self and future world they cannot always articulate or imagine clearly. For those of us who work with students whose futures are constrained, whose lives do not map easily onto the white middle-class projection of mainstream higher education, it is necessary to imagine along with our students the forms of civic inclusion they desire and the barriers they may face. We must listen and hold space for the material and social realities of our students' likely futures, which may look very different from our own, as well as their dogged, insistent hope, and create learning environments aimed at cultivating belonging rather than assimilation.

As a way of wrapping up our conversations, I asked each research participant to tell me what they would like for me to do with their stories. It was no small gesture to relive their experiences, to identify again with that place, even for just a couple of hours. I could see what it took out of them. I could hear in their voices the line in their memory they would walk right up to but never cross. I know there is so much they didn't tell me, about violence, trauma, shame, despair, fear, and while I'll never know exactly the shape of those things, I could feel their enormity as their wakes rippled in the space between us. So I wanted to know why. Why did they agree to talk with me? What were they hoping for that they would voluntarily and with little compensation relive some of the worst times of their lives? And every one of them said the same thing. They wanted their stories to be a beacon of hope for those still locked up, telling them, "Just don't give up. No matter what, don't give up."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All research participants are identified by a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mary R. Lea and Brian Street, academic literacy refers to the social practices required in academic settings, including both the reading, writing, and knowledge-making conventions of the various academic disciplines and of the discourses of the academic institution itself.

<sup>3</sup> Though “reentry” is the most commonly used term to describe the experience of leaving prison and reintegrating into this nomenclature. Loic Wacquant argues that “reentry” assumes a previous inclusion that in many cases was not there. My research participants similarly reject “reentry” as an apt term, preferring “reintegration” or simply “coming home.” Here, I use the term “reentry” hesitantly, due to its pervasiveness and the lack of consensus around a viable alternative.

<sup>4</sup> University of Illinois IRB #15787. University of Texas Rio Grande Valley IRB #1151780-1.

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of ambivalence is indebted to Kaia Simon, whose work explores the ambivalence generation 1.5 Hmong women feel when performing translation labor at their workplaces. Simon shows that while these women are proud of their translingual literacies, they are not compensated or shown value in equitable ways in the workplace. Simon shows that translation practices are both an opportunity to serve the women’s community and a marker of outsiderhood, provoking stares from onlookers. For these women, as for my research participants, literacy offers a pathway to increased opportunities, but not full acceptance or inclusion.

<sup>6</sup> This connection is reflected in a tension in composition scholarship and practice. On the one hand, first year composition’s service ethic, as Sharon Crowley has shown, derives from its origins as an institutional mechanism for regulating and assimilating the literacy practices of students into those of the university, particularly as universities began admitting more people of color, women, and students from lower socio-economic classes. This results in a sense that composition offers non-mainstream, structurally oppressed students a pathway into mainstream social and economic success, an ethos reflected in Patricia Bizzell’s “Composition Studies Saves the World!” On the other hand, new literacy studies has long worked against the notion that literacy achievement results in social, political, and economic benefits as a matter of course, reflected in the work of Harvey Graff, Brian Street, James Gee, Sylvia Scribner, and others. Most literacy studies scholarship, in fact, reflects concerns with citizenship, civic efficacy, inclusion, belonging, assimilation, and related terms. A few recent examples include work on literacy tests for voter registration (Kirk Branch; Tabettha Adkins), global citizenship and its challenges for international students at US universities (Tom McNamara; Yu-Kyung Kang), the role of composition in navigating the civic sphere (Juan Guerra), and challenges to the notion that literacy is a means to assimilation (Kate Vieira).

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