

Making Citizens Behind Bars (and the Stories We Tell About It): Queering Approaches to Prison Literacy Programs

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In June 2016, the US Department of Education reinstated access to Pell Grants for incarcerated students through their Second Chance Pell Grant Pilot Program, granting funding to 67 colleges and universities across the country. The goal of the initiative is to allow incarcerated individuals to receive Pell Grant funding and pursue postsecondary education in order to develop the skills necessary to “live lives of purpose and contribute to society upon their release” (“12,000 Incarcerated Students”). This pilot program reversed a 1994 Congressional change to the Higher Education Act (HEA) that rendered incarcerated students ineligible for Pell Grant funding, causing many prison education programs to shut their doors. While the future of the program currently remains uncertain, the availability of these grants increased access to education for students who had previously been barred because of their incarcerated status. In a press release announcing the program, the Department of Education frames its work as giving “deserving incarcerated individuals” access to higher education in an effort to “reduce recidivism, promote opportunity, and give justice-involved individuals a meaningful second chance” (“12,000 Incarcerated Students”). Similar language can be found in prison education programs across the country, whether they are Second Chance Pell Grant recipients or not. In mission statements, promotional materials, and media coverage, education and its attendant benefits (reduced recidivism, savings to taxpayers, increased employability) are consistently linked with the creation of “productive and engaged citizens” (“12,000 Incarcerated Students”).

The problem with this image of the citizen reformed by education is that the students in these programs have all been rendered *non-citizens* as a result of their incarceration. During their sentences, they are denied many forms of civic participation and there are additional barriers to voting in twelve states even when their sentences are complete (NCSL). Even in states with no voting restrictions, their marginalized status will continue to follow them, and they will face sanctioned discrimination in the form of decreased access to employment, housing, and post-secondary educational opportunities and will be barred from many government assistance programs. Regaining anything that looks like the popular

ideals of citizenship—voting, access to jobs and education, government assistance—will be difficult, if not impossible.

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Given these contradictions and conflicts, why talk about citizenship and prison education together at all? Across the United States, prison education programs invoke the power of literacy education in the project of (re) making good citizens in the stories they tell about their work. In the programs’ promotional materials,

the figure of the citizen becomes a site of struggle, and this figure—the “bad citizen” in need of redemption and the potential for “good citizenship” in the future—is often central to the values that guide these programs. Literacy education becomes a focal point for the individual reform of deviant citizens, but this focus on the individual trains incarcerated people for a kind of citizenship that will not actually be available to them when (or if) they are released. Citizenship is frequently invoked as an ideal, but its complexity is elided. Examining these complexities opens up larger questions about the relationship between literacy and citizenship and the stories we tell connecting the two.

Recent scholarship in literacy and composition studies has demonstrated how the mythos of citizenship gets deployed to tell stories of who is included and who is not (e.g., Guerra; Wan). Such stories, argues Amy Wan, deserve our attention because “[h]ow a nation defines, constructs, and produces citizens communicates not only the ideals of that nation, but also its anxieties, particularly in moments of political, cultural, and economic uncertainty” (1). The development of mass incarceration in the US is a product of similar uncertainties. Because of persistent anxieties about race, legal scholar Michelle Alexander has demonstrated how new, institutionally sanctioned forms of discrimination replace the old—from slavery to Jim Crow to mass incarceration, where 1 in 15 black men and 1 in 36 Hispanic men can expect to be incarcerated in their lifetime, as opposed to 1 in 106 white men (“Mass Incarceration Problems”). Since educational programs are such a prominent feature of the carceral landscape,¹ and incarcerated people have a unique relationship to citizenship, I argue that we must include prison literacy programs in scholarly conversations about the relationship between education and citizenship. In many educational contexts, there is frequently an easy conflation of literacy education and the production of good citizens, a conflation that I argue is both especially tempting and especially damning in the context of prison education. While programs frequently invoke the language of citizenship in describing their goals, they do so without considering the particular challenges incarcerated people face in actually achieving this vision of citizenship—or indeed, if such a vision is ever possible (or desirable) for someone who has been incarcerated.

Incarcerated students make an important contribution to conversations about literacy education and the promise of citizenship both in spite of and because of their limited access to citizenship’s

privileges. In this article, I propose a framework to aid in interrogating the role that the production of citizens plays in the educational landscape of mass incarceration, and how teachers and scholars of literacy can intervene in these conversations. Drawing on three scholarly traditions concerned with prisons—New Literacy Studies (NLS), queer studies, and critical prison studies—I demonstrate how teachers and scholars of writing and literacy can intervene in the project of citizenship production by challenging and critiquing the logics of individualism that underwrite prison literacy programs. When we undo these logics, we can resist the individual narratives of redemption and transformation (e.g. Jacobi; Meiners and Sanabria) and envision possibilities that trouble the relationship between literacy education and the production of good citizens in prison.

In order to do this, we must take responsibility for the ideologies that show themselves in the materials that represent the work of prison education programs, including mission statements, promotional materials, and articles in local newspapers. While previous research has offered principles to guide our literacy work inside prison classrooms (e.g. Jacobi and Becker), I build on that work by turning an analytical lens toward the ideologies embedded in the ways we frame the literacy programs themselves, arguing for sustained (and queer) attention to the rhetorics of individual citizenship. A queer lens allows us to challenge the most common ideas about citizenship, calling our attention to the ways it often fails as an ideal, particularly for marginalized people. While we always need to be sensitive to the multiple audiences prison education programs are responsible to, we must also recognize that program materials don't just guide our work—they represent our work to a wider public and can reproduce harmful narratives about incarcerated people. This attention to language is essential because it has a material effect on the incarcerated students we teach, as well as the futures we imagine for our classes, programs, and the wider landscape of prison education.

In this article, I begin by outlining the intersections among literacy studies, queer studies, and critical prison studies, illustrating the ways their intersections might be productively mobilized in critiquing the role of citizenship in prison education. I then follow with a study of the “Higher Education in Jails and Prisons Programming List,” demonstrating the prevalence of and problems with individualist, “bootstraps” ideologies in the construction of citizenship in these programs. I conclude with a framework, influenced by queer prison abolitionists and queer citizenship theorists, to guide the work of revising and taking responsibility for the work of our public materials.

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Education And The Carceral Landscape: An Interdisciplinary Framework For Queering Citizenship In Prison Education Programs

When I first stepped behind the walls of a prison three years ago as a writing instructor for the Education Justice Project, I quickly learned that prisons are built on and sustained by distinctly counter-productive logics. All across the country, while states routinely divert resources away from K-12 schools and public universities in times of budget crises, they do not hesitate to incarcerate their residents at nearly 4.5 x the cost (depending on the state) (Meiners 18). In Illinois, for example, where I earned my PhD and started my work as a prison educator, Erica Meiners describes the two different paths that such budget choices create with the phrase “going downstate,” a metaphor that carries radically different meanings for different people: for wealthier Chicago residents, this means leaving the suburbs and traveling south to the prestigious (and expensive) University of Illinois (15). For poorer Chicago residents, their schools underfunded and crumbling, their neighborhoods ravaged by gentrification, this means traveling south to be incarcerated in the state’s prisons, including the Danville Correctional Center, where I was a tutor and instructor for two years. Despite the conventional wisdom that tells us that these institutions are for those who deserve them (prisons for the worst of the worst, universities for the best of the best), these budget choices show that schools and prisons are linked by patterns of uneven resource allocation, illustrating that “these institutions do not merely reflect existing structures of power but reproduce and even exacerbate them” (Meiners 18).

Though I use Illinois to illustrate the ways that seemingly disconnected state institutions are analogous, such patterns repeat themselves across the country, and funding is but one of many points of intersection between public schools/universities and prisons. In California, for example, where I now work as an assistant professor, public colleges and universities are provided with furniture that,

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according to Angela Davis, is largely produced by incarcerated people (36). In fact, the number of connections between schools (and other institutions) and prisons is so overwhelming that scholars and activists have started using the phrase “prison-industrial complex” (PIC), a term

that suggests that “criminalization and imprisonment filter through every aspect of how we live and understand ourselves and the world,” including the design of educational institutions (Spade 3). Seeing prisons not as discrete buildings but as part of a web of institutions and practices demonstrates how prisons invisibly—and yet powerfully—permeate our lives in frequently unacknowledged ways.

Acknowledging these intricate, often unspoken connections between prisons and schools/universities, scholars in literacy studies, queer studies, and critical prison studies have separately

interrogated the operations of the PIC. In literacy studies, scholars have examined the complicated role of writing in the prison environment, examining tactical methods of resistance (Plemons), considering the particularly fraught role of literacy sponsors (Jacobi), and researching the role of hope and possibility in the prison writing classroom (Berry, “Doing Time”). In queer studies, scholars and activists have resisted the incarceration and legal regulation of queer bodies (Stanley and Smith) and critiqued the use of legal frameworks as a means of protection (Spade). Finally, the field of critical prison studies offers frameworks for radically deconstructing the normalized operations of the criminal justice system (e.g. Davis), not merely offering solutions to reform it. Collectively, these three fields acknowledge that the PIC is both a product of and producer of normativity, that it dramatically impacts society’s most marginalized, and that it uses literacy education as a component of its project of reform and punishment. The prison is as central to the work of literacy scholars (a field with a long history of commitment to questioning issues of power and privilege in language use) as it is to the political commitments of queer scholars and activists (whose projects critique injustices produced by normativity).

The intersections of the common concerns of these three fields can provide us with a framework to interrogate the normative ideologies embedded in prison literacy programs and offer a set of values to push this work forward. Queer theory and literacy studies’ shared concerns with the operation of *normativity* and critiques of the *discourses of individuality* offer new insight on literacy education and citizenship when considered in the context of prisons. Following the work of Cathy J. Cohen and others who focus on queer theory’s intersectional possibilities, I apply queer theory’s critiques to a wider field of normativity, one that considers particular relationships to the power of state-sanctioned norms. Literacy, in particular, operates in this way, making it a good entry point into the operations of normativity in the PIC. Eric Pritchard’s term “literacy normativity” captures these operations, describing literacy normativity as “the use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textsapes” (28). In many prison programs, a lack of education and literacy are often cited as significant factors that led to incarceration in the first place. This actual or perceived “deficit” becomes a way to simultaneously label incarcerated people as non-normative citizens and provide an avenue of redemption for an offending body to reintegrate into society as a “good citizen.” This mode of redemption, however, relies solely on a process of *individual* work. Whether or not you are “redeemed” into an acceptable citizen depends on the opportunities you take advantage of while incarcerated, via an educational project that promises to reform individual “criminals” into economically productive citizens.

The particular challenge with extending conversations to the construction of citizenship in prisons is that incarcerated people, according to Caleb Smith, are the product of paradoxes produced by carceral institutions, becoming divided figures as “a citizen-in-training but also an exile from civil society” (qtd. in Schorb 177). In order to address these paradoxes, I work to maintain an active tension between what Amy Brandzel calls “a politics of presence” and a “politics of radical critique.” In her work on the queer politics of citizenship, Brandzel writes that a politics of presence requires “compassion toward the normative desires and aspirations for less vulnerability, more social belonging, and access to more life chances” (x), while a politics of critique requires “radical and

downright cranky disdain for normativity” (xi). The tension between these two approaches forms the heart of my framework—it requires that literacy teacher-scholars who work in prisons remain cranky about normativity and normative aspirations (in this case, the ideology of individualism that guides prison education programs and the elusive promise of redemptive citizenship) while acknowledging the ways that the promise of such inclusion may seem like a compelling way to end the violence and suffering that this exclusion causes.

Maintaining such critical tensions extends the project of critique that is already familiar to scholars of literacy and composition: on the one hand, we have critiqued literacy’s violence, and have expressed our disdain for the ways literacy renders people acceptable or unacceptable (e.g., through the politics of “standard English”). On the other hand, we recognize the potential power of literacy to effect change and the ways that denying access to literacy perpetuates the disenfranchisement of marginalized people. When it comes to an investigation of prison literacy programs and their role in the production of citizens, we must also maintain this critical tension between the individual and the systemic by working “to expose the intersectionality of normative belief systems and structures of thought, and offer suggestions as to how we might work against the reentrenchment of these processes” (Brandzel x). Examining this complex relationship to literacy in prison education programs, Patrick Berry has argued that “[w]hile we must find ways to maintain a critical stance toward overly optimistic accounts of literacy,” we also “do ourselves a disservice if we do not recognize the multifaceted, sometimes contradictory ways in which writing accrues value in our lives” (“Doing Time” 138). Keeping these tensions at the forefront of our work, he argues, would help us develop pedagogies that are “mindful of the multiple objectives of literacy and writing instruction—objectives that go well beyond a focus on acquiring skills or gainful employment to the use of writing as a pathway toward understanding oneself in the world” (138). Throughout this project, I work to keep these multiple tensions between crankiness and presence, between violence and possibility, alive in my discussion of prison education work. In this way, I hope to move the conversation away from the more reductive, individualist constructions of the incarcerated citizen in a way that has material consequences for individual programs and the wider landscape of prison literacy education.

Literacy Frameworks And Case Study Methods

In order to more concretely and systematically study the ways that prison education programs across the country frame their work, I analyze programs from the “Higher Education in Jails and Prisons Programming List” (HEJPPL). Compiled by Victoria Bryan and Rebecca Ginsburg, this list contains information on 149 prison education programs across the United States.² From this list, I selected 54 programs across 25 states (including Washington DC and two national programs) for analysis. My primary criterion for selecting programs was the presence of a website, mission statement, or write-up so that I would have a stable set of texts to analyze. I also focused on liberal arts and humanities programs with literacy education³ in some form or another, omitting programs that had only a vocational focus. I also omitted programs that were just for incarcerated youth since my interests are in higher education. Throughout my analysis, I leave the specific programs unnamed

because my purpose is not to critique individual programs but rather to illustrate the larger ideological patterns that these programs follow. An analysis of these ideologies allows us to see the ways they are tied to larger social and political issues and how individual attempts at literacy education are never just about the individual but about constructing a (problematic) vision of citizenship. In instances where I reference specific examples from programs, I assign the programs pseudonyms in order to maintain this focus. In what follows, I show the prevalence of these ideologies and analyze their impact on our understanding of the connections between education, citizenship, and incarceration.

Reducing Recidivism And Making Good Citizens: Promoting An Individual “Choice” Discourse Through Literacy Education

In advertising and promoting their work, prison education programs offer an image of the kind of “good citizen” they will create through educational opportunities—one who makes up for their prior “mistakes” by being economically productive and not a burden to good, law-abiding taxpayers, an image that depends on a sense of individual responsibility and pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps. This vision is frequently supported by an emphasis on reducing recidivism, saving taxpayer money, providing a second chance, and improving future employment prospects, without considering the particular challenges incarcerated people face in actually achieving this imagined idea of citizenship. These attributes are featured prominently in the 54 programs I surveyed: 42 of the programs (over 77%) referenced at least one of these features, and 30 of the programs (over 55%) referenced two or more.

One of the most persuasive justifications for the presence of educational programs in prison is cost savings. Programs frequently emphasize that education can save money in order to argue that prison education will give taxpayers a good return on their investment, citing savings ranging from \$36 to \$97 million per year. Mid-Atlantic Prison Program, for example, informs us on their website that since the state spends over \$60,000 a year to incarcerate just one person, the costs savings to each taxpayer attributable to this particular prison education program in “reduced re-incarceration rates could likely pay for the entire program” and should “be considered a mechanism to reduce the scope of prison [and] save the taxpayer money.” Southern Prison Program cites different statistics, but nevertheless frames the importance of college education in terms of how much it can save the state’s taxpayers: it costs \$25,000 per year to incarcerate one person in this state, but “if college experiences could cut the recidivism rate in half, we could save the taxpayers millions of dollars.” Second Mid-Atlantic Prison Program is even more direct in their budgetary comparisons, articulating the importance of a college education by directly comparing the cost of that education and the cost of incarceration: the daily rate of incarceration in their state is \$115 per day, but the cost of attending a local state college is almost half that amount.

Along these same lines, programs foreground education and literacy in the service of job preparation and as producing marketable, directly transferrable skills. Many programs use general language to describe this job preparation: they describe the potential for “meaningful employment,” “increased employment opportunities,” “employment success,” or “improved job prospects” upon

release. Somewhat tellingly, these programs do not provide comprehensive information (beyond mentions of employment in a handful of “testimonials” or “success stories”) on what kinds of jobs the former students were *actually* able to attain upon release. These vaguely articulated goals don’t address the fact that while some employers are offered incentives to hire people with criminal records, employers are also legally allowed to discriminate against formerly incarcerated people, a stigma that no amount of education and no level of advanced literacy will remedy. And, even though they are in the minority, at least five programs require that incarcerated students pay for their courses (some at a reduced rate). Midwestern Prison Program requires “financial support to cover tuition and fees each semester,” while Second Southern Prison Program pays for the courses while the student is incarcerated, but students must repay the state for the loaned amount *as a condition of their parole*. Given that incarcerated people are typically society’s poorest—and that incarceration tends to exacerbate conditions of poverty because of its impacts beyond the individual and into communities—it is difficult to imagine how many incarcerated people would pay for the courses while incarcerated (or come up with the money once released).

Many programs extend their discussions of taxpayer savings by emphasizing education’s role in reducing recidivism, with 61% of programs citing statistics that students who complete such programs return to prison far less than the approximately 68% national average. Though most programs avoid citing specific percentages (preferring, instead, to simply state that education programs contribute to reduced rates of recidivism), West Coast Prison Program boasts that the “recidivism rate among [their] graduates is just 6%.” East Coast Prison Program reports that “virtually none” of their students return to prison, boasting a recidivism rate of less than 3%. For educators who care about keeping students out of the criminal justice system, breaking cycles of incarceration and having fewer people return to prison is a positive result of these programs. However, like the other goals, the discussions of the ways in which educational programs reduce recidivism do not account for the complexity of systemic inequality. In many of these programs, recidivism is evoked uncritically; as Thom Gehring notes, recidivism often functions as “an unsophisticated, dichotomous, terminal variable,” and the burden rests with the individual’s own efforts to keep from returning to prison without acknowledging the many barriers in that process (Gehring 198). These programs position themselves as giving incarcerated people the resources they need not to recidivate so they are able to enjoy their freedom and rehabilitation once they are released, ignoring the many factors that make educational attainment limited in what it can accomplish in this regard (notably absent from these discussions are those who will never be released from prison). Education does not erase all the post-release challenges and barriers, such as when formerly incarcerated people are banned from government-sponsored food and housing support programs. Taken together, these discourses reduce literacy education to its instrumental value as line items on a budget sheet, simultaneously reducing the complexity of literacy education and overstating what that education can accomplish.

Narrating Redemption through Literacy Education

While many programs invoke just pieces of the individualistic ideologies in their project of producing good citizens, some programs bring a number of these characteristics together in the

narratives they feature. Prison educators have critiqued the use of this type of narrative (e.g. Berry, “Doing Time”; Jacobi and Johnston), a literacy practice that Erica Meiners and Roberto Sanabria describe as constituting a “redemption genre” that follows a remarkably similar pattern: “I was born, committed evil, served time, saw the errors of my ways (found God), and I am now on the true path” (635). These are the narratives that tend to “capture public imagination—stories of admission, forgiveness, regret, familial hope and redemption” (Curry and Jacobi 11), and they are part of a larger project that requires incarcerated people “know” themselves (à la Foucault) “through highly regulatory and confining discursive practices” (Meiners and Sanabria 636) that are always—inescapably, unavoidably—mediated by the institution of the prison.

However, while we must acknowledge that “[s]uch narratives of transformation are, of course, distinctive and representative of these authors’ powerful experiences,” they also frequently “echo a romantic cultural script about the power of reading and writing that, while appealing to the public and especially to literacy educators, can overshadow what Morris Young (2004, 28) calls ‘minor narratives’ that fail to align with dominant tellings” (Berry, *Writing Lives* 105) and break out of the conventions of this genre. We cannot overlook or take lightly the materially important functions these narratives serve—many students see themselves in these renderings and they are rhetorically persuasive for the purpose of accessing material benefits, including obtaining necessary employment or speaking before parole boards. No other kind of narrative except one of individual responsibility and reform is going to get you released from prison or get you a job to support yourself. However, the almost complete lack of “minor narratives” that move away from individual redemption mask the larger factors—trauma or systemic structures of inequality—that contribute to incarceration exponentially more frequently than individual choices.

Of course, studying the complexity and range of the narratives used to support prison education programs is impossible when incarcerated people are largely absent from discussions of this work. While we cannot know the rationales behind each program’s choice to use or exclude the voices of incarcerated people, there are numerous potential reasons for this absence: justice-involved people always face a real risk that their words will be later used against them in legal proceedings, and many prison administrations tightly control the writing that goes in and out of the prison, so that even programs that publish collections of incarcerated students’ work (e.g. SpeakOut! (Curry and Jacobi)) must edit the published work to omit anything that might depict the prison in a bad light. However, over 56% of programs had absolutely no presence of incarcerated people in their materials. An additional 30% (17 programs) had some carefully contextualized quotes—in videos, in “testimonial” sections, or in reflections at award ceremonies. Only 8 programs (a mere 14%) have substantive narratives from currently (or, more commonly, formerly) incarcerated people, and only a few of them break from the script that Meiners and Sanabria identify. This absence speaks to the tight control institutions maintain over the ways the programs get narrated.

When they *are* included, many programs make redemption narratives a prominent feature of the way they frame their work. For example, a newsletter for Third Southern Prison Program contains an article very subtly titled “Redemption” that details the story of one formerly incarcerated student’s journey through prison and to a life beyond through the redeeming power of education.

Though very little information is provided on this student's early life, he was incarcerated three times before he was 19 for gang-related activity. When he started his third prison sentence, he didn't take advantage of the prison's educational opportunities right away. Eventually, he "saw the error of his ways" (how he made this change is not explained) and decided that he didn't want to be involved in gangs anymore; instead, he "wanted to be an educated man." This marked a turning point in the narration of his life, or what Meiners and Sanabria would call finding "the true path." Though he was not eligible for a bachelor's program because he was up for parole in four years, he devoted himself to his studies, earning more than double the necessary credits for an Associate of Arts degree. While enrolled in this program, he and other incarcerated students saw a shift in their perspective on the world: "they began to see their involvement [with gangs] differently. They began having condescending attitudes to the thought patterns of their friends and the reasons for doing the kind of things they did." The three additional issues of the newsletter for Third Southern Prison Program are full of similar redemption narratives.

Third Mid-Atlantic Prison Program features "student success stories" where visitors to their webpage can "meet" some of the former students who have transformed their lives "through the power of higher education." The stories begin similarly: the students got involved with crime (drugs, gangs) and continued to get in trouble once they were incarcerated. One student is described as believing he had no value, no hope, and nothing to pass on to his own children. Another student describes how anger and fear led him in the wrong direction, eventually leading to his incarceration. A third student describes himself as "a street thug" with "no respect for [himself] or humanity." After these bleak beginnings, each of these students goes on to talk about the positive impact that higher education had on their outlooks and how instrumental it was in "turning their lives around." When the voices of incarcerated people are actually present in prison education program materials, they are frequently used to illustrate the desired outcome of prison education across the country—good citizens who have seen the error of their ways and have reformed themselves through hard work.

The repetition of these particular kinds of narratives—and the requirement that they are produced as part of the prison experience—illustrates Meiners and Sanabria's claim that "the PIC advances a quiet insistence that those incarcerated 'know' themselves in specific institutionalized ways" (643). This is one of many places where the push and pull between a politics of presence and a politics of critique is acutely felt; students are required to produce redemption narratives for parole boards and prison officials, and so we must acknowledge the current necessity of learning to narrate your life this particular way as a survival strategy; after all, "If an author knows that the audience does not have the ability to bear witness to her life in ways that will be productive for the author, the author can be engaging in tactics of survival" (Meiners and Sanabria 645). Narratives that follow these scripts are useful and desirable: useful for the prisons, in order to show that they are successfully rehabilitating offending citizens; for programs to show that they are helping prisons achieve their goals and pose no threat to their operations; and for incarcerated people themselves, as a tactic for survival and as a way to access material resources. However, a politics of critique asks us to begin to challenge the inclusion of these narratives in the work we do in our prison education programs. If we include and highlight narratives that provide "opportunities for writing and connecting outside

of the self” we “might encourage prison writers to link their individual experience to more systemic understandings and critiques of current practice” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 77). The narratives in these examples simultaneously reinforce and ignore systemic problems; in the examples above, the crimes associated with gang activity or drug use/selling are positioned as a series of bad individual choices, and the decision to turn away from those activities is positioned as another individual choice that gives the incarcerated person a “second chance” (presumably to make up for the first chance they didn’t take advantage of) to remake themselves through education. Absent from these narratives is any acknowledgement of the systemic inequalities that create conditions for gangs or underground economies. We need to make room for stories that show who the individual is in the world, stories that focus on *connectivity*—the way the individual person is connected to others in a web of social relationships. Literacy, in these kinds of narratives, becomes positioned as much more than a tool in a process of individual, bootstraps reform. Instead, literacy education is a dynamic process that doesn’t just impact the individual but also their web of connections in their communities.

Constructing the Good Citizen through Higher Education

Collectively, these rhetorical characteristics have a common focus on reforming *individual* people into model citizens, focusing on the individual responsibility to build a “productive” life (defined as making economic contributions and not being a taxpayer burden) during their incarceration and beyond by participating in education programs. The collective vision of these education programs is implicitly supported by arguments “for what a person needs (or needs *to be*) in order to be prepared for a future and to act as a citizen” (Wan 22). Several programs explicitly evoke the language of citizenship, typically connecting transferable educational “skills” to transforming incarcerated people into good citizens. In Second East Coast Prison Program, for example, interviews with administrators linked good individual choices with creating productive citizens. Participating in this educational program, they argue, “is a concrete example of the positive choices these gentlemen have made to accomplish significant changes in their lives” because “we know that returning *citizens* to a global society armed with vocational and education credentials is truly the equalizer for positive productive citizenship, and greatly reduces the rate of recidivism” (emphasis mine). Collectively, they argue that the effect of education will improve the larger social order: “the more educated the citizenry, the better the social order.”

“A queer intervention—a queer perspective on prison education programs—can be sensitive to the most rhetorically persuasive arguments and begin to shift the conversation to the larger social forces that feed the prison-industrial complex in order to challenge the narratives we tell about incarcerated people.”

However, as with the educational contexts in Amy Wan’s study, the many challenges that formerly incarcerated people face “highlights the inequality among people’s citizenship and the inadequacy of literacy as a sole solution” (26). Their newly acquired skills cannot overcome employment discrimination and

their exclusion from the very social supports that would support a post-release life. No matter how educated, the scarlet letter of incarceration follows them as they attempt to navigate their supposed re-attainment of their citizenship status, a scarlet letter that burns ever brighter with the ways that electronic records make it more difficult to escape the stigma of incarceration. Furthermore, this framework ignores those incarcerated students with little or no hope for release.

This focus on the individual should be both familiar and unsurprising—individualism, or pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, is frequently evoked in discussions of literacy education. The problem with this, according to Victor Villanueva, is “if everything is reduced to individual will, work, and responsibility, there’s no need to consider group exclusion” (“Blind” 6). What we fail to acknowledge is that for some “the bootstraps break before the boots are on, that too many have no boots” (Villanueva, *Bootstraps* xiv). If we only look at individuals to figure out why literacy education does not accomplish its inclusive democratic goals, we come to simple judgments about motivation and responsibility to make use of available resources. There’s no need to contend with the larger structural forces of inequality. This focus on individual work, responsibility, and bootstraps is another manifestation of Harvey Graff’s “literacy myth,” the idea that literacy is linked to upward mobility, a myth that ignores the complex material, social, and economic factors that act as barriers to this supposed mobility. Furthermore, when literacy education is linked so closely with the development of citizenship the way it frequently is in prisons and the way Amy Wan found in her own case studies, “the burden of realizing citizenship remains on the individual rather than locating that burden within a larger system of inequality” (Wan 35). Ultimately, it functions as part of a larger discourse about individual “choice” that is frequently mobilized around issues of crime and punishment—you, incarcerated person, made “bad choices” that landed you in prison. I, person who has never been incarcerated, made “good choices.” Under this ideological umbrella, education becomes the solution to make up for your “bad choices,” never mind that many of my students grew up in neighborhoods ravaged by gentrification and subject to funding cuts for schools, where sometimes the best way to ensure that they were fed and clothed and housed meant joining a gang. The “second chance” that so many of these programs claim to provide is, for many, actually their *first* chance at education.

Jobs, reduced recidivism, cost savings to taxpayers, second chances—none of these is inherently negative. There is nothing wrong with making people more employable or keeping them from returning to prison. We *want* incarcerated people to stay out of the prison system. We *want* them to be able to financially support their families. And these descriptions were not written with radical activists in mind—they were written to be rhetorically persuasive to those who frequently have the power to make or break prison education programs: lawmakers and prison administrators. Cost savings, reduced recidivism, law and order—all of this is persuasive rhetoric in an era of mass incarceration, and a politics of presence requires that we acknowledge the power of the promises of prison education, especially for those who are incarcerated. The problem is that a focus on these factors presents a limited vision of citizenship for the formerly (or future formerly) incarcerated person. These programs seek to fill gaps in education and offer opportunities for incarcerated people, without acknowledging the systemic forces—poverty, racism, underfunded schools, homophobia, transphobia, etc.—that caused these gaps in education or the factors that render the incarcerated

students in these programs non-citizens in the first place.

My analysis of these programs provides just a brief snapshot of the larger landscape that, while not comprehensive, does indicate patterns that repeat themselves across the country. After all, there are programs not included in this study because they operate with no mission statement or public materials at all. Even for those that do publish public materials, they may say one thing and do another, emphasizing particular ideologies in their public materials that may or may not manifest themselves in their curriculum and operations. Without further investigation, we have no way of knowing if they are presenting accurate portraits of the work going on, or if they are used to closely guide the programs. Regardless, they *do* shape the public narratives and images of incarcerated people, particularly since many of these programs publicize their work not just on institutional websites, but in local newspapers, where the representations circulate in the communities that surround the prisons, influencing the cultural discourses about incarcerated people.

Some programs do challenge this common framework by merging discussions of individual responsibility with arguments about strengthening communities, fostering life-long learning, or diminishing the stereotypes of incarcerated people. Third Mid-Atlantic Prison Program, for example, positions their teachers explicitly as “dedicated reformers who share a vision of social justice,” who “also know that by expanding opportunities for college in prison, [they] reduce the rate of correctional failure, increase public safety, and in the long run reduce the costs of prison” to the taxpayers. These are gestures that challenge the normalized narratives of redeeming failed citizens through education, but this is done from within the same framework of individual responsibility. Most programs, however, do not acknowledge this tension between the limitations and possibilities of literacy education. A queer intervention—a queer perspective on prison education programs—can be sensitive to the most rhetorically persuasive arguments *and* begin to shift the conversation to the larger social forces that feed the prison-industrial complex in order to challenge the narratives we tell about incarcerated people. By maintaining an active tension between the politics of presence and the politics of critique, the systemic forces do not get ignored. A queer perspective can challenge the normalization of this particular vision of citizenship in these programs.

Toward A Queer(Er) Vision Of Prison Literacy Education: Constructing Alternate Visions Of Citizenship At The CSCE

In an essay appropriately titled “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got,” Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade issue an urgent call for readers to imagine a radically different world. Drawing on the radical lineage of previous queer activism, they ask the reader to imagine a world without prisons, a world where solutions to social problems do not rely so frequently on incarceration. Their essay urges readers to do this work “with everything [they’ve] got,” a project that is necessarily dispersed and fragmented in order to respond to the dispersed and fragmented organization of the PIC. This work, they argue, must begin by “speaking what we have not yet had the words to wish for,” by imagining radically different alternatives to a system that has permeated (often invisibly) many aspects of everyday life (43). Finding and

articulating these words to imagine new futures is a crucial project for literacy educators working on prison education projects.

The vision of citizenship that I have outlined in my case study, the one so prevalent in the guiding vales of prison education programs, has been normalized to the point of near invisibility: Take advantage of your “second chance” at education and make economic contributions to your community so you aren’t a burden on the good, law-abiding taxpayers. Literacy educators must challenge the ways these narratives construct a problematic image of the incarcerated (un)citizen because the representations of our work not only shape what we do but also perpetuate particular images of incarcerated people to the public. These representations have a material impact because they get re-inscribed over and over in the larger narratives that support mass incarceration. If we do not intervene, this discourse about the work of literacy inside prisons will reproduce itself unimpeded. Identifying and challenging the ideologies of citizenship that underwrite our prison education programs is one queer and critical act that allows us to compose new visions for our work so that we may begin “speaking what we have not yet had the words to wish for.” All across the country, important work is already underway in prison education programs, but if that work falls into a pattern of representing prison education and incarcerated students using bootstraps discourses, then we are shaping larger public perceptions of incarcerated people and placing limits on the work of the programs. However, when we challenge normative narratives of crime and punishment, we open up new possibilities for public representations of our work and for what the work of prison literacy programs can achieve. I end here with describing a few ways we can flip traditional scripts and offer one example of what this might look like in action.

What I offer here is, first and foremost, not a blueprint or a map. To argue for a stable and fixed set of guidelines or principles ignores local complexities and contextualized readings of resistant acts. Given the dispersed and fragmented organization and operations of the PIC, the work of negotiating between the politics of presence and the politics of critique must be contextual, constantly negotiated and renegotiated in ways that are provisional and always subject to constant revision. When taking into account the various stakeholders that influence the way we frame our programs, what looks like progress in one program is not in another. By negotiating local complexities and demands, literacy educators can push back against the problematic narratives that underwrite their programs, narratives that position incarcerated people solely as deviant citizens in need of redemption. We can critique these visions of citizenship by imagining our practices beyond the confines of individualism and by shifting our focus to practices that position incarcerated people as members of vibrant communities and as crucial components of a network of relationships.

Rather than offer a set of specific guidelines that may not address local rhetorical situations, I instead encourage literacy educators in prison programs to pay attention to three key areas of the representation of their work: the rationale and justification for the program, the stories we tell about our classrooms and our students, and the goals and projected outcomes of the program. When we provide a rationale to the many different audiences and stakeholders, we must find ways to push back against justifications for this work that are articulated solely in terms of the cost savings that can come from incarcerated people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps in order to (finally)

take advantage of the educational opportunities that will (finally) shape them into good citizens. When we tell stories of success, we must imagine new possibilities for how those stories might be composed. Finally, when we articulate the goals for our programs, we must frame them in ways that do not position incarcerated people as deviant citizens in need of redemption through education, but as people whose relationship to the PIC has been shaped by a web of systemic forces. In doing so, we can continue to do the imaginative work that will increase the vibrant possibilities for how we can compose our stories that represent our work back to the world.

My own efforts to imagine a different vision of literacy education in prisons began when I was recently appointed as the director of the Center for the Study of Correctional Education (CSCE) at California State University, San Bernardino. In the mid-1990s, the CSCE was developed as a space for research, professional development, and building prison education programs. In taking on this role, I have the opportunity to shape the future direction of the CSCE's mission. As I work to get new programs off the ground and build partnerships with other educators, I begin by thinking about how to make actionable what I call for in this article. How do we communicate differently about our work, and how might this framework shape the efforts on the ground in our programs? What follows is a copy of the guiding values and questions we have developed in order to shape and frame the work that takes place under the CSCE's umbrella.

Community Writing Collective in Prison⁴

Guiding Values

- We value the voices, experiences, interests, and knowledge of incarcerated people.
- We believe that education is a human right. Education needs to traverse borders and boundaries, including prison boundaries, and so we seek to foster literacy practices that enrich lives both inside and outside the prison gates.
- We are committed to an intersectional approach to literacy education, one that recognizes the complexity of each person's relationship to power and privilege.
- We believe learning is a lifelong process and should be open to all people regardless of sentence length and status in the criminal justice system.
- We believe that education is reciprocal, meaning that everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn.
- We believe that educators should be prepared for the particularities of teaching in the prison system and should engage in continual professional development and reflection on their work.

Key Questions:

- What can we learn from each other?
- Who are our audiences?

- What materials and methods best relate our concerns and ideas?
- What can we *hear* from inside a prison? What can we *say* from inside a prison? What conditions shape our writing and thinking?

These values and questions are part of a working document, subject to revision and re-evaluation as the CSCE builds its work and engages with diverse audiences. What I have aimed for here is a set of principles that represents a more complex view of literacy practices within the confines of the prison walls, one that situates literate activity as a way of pushing back against and surviving within institutions that have caused a great deal of harm.

In these guidelines, the curriculum is shaped by values similar to those we have for the literacy and composition education we strive to offer students in our traditional university classrooms. Incarcerated people are positioned as members of a community of learners, as people whose literacy practices are part of an interconnected web of relationships both inside and outside the prison. These guidelines recognize that literacy practices are shaped by a person's position in the world and their relationship to power—no value-neutral literacy education is possible. Literacy allows for reflection—not in the traditional sense of reflecting on the need for redemption or in the tradition of personal expressivism but as a mode of action toward social change, where students are asked to participate in community conversations. It encourages all participants to ask questions about power and privilege, about what we can say and who hears what we say, and what the consequences of both might be, which is especially important in an institution defined by communicative constraint (e.g., Cavallaro, et al.) and inevitable complicity on the part of volunteers (Curry and Jacobi). Ultimately, of course, I would hope that these workshops help incarcerated people achieve a number of goals traditionally associated with prison literacy programs—if released, I hope they will find good jobs to support themselves and their families, and I hope they will never, *ever* return to prison. But these guiding values do not limit us to these future-oriented outcomes, and through being open to all people, including lifers, they attempt to recognize a much broader vision of what literacy can do in the world.

The tensions around citizenship that are illuminated by prison literacy programs point toward the need to bring the *public representation* of our work in line with the values that shape the long-standing tradition of scholarship connecting literacy to power, privilege, and potential social action (Cushman; Royster). Previous scholarship has broadened our understanding of the ways that socially and politically marginalized groups use literacy education both to achieve larger goals *and* to acquire specific kinds of education previously denied to them (Kates; Royster; Sharer). In the context of the prison, we extend this work by seeing how difficult it is “to separate literacy from the US nation-state's equal investment in disciplining individuals into becoming normative and socially respectable citizens-subjects” (Pritchard 25) and the simultaneous impossibility of ever recognizing that ideal if you are an incarcerated (un)citizen.

My goal in developing these guiding values and this larger framework has been to suggest a way for literacy scholars and educators to intervene in prison education narratives and to revise the typi-

cal stories that get told about the connections between literacy and citizenship. Of course, taking responsibility for the narratives that we create is only a small portion of the larger problem that prisons present in our society. However, given the prominent place that literacy education has in the project of reform and punishment, this is an important site of intervention into a very complex problem. Social justice work around the PIC requires a diversity of tactics, multifarious acts of micro resistance that build a larger tapestry of work. My proposed approach and particular intervention is one such act of micro resistance, calling for literacy educators to participate in the project of un-making and un-doing the logics that have caused so much damage in the lives of so many people, the logics that have rendered a whole segment of our society disposable. Our field, in which so many are drawn to projects related to social justice, needs to contend with the difficult and uncomfortable questions that the prison generates for us.

As I sat down to write this conclusion, a short piece written by Elizabeth Gaynes, head of the Osborne Association, came across my social media newsfeed. Gaynes highlights many of the problems with the ways we talk about mass incarceration that I found in my research, and one line in particular struck me: “We can only see people as the worst thing they have ever done if we don’t *actually see them*” (n.p., emphasis mine). The millions of people who are incarcerated in our prisons are rendered invisible by the language we use to erase the multifaceted complexity of incarceration in this country. We continue to blame individual circumstances and promote individual stories of the redemption of formerly bad citizens into good, erasing the array of systemic factors that do far more to contribute to what we call mass incarceration. One crucial way that we can start to *see* incarcerated people is by reframing our work in strategic ways. I offer this queer literacy framework as but one of many entry points into a larger conversation, and it is my hope that other literacy educators will take up this framework and revise it and extend it as necessary. In order to queer our work, we must continue to ask—over and over again—the questions I propose, viewing our work as provisional and contingent in response to the complexity of the PIC. As I continue to pursue these questions, I am both guided by and haunted by a sentence from Thom Gehring, a long-time prison educator in California, a quote that shows me the enormous stakes of such work: “If we want to learn to be less brutal, we need to learn from those we have most brutalized.”

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NOTES

¹ Current estimates place their numbers at more than 200 programs across the country (“Prison Program”).

² The list contained 149 entries as of January 2017; it is occasionally updated when the authors find new program information.

³ Throughout my analysis, I call these programs “prison *education* programs” instead of “prison *literacy* programs” in order to accurately capture their multifaceted focus, but each program I selected has a literacy component as part of their programmatic work. “Literacy,” in this study, is defined as a range of practices that include reading, writing, speaking, and meaning making that play a role in the project of prison education.

⁴ I am grateful to Paul Beehler, Erie Leduc, and Ginger Walker for their feedback on the development of these values.

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