Queer Black Imagination & Abolitionist Futures: A Community-Based Approach to Narrative Change

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ABSTRACT

Prison abolition isn't solely or even primarily about abolishing prisons; rather, it's about building alternatives and abolishing the conditions that make the very notion of a prison and its incumbent carceral logics possible. I posit that one such condition is the inadequate compensation available for Black people to do imagination work, thought work, and literacies work. Black people, while dramatically and disproportionately impacted by the carceral logics of racial capitalism, are denied access to opportunities to freely imagine alternatives and create strategies to enact them. Drawing on queer Black feminist studies, literacy studies, and abolitionist theory, I argue that those with institutional resources and power can support spaces where formerly incarcerated people can engage in compensated literacy work that troubles the complexity of living between the oppression and possibility under two categories deemed "not-fully-human": Blackness and "criminal." These spaces, when designed to honor embodied and community-based forms of meaning-making, create opportunities for those impacted by the criminal legal system to resist carceral logics through practices of embodied literacy.

In my work, I am often asked by formerly incarcerated people, with a raised eyebrow, "well, have you been to prison?" There is a demand in this question that I account for my experience and acknowledge my inability to know the embodied experiences of those who are directly impacted. I have never been incarcerated, and my commitment to abolition requires me to take this demand seriously while using the creative and positional power that I have to resist carceral logics and dominant narratives about worthiness, criminality, and punishment. This is tricky when my colleagues who are formerly incarcerated employ these dominant narratives in our work together. Who am I to tell someone just returning from prison that they are using a narrative that harms people, or to assert that the way they are telling their stories upholds a problematic logic? On what basis am I standing when I say that we all, regardless of our proximity to and experience with the carceral state, ought to be telling stories that resist oppressive logics because abolition requires us to do so? This article articulates the conditions that make an abolitionist literacies posture possible and necessary, while critically analyzing the complexity that occurs in the dance between dominant narratives and counternarratives within literacy practices as they edge and resist carceral logics.

Dominant narratives about incarceration are built on carceral logics—logics that uphold crime as an individual act and see punishment as a tool of safety. Borrowing a concept from Eric Darnell Pritchard, carceral logics act as a kind of "literacy normativity" that weaponizes literacy against racialized, non-heteronormative-conforming people. Abolitionist literacy practices might move us towards Pritchard's idea of restorative literacies, which "restore not only the individual but also [restore] positive associations to literacy itself through the belief . . . in the power of literacy for social and political change that emerges from and evidences love as a radical praxis of freedom and care for self and community" (*Fashioning*, 39). To find a path toward abolitionist literacies, we need to understand how literacy normativity functions in the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

In the context of reentry and incarceration, literacy normativity shows up in specific ways. In a study of narratives of men who were recently released from prison, Lucius Couloute and Dijonée A. Talley find that narratives related to hyper-individualism and meritocracy are often encouraged and rewarded in the process of reentry. They explain that "the field of reentry instills a sense of personal responsibility, demands accountability, and preaches self-improvement, but cannot provide tangible pathways to success that can contend with the structural barriers faced by those returning home" (Couloute and Talley 20). They call this narrative phenomenon "criminalized individualism," which they define as "an agentic—albeit constrained—strategic response to the cumulative disadvantages experienced by those convicted of crimes" (20). Noteworthy here is both the importance of the agency with which criminalized individualism is deployed, alongside the problem that its use, and the use of other modes of literacy normativity, pose for abolitionist literacy practices.

As a Black queer person, I experience racialized heteronormativity and am subject to attendant assumptions about my humanity, worthiness, and potential criminality. However, having never been incarcerated, I am still able to shine a spotlight on the broader implications of collaborative work done by people who have and have not experienced incarceration. Those of us who haven't been incarcerated operate in a

position of potential ambiguity in relation to abolition work. We seek to work with and not for, to leverage our power and resources while prioritizing and amplifying the power and resources of folks who have direct experience of incarceration, and to find spaces of solidarity that feel meaningful to us and useful to people with direct lived experience of incarceration. We have to find ways to ethically contribute to abolitionist futures, while foregrounding the words, ideas, and decision-making of people with direct lived experience of incarceration. People who are most directly harmed by systems of oppression should be central in analyzing and redesigning those systems. In some instances, this is easier said than done. Practical concerns make it difficult for formerly incarcerated community members to find the time to write, theorize, and share their ideas. Moreover, the criminal legal system is designed to teach people that they are unworthy and incompetent, and to force them to differentiate themselves from their "criminal" past, which may include family members and friends, as a price of freedom. The goal of the very notion of criminality is to separate criminalized individuals from the category of humanity, and to inflict economic and social punishment upon them in an ongoing way, both inside and outside of prison. How can both those of us with direct lived experience and those of us without direct lived experience of incarceration intervene in these conditions to make abolition more possible? For the remainder of this paper, when I use 'we' and 'our' in this text, unless otherwise noted, I am referring to collaborative work of abolitionists, whether formerly incarcerated or not.

I argue that, since carceral literacy normativity links survival to reductive narratives and limits our ability to operate within a narrative frame of abolitionist resistance, queer Black radical imagination and embodiment can serve as a restorative literacy practice and move us towards abolitionist futures. Justice-impacted storytellers and activists can do literacy work in a space between coercion—employing carceral literacy normativity—and agency/resistance—pushing for linguistic justice (Baker-Bell). There is potential for abolitionist power in the paradox of this position, and wisdom to be gleaned for both abolitionists who have been incarcerated and those who have not. To highlight the nuances and complexities of this kind of embodied power, I use theories from Sylvia Wynter, Hortense J. Spillers, and Jayna Brown to analyze narrative and conversational fragments from an "Imagining Black Futures" workshop series that I led in the winter of 2025.

I led the "Imagining Black Futures" workshops as a community practitioner and advocate working outside of an academic context. Participants were asked to complete a consent form indicating their willingness to be referenced in this paper, and all names have been changed. I show, through my analysis of the workshop series itself, its attendant power dynamics, and the artifacts that we created during it, that compensated spaces for shared and embodied meaning-making make it possible to hold the tension between survival and resistance at the center of abolitionist work. Compensated, community-based literacy work rooted in queer Black radical imagination and embodiment practices resists carceral logics, honors the realities of people navigating them, and represents an important but under-theorized area of abolitionist literacy.

This article has four parts. I offer a literature review that positions abolitionist literacies within the context of Black feminist theory and queer Black literacies. I bring theorists like Wynter, Spillers, and Brown into conversation with scholarship in literacy studies to frame queer Black radical imagination as an abolitionist literacy practice. Next, I explain the methods behind the work we did during the "Imagining Black Futures" workshop series. I discuss the material conditions, pedagogical setup, and content of the workshops. I share my analysis of artifacts from the workshops—fragments of conversation and participant writing that exemplify the tension between literacy normativity and abolitionist dreaming, and serve as a form of abolitionist literacy. Lastly, I discuss the ways in which this community-driven approach contributes to the work of using literacy practices to begin to make prisons obsolete.

Rationale: Pay Black People to Do Radical Imagination and Literacies Work

There are precious few moments when Black people, outside of academic contexts, are paid to participate in literacy work that critically engages with and intervenes in carceral logics. These logics include pervasive narratives that define wealth in terms of scarcity through a capitalist lens, create and maintain systems of precarity, and require systems of domination and harm to function (Davis, *Obsolete*; Gilmore; Rodríguez, *Abolition as Praxis*; Kaba). Carceral logics are a central component of what Cedric Robinson has termed "racial capitalism." Racial capitalism employs various forms of violence including slavery, imperialism, and genocide in the service of upholding both racism and capitalism (Robinson). Jodi Melamed expands on this term, explaining that racial capitalism is a "technology of antirelationality" that functions by "producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups" (77) and separates people of color from one another in order to make it challenging for us to work together to change conditions of oppression. The work of many Black feminist theorists asserts that Black people were and continue to be excluded from Western definitions of humanity, are categorically denied subjectivity, and are therefore ideally positioned to rethink the very concept of what it means to be a human and do human things (e.g., Brown; Musser; Spillers; Wynter).

Perversely, even while being denied humanity (setting aside, for the moment, the radical potential of such a posture), people impacted by the criminal legal system are required to be conversant in specific and dehumanizing forms of literacy normativity in order to survive racial capitalism. Stories of redemption act as currency in efforts ranging from making parole, to appeasing probation officers, to obtaining employment. Denied opportunities for employment, many formerly incarcerated people, understandably, don the mantle of small business owners and entrepreneurs, further cementing their reliance on notions of meritocracy, scarcity, and precarity. In the interest of finding housing, formerly incarcerated people may find it most effective to articulate their stories through the lens of criminality and redemption. They may find that the most effective narrative about their incarceration asserts that they have worked to change themselves from bad criminals into good citizens, often through

some combination of individual hard labor, punishment, and moral achievement. It is understandable to engage in literacy normativity as a prerequisite for material survival. Yet, in much the same way that engagement in respectability politics serves both as a tool of social acceptance/security while also undermining Black and/or working-class humanity, the literacy normativity of carceral logics maintains a tangible and meaningful, but fleeting, illusion of material security, while simultaneously perpetuating a system that dehumanizes and causes ongoing harm.

Abolitionist theory-building is severely hindered by material priorities like paying the rent, the light bill, the grocery bill, and, for those impacted by the criminal legal system, the fines, fees, and many costs of coerced participation in their own surveillance and punishment. In order to even consider abolitionist futures and imagining, people who are currently or formerly incarcerated, as well as those who are threatened in ongoing and sometimes daily ways by the potential of incarceration, must be compensated to participate in practicing restorative literacies. Alas, even when moments of localized theory-building and discussion do occur, such efforts are generally underfunded and undervalued as literacy practices. Carceral logics pervade popular culture, consumer culture, and the systems of education where Black students are taught whether our intellectual contributions matter. The ubiquity of these logics leads many to doubt the importance and even possibility of building alternative theories.

Black communities and individuals have formed rich rhetorical and literacy practices both within and outside of institutional spaces (e.g., Richardson; Kynard; Muhammad and Haddix). In many instances, such literacies encompass far more than written words. These include embodied communicative skills, aesthetics, and reading abilities that function as tools of analysis, create structures of safety and belonging, critique the status quo, and subvert dominance and oppression both theoretically and as a daily practice (Brown; Kynard; Musser; Richardson). These are the kinds of restorative literacy practices that are possible within the context of radical queer Black imagination. Importantly, and perhaps so mundane as to be obvious, the majority of these literacies involve unpaid and underrecognized labor. Nevertheless, queer Black abolitionist dreaming is crucial to the goal of abolition, worthy of increased attention and funding, and central to the development of abolitionist literacies as a topic of study.

Queer Black Feminist Imagination and Abolitionist Literacies as Celebration

I built this project drawing on literature within literacy studies, abolitionist theory and abolitionist literacies, and Black feminist theory to understand and guide community literacies work at the intersection of abolition, embodiment, and radical Black imagination. Abolitionist work asks not only for an end to prisons (and many other forms of violence and domination) but also for the creation of new stories, logics, and ways of being and imagining.

Abolitionist literacies are literacy practices that resist carceral logics of anti-blackness and punishment, and work to build alternative worlds that privilege queer

and black modes of meaning making, promote safety and community healing. Abolitionist literacies articulate sustainable models of power rooted in the recognition that those who have been harmed by systemic injustice are well positioned to create alternatives to carceral logics. In their thoughtful work about the limitations of representation in the context of prison literacy programs, Wendy Wolters Hinshaw and Tobi Jacobi acknowledge that such programs might not explicitly call for abolition and may inadvertently perpetuate the prison industrial complex (Hinshaw and Jacobi). Abolitionist literacies resist prison reform as a categorical impossibility and call for both an end to prisons and the creation of conditions that make them obsolete (e.g., Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad; Cavallaro; Hutchinson; Middleton). This approach demands a self-reflexive stance that critiques the limits of conditions as they are. It works directly with and foregrounds the work of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. It also revises our pedagogy, practices of collaboration, and norms of relational engagement, while troubling the complexities of power and identity formation.

Relationships between people who have been incarcerated and those who have not—as well as between people who are currently incarcerated and those who are not—won't immediately bring down prison walls, but they do create a porosity in the metaphorical walls of the prison that allows for different power dynamics to emerge (Lewis). In my time working in community with formerly incarcerated community members, the power dynamics shifted insofar as I brought academic and professional knowledge to a table where lived experience was of equal or greater value to my academic and professional offerings. Abolitionists remind us that we have to create opportunities for proximity to reduce the social, physical, and psychological distance among those of us who are currently incarcerated, those who have been incarcerated, and those who have not. The good news is that this isn't new work. Prison abolition scholarship has paved extensive pathways for abolitionist literacies to draw from (e.g., Davis, *Obsolete*; Davis, *Women*; Gilmore; Kaba; Rodríguez).

Many existing studies of prison literacies are related to the writing instruction and outcomes that happen in prison writing programs (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad; Berry; Cavallaro; Hutchinson; Kocik, O'Ceallaigh, Fettig, and Novotny; Lewis; Middleton). These studies are key to creating conditions that make prisons unnecessary, including thinking critically about existing social and political power dynamics at the nexus of prison literacy and abolition, rethinking narratives that define the relationship between citizenship and literacy, and theory-building around abolitionist literacy practices more broadly. Abolitionist literacies propose the twin premises that composition and literacy studies have an ethical imperative to work towards abolition and that literacy work requires a shift from a focus on literacy primarily as a skill that allows more effective participation in the carceral state to literacy as a practice of reshaping the ways in which we see ourselves and what is possible for human relationality.

Similarly, Black literacy—and more recently, queer Black literacy—scholarship advocates for systemic change. These fields of study assert that existing literacies uphold racial violence, and that we should foreground Black and queer ways of reading and rendering the world around us (e.g., Kynard; Pritchard, *Fashioning Lives*;

Richardson). Black feminist studies spotlights the foundations of dehumanization under racial capitalism, challenges violence and oppression in their many forms, and offers alternatives. Much of Black feminist work is abolitionist insofar as it amplifies possibilities outside of the foundations of the carceral state. Putting abolitionist literacies into conversation with scholarship rooted in queer Black feminist studies yields interesting opportunities for literacy theories and practices that sit in the fraught space between what has and what has not yet been created, while articulating possibilities under conditions of oppression. These kinds of literacy practices do abolitionist work by foregrounding the literacy practices of people with expertise in dehumanization and exclusion, and by directing the energies of literacy workers towards troubling and dismantling categorical exclusion and using imagination as a tool to read, imagine, and write new worlds.

In "No Humans Involved," Wynter traces the lineage of the classification "No Humans Involved/NHI" used by the Los Angeles police department to deny unemployed Black men their rights as humans. NHI serves as a proxy for her to reflect on the ways in which traditional humanist frameworks leave Black people outside of the definition of human (Wynter). This denial of humanity by categorical exclusion is a legacy of the violence of slavery and the subsequent carceral logics of racial capitalism. Many thinkers have, alongside Wynter, considered the impossibility of speaking to the impact of slavery and its afterlife on bodies, as well as the language made im/possible in its wake and the methods of circumnavigating these limitations to find sites of possibility (e.g., Philip, *Blank*; Sharpe; Spillers). M. NourbeSe Philip outlines a key contradiction in her use of the English language in the wake of slavery:

> This language . . . was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies, it is the only language in which I can now function. . . . I begin from a position of extreme distrust of language and do not believe that english [sic]—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. (*Blank*, 55)

Inspired by Philip's poems, with language scattered across the page representing the chaos of the hold, humans becoming commerce, and voices and people lost to the bottom of the ocean during the middle passage, we might consider moments of breaking conventions of language as abolitionist fragments—sites where speakers/writers let go of the expectation of finding full meaning and clarity with the goal. Abolitionist fragments, rather than conveying something complete, represent a gesture towards deeper understanding. I suggest that a queer Black abolitionist approach to literacy requires us to pay closer attention to the work happening in such moments of fracture—not as errors to be corrected, or as thoughts demanding completion, but as an art of rupture that alerts us to a quality of embodied discomfort and moves us closer to breaking carceral logics and designing liberatory ones.

Black feminist scholars have established ways of reading bodies, flesh, and modes of imagination that arguably frame qualities like hieroglyphics of the flesh, post-human imagination, and the realm of the sensual in ways that are, if not literacies themselves,

so closely linked with literacy practices that they require further consideration within the context of composition and literacy studies. Here, I am advocating for a perspective of literacy work as a kind of art most fruitfully practiced in collaboration with communities forced to define themselves outside of Western notions of humanity. I use, as a starting point, the work of two theorists who have taken a different approach to understanding what it means to exist in a body that has been defined outside of the dominant definitions of what a human can be and do. I argue that some of the intellectual explorations of Spillers and Brown function as literacy theories, even though not explicitly framed as such, that offer firm ground upon which to build a framework for queer Black abolitionist literacies.

Black queer abolitionist imagination is a fundamental literacy practice that reconstructs ways of knowing and being in the world. Brown articulates specific limitations and modes of imagination that contribute to abolitionist literacy practices: "Dystopia, the horrific terms of being black in our earthly condition, is a starting point for critique; dystopia forms the terrain of our existence. But forms of black life and liveliness are claimed and created in the terror" (1).

These words were a meditation for me in the year prior to my organizing the Radical Black Imagining workshop—the paradox of asserting Black "life and liveliness" in conditions of terror. I wanted to feel the full fleshiness and possibility of dwelling in what Brown refers to when she gestures toward utopia, which she defines as "the moments when those of us untethered from the hope of rights, recognition, or redress here on earth celebrate ourselves as elements in a cosmic effluvium" (1–2). What would a quality of celebration like that look like? What would it feel like in our individual bodies working collaboratively? Imperfect as we are, acknowledging that we don't need "rights, recognition, or redress" (Brown 2) to celebrate ourselves, it might look like me spending time with people I care about simply because of our shared experience of Blackness and commitment to curiosity about what we might create together. It would, however, also engage an embodied tension around resisting power dynamics occurring within differential relationships to knowledge about and experience within prisons.

In Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she outlines the idea of "American Grammar" wherein the Black body is a text onto which violence is inscribed physically into flesh, first through the laceration of the whip, and subsequently within the grammar of what we may now call racial capitalism—complete with judges, prisons, police, norms and dehumanizing logics. This process plays out in what she refers to as a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Spillers 67). The hieroglyphics of the flesh extend invisibly beyond the space and time of slavery into the present carceral state. Amber Jamilla Musser takes the flesh thusly rendered by Spillers—flesh as the location where Black humans lose their subjectivity and take on the projections required to undergird systems of racial and capitalist violence—and contemplates the potential for the body's fleshiness to be a location for meaning-making. Through this meaning-making process, she argues, Black humans are able to define our selfhood through what she refers to as "brown jouissance," a process of reveling in the excess, pleasure, and vulnerability within and between the bodies and flesh of Black and brown people (Musser).

What Might This Work Look Like in Practice?

Between Fall of 2024 and Winter of 2025, as the Director of Narrative Change at a small grassroots organization where I worked at the time—Community Spring—I co-created and co-facilitated a series of workshops called "Imagining Black Futures." I drafted the Imagining Black Futures workshops with Spillers's hieroglyphics of the flesh, Brown's utopia, and Musser's brown jouissance in mind. Workshop participants would labor together with me in playful ways, luxuriously meandering through the intellectual and aesthetic theory of many of the scholars referenced in this paper, not only experiencing our bodies as text, but writing against the grain of the "American Grammar" of racial capitalism, breaking and re-making language in the lineage of Philip, examining the areas of convergence and divergence between us all under the racializing assemblage of Blackness in some form or fashion, and producing some sort of living textual document with words, and also through our embodiment.

Community Spring (CS) is a nonprofit that aims to disrupt the cycle of poverty and incarceration by creating access to guaranteed income and supporting community members in building power necessary to meet their basic needs through a guaranteed income program and various literacy-based community workshops. Approximately 50% of CS employees are directly impacted by the criminal legal system. The organization supports justice-impacted community members in building skills and power critical to transforming unjust systems and creates a community where those who have survived carceral systems are able to challenge dominant narratives and build a culture that resists the carceral logic of racial capitalism. The goal of the workshop series was to engage Black community members, both those who were formerly incarcerated and those with impacted family and friends, in theory-building; community-building through enlivening conversation; and worldmaking through study of Black radical imagination, embodiment, carceral logics, and counternarratives with the power to end mass incarceration.

A total of five people participated in the entire two-part, six-day workshop series, with an additional three also participating in portions of the six-day workshop as well as related narrative-change and storytelling workshops that have informed this article. Three of the five workshop participants, and six of the abolitionist storytelling workshop participants, had been incarcerated for varying lengths of time in prisons and/or jails, ranging from months to decades, and everyone had loved ones and family members who had been previously incarcerated. I include myself as a participant primarily because, although it is impossible to flatten the hierarchy between myself as a facilitator and the rest of the group, I entered the workshop with the same level of curiosity and uncertainty as everyone else. We recorded audio throughout the workshop as well as written texts so that I could return to review and analyze both the audio and the texts. The sample size of the group, while admittedly small, offers a glimpse of the possibilities for and potential promise of future related projects.

Through analysis of these workshop artifacts, which I refer to as fragments, I reflect on the ways that formerly incarcerated Black storytellers and impacted communities navigate the tensions of differential power (between those with and

without direct incarceration experience), carceral literacies, embodiment, and the abolitionist potential of queer Black radical imagination. The workshop series was structured as a six-day experience with each day consisting of two hours of discussion and writing prompts. I wanted to attend to the embodied and social aspects of literacy work before moving into writing practice. I frontloaded the curriculum with theory, foregrounding embodied practices and queer Black feminist theories of storytelling. On day one, we opened with an exercise that paired a writing prompt—"What are the first stories you remember being told? / What are the first stories you remember reading?"—with an embodiment activity. After we all responded to the prompt, most of us shared some insight from what we had written. Then, I led a body awareness activity to invite us to become aware of the relationship between what we were reading, hearing, and remembering, and the physical sensations associated with these various modes of literacy. The goal of beginning in this way was threefold: firstly, to lay the foundation for body awareness throughout the workshop; secondly, to welcome participants' awareness of their physical reactions/sensations and ensure that they were in touch with moments when they might wish or need to step away from the group; and lastly, to build awareness of the relationships between literacy, community, and embodiment. On that first day, we continued with readings from incarcerated writers and formerly incarcerated writers—notably, "Belly Song" by Etheridge Knight, which served as a bridge to talk about bodies, sensation, prison writing, and the relationship between narrative and storytelling.

The remaining days of the workshop proceeded in similar fashion, with embodied exercises; discussions around quotes from Wynter, Brown, Musser, and several abolitionist artists and writers, interspersed with writing prompts, writing, and more discussion. The intention was to create a finished document articulating a collaborative abolitionist future, what that would look like in concrete terms, and what it would feel like in our bodies. As the facilitator, I was open about my own queer Black embodiment, and the ways that this informed my selection of texts and media for the workshop. Participants also shaped the workshop by bringing in some of their own poems, media, and theories. Whereas the first three days of the workshop were heavy on theory, discussion, and body awareness, and light on writing, the final three days relied more on contemplation and written reflection intended to yield a form of written story or cohesive body of written work created in collaboration between participants. In the final days of the seminar, we moved toward the concept of worldbuilding, speculative fiction, and abolitionist possibilities. For the culminating project, we began with the prompt: "Share one possibility this workshop has inspired you to imagine and work with a partner to write that world into reality." While the discussions and writing in response to the prompt and the theory/worldbuilding we did during the workshop were collaborative, the writing we accomplished was largely individual work that we discussed together.

Sites of Contradiction and Possibility: Workshop Fragment Analysis

The imagination and worldbuilding potential of each person who participated in the experimental Imagining Black Futures workshop is rooted in innumerable stories and experiences, many of which involve one of two things: incarceration in some form, and/or the felt sense of claustrophobia within the narratives that America tells about Black and brown people and people impacted by the justice system. These narratives ripple out past the walls of prisons, perpetuating harm that has a uniformly negative but differential impact on incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and not-yet-incarcerated people. We worked both within and against dominant narratives and toward modes of experience that engaged ways of knowing and being that we haven't yet achieved. There were limitations to what was possible in the short time we had together. We articulated a vision for the world we wanted to see without yet being able to articulate the concrete path to arriving there. Recognizing both the power of embodiment and the presence of embodied trauma in our shared space, we operated within an embodied awareness because we agreed that attending to awareness of embodiment was important, but we continued to have questions about when it may feel appropriate to foreground embodiment, and when may be perceived as unsafe and unwelcome.

For the remainder of this article, I will speak exclusively in conversation with the writing and ideas of people who have experienced both Blackness and incarceration. The workshop series and the theory behind it made restorative literacies practice possible on three axes: firstly, that of written text; secondly, through the embodied grammar of Spillers and Musser; and thirdly, informed to some extent by the language-bending imperative of Philip, this embodied grammar as a space of utopian imagining. According to Brown, "forms of black life and liveliness are claimed and created in the terror" (Brown 1). They are also created through the speculation made possible within a subjectivity that, by necessity, occurs in the communal space of "not being" [not seen as fully human, but able to imagine ourselves as other than human].

As I addressed earlier in this article, people who are or have been incarcerated can experience tangible benefits from carceral logics and incumbent narratives. Such narratives are normative literacies that can be traded as a kind of currency. Their material consequences, while opening doors within the context of carceral citizenship, also close doors of possibility within the context of radical queer Black abolitionist literacy practices. Many of the people I have worked with have expressed a deep sense of connection to notions of Christian redemption and the idea that they have, through painstaking individual labor, achieved a transformative mindset that serves as a way of keeping them out of prison in perpetuity. The Bible is, at least in numerous locations in the South, the only book made available to people in prison. As we will see in some of the following fragments, carceral logics of individualism, bootstrapping, and rising above the proverbial riff raff, serve as a protection against the ever-present threat of re-incarceration, while agitating an impulse towards a world that renders carceral logics unnecessary.

The following language excerpts emerged from the workshop series. It is my hope that each fragment can be seen in its fullness. I am claiming the fragment as a restorative practice of literacy. I refer to them as fragments not solely because they are partial, but to capture the complexity of the broken wholeness that happens as we are forced to use inadequate language and logic to make abolitionist meaning. I argue that working in broken and sometimes conflicting logics is a step towards abolition. My aim is for the opacity of the paradox within some of the statements to be read as a testament to the labor happening in the slippage between carceral logic as a hieroglyphics of the flesh, and the process of reaching for abolitionist logics from beneath dystopian pressures.

I arrange the fragments into two themes. The first theme entails "sites of contradiction," wherein normative and restorative logics are expressed in opposition to one another in ways that point towards a third path forward for abolitionist visioning—one that holds contradiction and conflict as inevitable and productive in the process of radical imagining. The second theme comprises "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations" that reside squarely within the realm of the possible which have not yet been achieved. These "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations" could be defined as "forms of black life and liveliness [that] are claimed and created in the terror" (Brown 1), which came to light in the space of mutual recognition and possibility of the workshop series.

Sites of Contradiction

1. "I really think we need to imagine an alternative to prisons." (Amara)
2. "Sometimes I feel like some people really should be in prison." (Amara)
3. "I never knew how to work until I went to prison. I'm grateful that I learned how to work." (Amara)
4. "It's better to be getting paid on the outside than to be working for free in prison." (Amara)
5. "In some ways, I was more free in prison. / When I got out, it was terrifying all the decisions I had to make." (Nelson)
6. "When I was going into prison, I was afraid that people would hurt me." (Octavius)
7. "I found a community in prison that I didn't have outside of it." (Octavius)
8. "I was healthier in some ways in prison, physically for sure, and in some ways mentally too. I read books. / I don't really read as much as I did when I was in prison." (Octavius)
9. "The biggest thing I changed was my mindset and nobody could do that for me other than me." (Nelson)
10. "We really do need each other. No one person can do it alone." (Nelson)
11. "Yes, Black people need each other, but I'm not buying it about the collective thing. I just want to play the devil's advocate for a second. No one is looking out for me but me right now. So when we see Trump in office again, that's because those of us at the bottom of the ladder are not feeling the impact of your affirmative action, of your DEI work. I will take care of myself and my family regardless of what the government does. Individualism is important." (James)

All of the above fragments represent sites of contradiction wherein an ethic and a longing for abolition meets the pressures of lived experience. James's, Nelson's, and Octavius's feeling of freedom inside prison were not a result of the liberatory potential of the prison; rather, it is a testament to some of the oppressive realities of the lived experience of Black men under racial capitalism. As in Spillers's *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, Nelson describes an experience in which carceral logics are built into the experiences of Black and brown people, whether they are in prison or outside. The very notions of freedom and liberation are troubled when community is more possible in a space that operates as the end goal of Black dehumanization. However, even while James pushed back against the communal logic of the workshops, he was a willing participant who laughed and imagined alongside the rest of us. If abolition were to demand that James reside in a single ideological location (either affirming the liberatory potential of collectivity or refusing it), he wouldn't be able to participate in his full complexity, or articulate the depth and complexity of his reality. His resistance spoke to an uncomfortable friction—a conflict that inspired more than a few moments of embodied discomfort within the group—that needed to be held rather than flattened.

In Octavius's fragments, the community he found in prison wasn't made possible because prisons are glorious places conducive to forming community; instead, his insight suggests that the carceral conditions created on both sides of the prison walls constrain community-building potential, but do so unsuccessfully. In his analysis, there is a mandate for community inside of prisons to negate the fear and terror of carceral conditions and the violence of corrections officers. As in Brown's *Black Utopias*, Black people have often created spaces of possibility for themselves even within the constraints of racism and capitalism. This is not to suggest that we maintain the status quo, but rather to say that Octavius's fragment regarding community within prisons holds abolitionist possibility and is a worthy foundation to further theoretical consideration *precisely because* it holds a logical conflict and pushes readers to critique a system in which it's easier to build community while inside of prison than it is outside.

James's comment resisting my own hasty dismissal of rhetorics of meritocracy is a valid pushback to my failure to recognize that, for people cycling between grind culture and prison, collective support is hard to fathom. I read this fragment as a call for more opportunities to experience the physical sensation of doing worldbuilding work together. In this moment of fissure, there was something to be learned from the tone of his voice, movements, expressions and gestures that would not be available to people reading the words alone. The tension represented in James's fragment, as well as the tension in all of the fragments above, was a plea for understanding and action. Embodied literacy practices such as these call for greater consideration. People who have experienced incarceration are central to reading and writing an abolitionist world into existence. Some of that work has to happen in ways that are physical and embodied. The fragmentary nature of the tensions above is a testament to the fact that Black and brown people very much hold abolitionist possibilities that can only be upheld as a process of becoming rather than a finalized text. This "process of becoming" is uncomfortable. It can be felt in the room as it's being discussed. Although it would likely have been more comfortable to shut it down, doing so would have followed a prison logic

of containment. I am inspired by this awareness to advocate for more tolerance of messiness and uncertainty in not only abolitionist literacies, but all literacies pushing toward social justice aims.

In participant fragments that made meaning as "sites of possibility" and "abolitionist articulations," they pondered direct changes to Black people's current lived experiences under racial capitalism in response to a series of writing prompts about carceral logics. They also articulated explicit visions for abolition.

Sites of Possibility

1. "Young people really need an alternative that's about healing. So many of them are out there hurting and wind up in prison because they didn't have anything else better to do with their lives." (Nelson)
2. "When it comes down to it, it's about attention. We got to pay more attention to one another. Everyone needs that." (Richard)
3. "I cried the day that I left. I had been back to prison so many times in my life. The guards would say things like, 'see you next time' and I knew it was true. But the last time I left, I knew I couldn't go back. I didn't know how I was gonna make it on the outside, but I knew I wasn't going back, and I haven't." (Nelson)

Abolitionist Articulations

1. "In our radical Black future, prisons don't exist anymore because there are adequate resources, a collectivist mindset, violent crime doesn't exist, when people do violent crime people are taken to rehabilitation, people are housed and focused on helping rather than punishment. There's more collaboration." (Amara's worldbuilding narrative)
2. "I am imagining a world where crime doesn't exist and all needs are met through government support. Crime can be mediated before it even happens because people are given mental health support throughout their lives." (Octavius's worldbuilding narrative)
3. "I'm a big dude. I'm 6'4", it's been a long time since anyone lifted me off of my feet, but when I imagine the world without prisons, you know that feeling you get when someone picks you up and you're carefree and at ease? When the pressure is lifted off of you? That's how I feel." (Octavius's worldbuilding narrative)

In the fragments above, we find articulations of sites of possibility alongside overtly abolitionist articulations inspired by a series of facilitated dialogues about topics ranging from Black radical joy and queer liberation, to writing prompts about lived experience, Black and queer abolitionist imagining, and embodiment. These fragments are steps in the process of moving towards abolition. They serve as an antidote to the literacy normativities which, materially useful though they can be, limit the potential for Black liberatory imagination, and ultimately, limit the potential for all humans to be defined in ways that exist outside of logics of oppression and incarceration.

Discussion

Embodied work at the intersection of literacy and Black radical imagination requires trust that can only safely be built over time. Holding conflict and unknowability is far more challenging, if it's even possible, when trust hasn't been built. In this project, trust and safety was made possible by direct compensation for theorizing and worldbuilding. Within our current context of precarity, material compensation for people impacted by the criminal legal system is a key component of abolitionist pedagogy. Workshop participants reflected that the relationships they cultivated during the "Imagining Black Futures" workshop deepened as a result of our time together. Importantly, the scholarship was secondary to the worldbuilding we were doing and continue to do in our everyday lives. Our work centered a conversation between community-driven theory and academic scholarship that foregrounded the community's potential to build theory. This approach is foundational to an ethics of abolition. During the workshop, we weren't aiming to "create a discursive space" or "engage in practices of literacy" as primary goals of imagining Black futures. Instead, this space and related practices arose from the primary goal of enjoying ourselves together while thinking about serious things. Laughter was very much present in our space together, intermingling with heavy conversations and writing about dystopia.

Engaging with the full complexity of the ways in which carceral logics function in the lives of people who are formerly incarcerated (and therefore also within the context of prison abolition more broadly) is both challenging and absolutely essential to the goal of participatory abolitionist literacy work, especially the work that takes place at the intersection of abolitionist ideals of activists like myself and the lived experience of the people I work with. Engagement with contradictions and carceral logics ranging from meritocracy and worthiness to criminalized individualism is central to abolitionist literacies work. This kind of engagement demands greater attentiveness to embodied experience within the context of literacy work. We cannot simply gloss over physical sensations. Instead, if we are to hold complexity and conflict in our classrooms and community spaces, we have to build our pedagogy around attending openly and explicitly to those sensations. I welcome others to pursue the idea of embodied literacies as a conversation between embodied sensation and the pleasures and discomforts of considering the complexities of disagreement, unknowability, and uncertainty. Further explorations of embodied literacy honor the kind of work we did in the Imagining Black Futures workshop series as well as future work on abolitionist literacies.

Racial capitalism ensures that the hostilities of the prison industrial complex will be felt by children, families, and communities, regardless of whether they have direct experiences of incarceration. This is even more so the case once people who have survived some combination of racism, poverty, homophobia, transphobia, and patriarchy become involved in the violence of the carceral state. For many people who are formerly incarcerated, even while it feels freeing to imagine a world without prisons, carceral logics hold a monetary value and cultural currency, and become a key part of a post-incarceration identity narrative that serves as a protective mechanism against the ever-present threat of reincarceration. Literacy practitioners have to work within

the complexities presented by the interweaving of freedom dreams with internalized carceral logics.

In our current moment, it is crucial that more of us perceive and acknowledge literacy work as abolitionist in nature, find locations where abolitionist literacies are practiced, and theorize the work being done in those spaces. It will not be possible to strategize our way toward abolition without being together in new ways. This study posits queer Black radical imagination as an abolitionist literacy practice that warrants more attention and funding. This is a practice that requires spaces for Black people to claim the title of theorists, through embodied experience and fragments of text that represent full and complex modes of thinking. We must, regardless of our relationship to the academy or our direct experience with the carceral state, take seriously the multidimensionality and sensory complexity of our discursive practices. Abolitionist literacies require that we all make meaning and take action from our understanding of both our individual and our collective bodies, the shapes we take, and the ways that we collectively assign value to our embodied experiences.

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