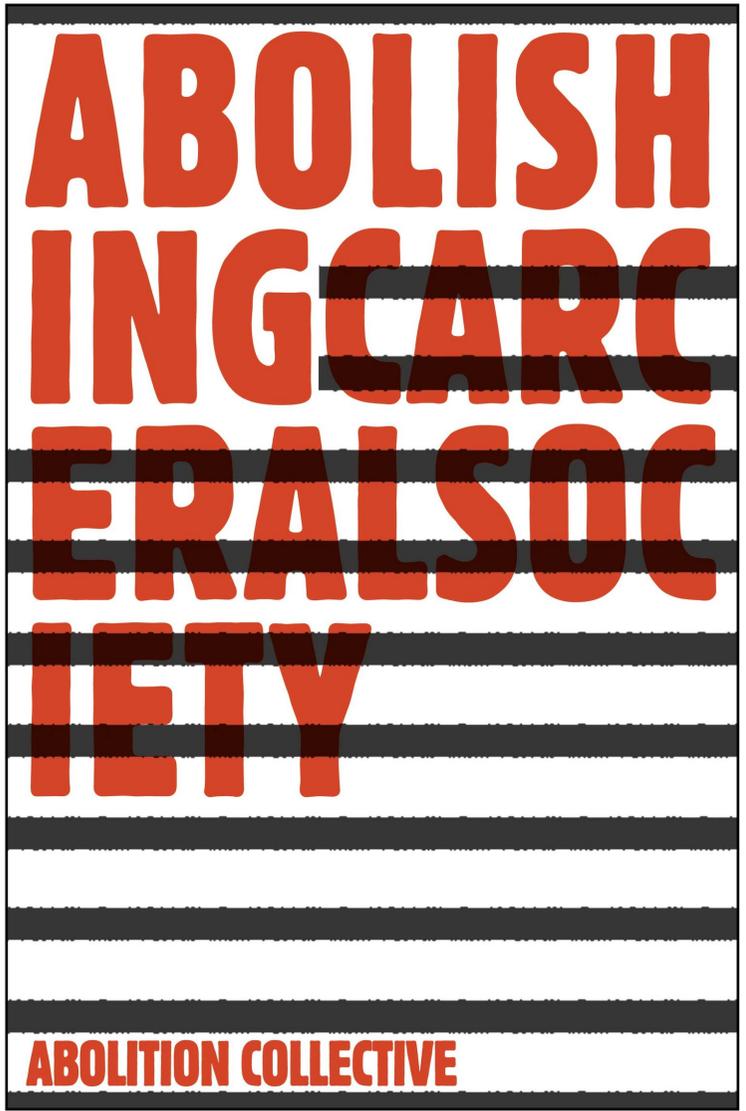


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ALL OUR COMMUNITY'S VOICES

UNTEACHING THE PRISON LITERACY COMPLEX

Michael Sutcliffe

SINCE THE PASSAGE OF THE ROCKEFELLER DRUG LAWS IN 1973, the United States has been in the business of incarceration. The number of people living in California has fluctuated with periods of immigration and exodus, yet the state's prison population has grown steadily and exponentially. According to a report compiled by *Huffington Post*, California's prison population has increased "eight times faster than the size of the overall population."¹ The state budget for criminal legal spending has adjusted accordingly. According to the report, "spending on California's prisons and associated correctional programs has skyrocketed by 436 percent" since 1980. California's other institutions were forced into crisis. In 2003, at the height of California's economic crisis, the legislature proposed budget cuts of \$11 billion from K-12 education and \$239 million from public universities while increasing prison spending by \$40 million and moving forward with plans to build a new \$595 million prison.² This increase was the only area of spending slated for increase on the 2003-04 budget. Rather than recognize the "direct relationship between how much money the Golden State spends on prisons and how much it spends on higher education," California's voters simply tried to outspend the prison population explosion.³

In the United States, illiteracy has long been associated with crime. Inherited notions of education and appropriate language

1. Aaron Sankin, "California Spending More On Prisons Than Colleges, Report Says." *Huffington Post*, September 8, 2012, available at huffingtonpost.com.

2. Prerna Anand, "Winners and Losers: Corrections and Higher Education in California," September 5, 2012, available at cacs.org.

3. Sankin, "California Spending More on Prisons."

use grew alongside the emerging economic and political climate in the colonial United States. Robert Johnson explains that the first jails appeared as populations increased and property within settled areas became a commodity. A shift in crimes away from person and morality and toward property and property owners (stakeholders tied intimately to the maintenance of government) resulted in an ideological shift as criminals were “seen more as pariahs who should be banished from society and less as wayward fellow citizens who were candidates for reform.”⁴ As the economic impact of crime became more politically significant, criminality was blamed on a deficient morality and worldview in need of correction, and criminals were marked for segregation. As incarceration became a formal response to social problems, clergy were charged with “last-hope” prisoner education through the facilitation of bible study and rigorously enforced quiet meditation. Education, and particularly literacy, served as the evidence of salvation or successful reformation.

This belief has persisted into our contemporary criminal legal system. According to Jonathan Messemmer’s history of correctional education, literacy levels among prisoners are difficult to evaluate, but conservative estimates suggest 40 percent of state prisoners and more than 45 percent of jail detainees do not have a high-school diploma or GED.⁵ National studies of prison literacy offer a similar picture. *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, a publication of the U.S. Department of Education, found “prisoners’ basic literacy rates are significantly lower than their free peers and that thirty-six percent of inmates reported having at least one learning disability.”⁶ Moves to reform legislation and prison policy often focus on education as both a measure of criminality and a means by which to mitigate it.

In 1994, politics in the United States were characterized by partisan finger pointing over who was “soft” on crime and who

4. Robert Johnson, *Hard Time: Understanding and Reforming the Prison* (East Windsor, CT: Wadsworth, 1995), 56.

5. Jonathan E. Messemmer, “The Historical Practice of Correctional Education in the United States: A Review of the Literature,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1, no. 17 (2011): 91.

6. Karl Haigler et al., “Literacy Behind Prison Walls,” *US Department of Education* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1994), 31.

was “tough.” Both Republican and Democratic Party leaders used legislation for political leverage. As a result, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) denying prisoners’ eligibility for Pell Grants and other federal funding while simultaneously mandating federal prisons to provide basic literacy education. Federal law now both requires support for prisoners seeking a GED and prohibits state funding of postsecondary or supplementary instruction. This law not only closed programs run by state colleges, which had proliferated in the eighties and nineties, but also validated high-school equivalency as the threshold for functionality and placed blame for criminal behavior onto prisoners’ lack of specific literacies.

Kirk Branch explains that the VCCLEA created an assumption that “illiteracy, or low literacy, causes crime. This assumption makes the provision of certain kinds of literacy education appear as a matter of some urgency, for to allow prisoners to leave prison without a basic education, often represented as necessary for post-release employment, fails to address an easily identifiable impetus toward a continuing criminal career.”⁷ Program administrators are positioned to see a specific, functional literacy as the “cure” for criminality. This view, or extension of the American “bootstraps” ideology, distracts attention from significant, systemic inequities that are directly related to criminality—advocates, teachers, and program administrators are encouraged to blame individual inmates when statistics show that entire populations are victim to the same “crimes” and overlook racism, poverty, drug addiction, and disenfranchisement as potential factors in inmate lives. These are seen as by-products of criminality rather than causes, and reform measures are authored accordingly.

The state has looked to educators to explain and then to reinforce links between criminality and illiteracy, seeking to explain those whose lifestyles fall outside normalized modes of production. Prison officials and policymakers alike routinely use academic measures as indicators of “progress” along an imagined linear path from criminality to social inclusivity, and parole boards often

7. Kirk Branch, *Eyes on the Ought to Be: What We Teach When We Teach About Literacy* (Cresskill, CT: Hampton Press, 2005), 59.

cite educational achievement as a sign of rehabilitation. In *Prison Literacy: Implications for Program and Assessment Policy*, Anabel Newman defines literacy as the ability to complete high-school equivalency courses, although the study recommendations are a bit more progressive, listing learner-driven designs and access to technology among its recommendations.⁸ The report continues the project of masking questions that might disturb the status quo means of economic production and questions about our collective, communal complicity, and instead directs research toward questions about enacting educational counter-measures to criminality.

On April 9, 2008, the “Second Chance Act” became law. Intended to reduce recidivism by addressing the limited options available to undereducated prisoners, the law set aside federal money to be distributed by the Department of Justice in the form of research grants. The first of these was issued in 2010 to the RAND Corporation, which was tasked with comprehensively evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education programs. Drawing upon studies done over the preceding thirty years, RAND evaluated adult basic, adult secondary, vocational, and adult post-secondary education programs and specifically omitted life-skills programs and community-based programs that serve prisoners upon release. Calculating the average cost of prison based programming, RAND juxtaposed the result against the (financial) cost of incarceration and projected average cost of recidivating. RAND reported,

For a correctional education program to be cost-effective, we estimated that a program would need to reduce the three year reincarceration rate by between 1.9 and 2.6 percentage points . . . our meta-analytic findings show that participation in a correctional education program is associated with a 13 percentage point reduction in the risk of reincarceration three years after release from prison.⁹

8. Anabel P. Newman, *Prison Literacy: Implications for Program and Assessment Policy* (Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1993), 47.

9. Lois M. Davis et al., *How Effective Is Correctional Education, and Where Do We Go from Here?* (US Department of Justice, 2014), available at rand.org.

The report does not attempt to explain the economic impact of education on policing or the court system nor does it attempt to evaluate the emotional costs borne by those involved; the RAND report does specifically mention victims of crime but makes no mention of costs incurred on victims of incarceration or their families and communities. In short, correctional education programs are, according to RAND, simply cost-effective.

The RAND report rhetorically reinforces the criminalization of illiteracy and the illiterate by associating literacy acquisition with a medical procedure stating future researchers will be tasked with “measuring program *dosage*, identifying program characteristics, and examining more *proximal* indicators of program efficacy.”¹⁰ Broken, illiterate prisoners will be taught how to think, learn, and problem solve; they will be “saved” through education. In other words, prison education programs are positioned to teach poor prisoners, mostly people of color, how to be more middle class and more white. Those that do not reinforce capitalist stratification by accepting a labor class role are seen in terms of threat and maneuvered out of influential positions in society. Their credibility is destroyed by a near-permanent identification as a convict.

Underlying the putative American Dream ideology is a belief in meritocracy and the equal opportunities that are supposed rewards of individual efforts. Consequently, education is believed by many to be a panacea for crime and a cure-all for hegemonic social ills. Politicians, parents, teachers, and most voters believe that a “good education” is a pass to social success and financial independence. Unlocking economic opportunity and lifting oneself upward from historically disadvantaged social stature is believed to be achieved through schooling and hard work. The evidence of material realities such as unequal distributions of wealth, property, health, and so on, is offset by an ideological investment in the idea that equality secures the opportunity to pursue these goods. As Jennifer Hochschild explains, “so long as we live in a democratic capitalist society—that is, so long as we maintain the formal promise of political and social equality while encouraging the practice of economic inequality—we need the idea of equal

10. *Ibid.*, 82; emphasis added.

opportunity to bridge that otherwise unacceptable condition.”¹¹ In America, equality is understood to mean opportunity, and poverty and crime evidence individual inadequacies or disinterest rather than an unequal system of distribution or access. Revoking widespread public support for incarceration means un-teaching some very entrenched beliefs.

Educational programs in prisons and jails largely exist to rehabilitate prisoners upon release, so they teach from the outside in. Even when designed with the intent of creating change, they almost always assume a mantle of instruction and, usually, remediation. Programs teach prisoners vocational writing or skills for specific trades; however, as Kirk Branch explains, “the pedagogic discourse of vocational education cannot be understood apart from the economic interests it serves, apart, that is, from its various sponsors.”¹² The systems of economic distribution that maintain a compliant working class and an elite bourgeoisie are maintained by a pedagogical approach that, ultimately, does little more than make worker-prisoners more comfortable with their station. I suggest that these programs make up a “Prison Literacy Complex,” as their attempt to re-enfranchise prisoners assumes a benign or benevolent system and culture waiting to accept wayward members back into the fold.

THE PRISON LITERACY COMPLEX

Literacy programs that serve incarcerated students have been largely built upon literacy research from secondary and postsecondary education, yet most scholarship on prisoner literacy reduces a complicated, contentious history to a single theory. The association of social status with an individual’s ability to process symbols (read, write, and speak in a particular standardized dialect) is indicative of what Alec Webster, Brian Caddick, Malcolm Reed, and Karen Ford refer to as a linguistic-functional definition of literacy; literacy is understood to be “a set of mechanical skills

11. Jennifer Hochschild, “The Double-Edged Sword of Equal Educational Opportunity,” American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (Washington DC, April 22, 1987), 8.

12. Branch, *Eyes on the Ought to Be*, 95.

for encoding and decoding print, or ‘cracking a linguistic code.’”¹³ Through this lens, literacy is seen as a measure of one’s ability to transmit a preexisting message by means of an autonomous coding system (an alphabet) that is independent from the rhetorical situation in which it is used. Written competencies like handwriting, vocabulary, and grammar as well as spoken competency in transforming coded symbols into phonetic sounds are thought to be teachable through rote practice and skill-and-drill instruction. Literacy, in this view, is limited to the transmission of preexisting meaning and messages, and programs exist to “equip adults with just sufficient competence to operate at the lowest levels of mechanical performance.”¹⁴ Learners are taught to memorize and repeat. Significantly, little attention is paid to where the “correct” versions come from.

Literacy, when thought of this way, is understood by most to be a nongradable adjective; one either is or is not literate with clear separation between, although there is some gradation allowed among the illiterate population. In other words, it is possible for one learner to be more literate than another, but educators and successful community members are simply literate. Once someone learns to read and write, they are no longer in need of literacy education. As a result, education (and authority) is understood to emanate from the educated while those deemed illiterate are seen as deficient community members in need of remediation. As Walter J. Ong explains, literacy, when thought of this way, is normative and suggests illiterates “are deviants, defined by something they lack.”¹⁵

This belief in language use as an indicator of social standing is what Harvey J. Graff has termed the “literacy myth”:

The acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility . . . [and is]

13. Alec Webster et al., “Functional Versus Critical Literacy in the Rehabilitation of Offenders: A Survey of Probation Services in England and Wales.” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 18, no. 1 (1999): 50.

14. Ibid.

15. Walter J. Ong in Ellen Cushman et al., *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 2001), 19.

invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.”¹⁶

The literacy myth connects a puritan sense of predestined morality with a demonstrable skill. Buttressed by Western notions of self-sufficiency and “bootstraps” meritocracy, blame for illiteracy falls on the illiterate with laziness, disinterest, or social nonbelonging effacing poverty, privilege, and limited access to education as exigency. Brian Street explains that literacy had “come to be associated with crude and often ethnocentric stereotypes of ‘other cultures’ and represents a way of perpetuating the notion of a ‘great divide’ between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies that is less acceptable when expressed in other terms.”¹⁷ Despite good intentions, a view of hierarchized literacies pathologized particular cultures, lifestyles, and dialects attaching literacies to race. Through uses of language, people of color and people with non-normative lifestyles were and are signaled as less economically valuable. Prisoners are presumed to be inherently deficient. While what is said is a deficiency in literacy skills, what is meant is a deficiency in white middle-class-ness.

As a result, the prison has become the enforcement wing of a sort of neoliberal checks-and-balances. As David Harvey explains, the role of the neoliberal state is to advance economic security “by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”¹⁸ Neoliberalism creates institutional (and ideological) frameworks to protect private property rights rather than public access and equity. State intervention should, according to this worldview, never countermand market signals and should only occur when necessary to deregulate and privatize new

16. Harvey J. Graff, “The Literacy Myth at 30,” *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 3 (2010): 635.

17. Brian Street, “The New Literacy Studies,” in *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose (New York: Bedford, 2001; originally published 1993), 433.

18. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

markets, such as recent efforts to privatize water for corporate retail bottling or land for timber sales and oil pipelines. Neoliberal economic policies have disappeared solvent employment and shredded state support services through deregulation, the dismantling of unions, and a progressive weakening of corporate restraints.

The process of legislating criminality perpetuates control and maintains the prison as a robust sorting mechanism. The police and the courts target not only specific actions but also specific groups of people while maintaining a myth of criminality as a violation of a shared, communal morality. As John Irwin explains, criminality is a mechanism by which to sort according to cultural capital: “The difference between crimes is not seriousness or prevalence; it is offensiveness, which is determined by social status and context.”¹⁹ Essentially, laws are discursive technologies employed to punish people for being offensively out of place. These “instruments,” as Michel Foucault calls them, “render visible, record, differentiate and compare” populations both before and after intake into the criminal legal system.²⁰ Prisoners are classified into a sublabor “criminal” class in ways that “serve only to manufacture new criminals and to drive existing criminals even deeper into criminality.”²¹ Former laborers are removed from the workforce and (permanently) re-classed as unemployable criminals. Criminality, then, is both the means by which people are sorted (primarily along class lines) for incarceration and the result of incarceration. Incarceration is not simply a set of institutions, laws, and facilities, but is also “a state of mind.”²²

The prison reinforces neoliberalism’s market primacy and the economic advantage of the wealthy by physically removing resistant people from society and preventing them from sharing testimony that could point to contradictions in the economic status quo. Rather than a poverty class disenfranchised by the state, the

19. John Irwin, *Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 17.

20. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Press, 1995), 208.

21. Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 40.

22. American Friends Service Committee, *Corrupting Justice: Primer for LGBT Communities on Racism, Violence, Human Degradation, and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Philadelphia: Justice Visions Publication, 2005).

criminal legal system protects neoliberalism by legislating their exclusion as poorly made personal choice. As a result, the white middle class largely looks away as neoliberal economic and social policies financed by the human suffering of incarceration leverage devastating results. Communities of color are stripped of working age men and women and repopulated with a criminalized class unable to gain or hold legal employment. As Loïc Wacquant has said, this process has “spawned a carceral continuum that ensnares a supernumerary population of younger black men, who either reject or are rejected by the deregulated low-wage labor market.”²³ Younger and older women are most often left to tend to children and to pick up pieces of broken communities.

Educational programs for prisoners began as bible study sessions in the first American prisons. This coupling of religion with literacy education was founded on the notion that committing a crime was an independent, individual choice made as the result of a personal skills defect and a moral insufficiency. Despite a legacy of scholarship that demonstrates otherwise, most literacy programs that serve incarcerated students have inherited their mission from this belief and approach literacy instruction as reparative and transformative. Prisoners are supposed to learn new ways of solving problems by learning from successful, informed outsiders or former-insiders who have succeeded. I have termed this alignment of literacy programs as a “voices-in” orientation. Literacy programs are designed to bring instructor expertise, source texts, and problem solving methods *in* to prisoners. While these types of programs exist to help prisoners, they do so by validating normative values and systems of distribution and criminalization that lead to increased rates of incarceration. While prisoners may get some relief from the monotony of prison life, may learn some valuable workplace skills, and even learn to communicate in ways that suspend judgment and stigmatization, the next generation of prisoners is still being targeted by widespread public support for prison building, militarized policing, legislated racism, and the expansion of the criminal-legal apparatus.

23. Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 97.

VOICING OUT

The ideological reliance upon literacy as a mark of exclusivity and affluence does, however, mark a paradigmatic shift in literacy studies as scholars began to apply critical theory and ethnographic methods to literacy studies. Brian Street explains that scholars seeking to reveal the relationship between language use and systemic privileging of one group over another “have come to view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society . . . [and] paid greater attention to the role of literacy practices in reproducing or challenging structures of power and domination.”²⁴ Literacy, according to Street, is intricately woven into the attribution of values, and the connection between language, thought (often in the form of judgment), and social access makes language acquisition inseparable from the ways we think of each other and ourselves. This ideological view of literacy reveals tensions around authority, power, and resistance that are products of language use but that also produce uses of language that mark social standing. Language, as a result, “can no longer be addressed as a neutral technology.”²⁵

Street, however, cautions that an ideological understanding of literacy should not be seen as a binary choice to autonomous, functional definitions. While some critics of Street suggest “unnecessary polarization,” Street explains that the ideological model views technical skills and ideological processes as “encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power.”²⁶ The processes by which we code meaning foreground particular value systems as natural and given while denigrating others as acquired or chosen deviations. This thought process is itself ideological, and it is implicated in ideological reproduction and the reinforcement of existing power distribution. Further, when adopted by institutional decision-makers, these ideologies are repackaged as “common sense,” particularly when legitimized by induction into pedagogy. According to Street, “the naturalization of ideologies, as though they were universal necessities rather than institutions for reproduction of the

24. Street, “The New Literacy Studies,” 434.

25. *Ibid.*, 435.

26. *Ibid.*

cultural and power bases of particular interests and groups, has been reinforced by the academic community as much as by those whose interests it serves.”²⁷ The adoption of functional definitions of literacy as well as concepts like “cultures of poverty” position education against those hoping for improved socioeconomic mobility. Education, as an institution, thus becomes an ideological apparatus mobilizing the economic resources of the state in service of capitalism and the culture of the dominant. Despite the intent of teachers and administrators, education is not politically or ideologically neutral, yet literacy programs for incarcerated students are usually modeled on school pedagogies with little critical consideration of their political consequence or implication.

Street suggests it is not enough to point to a specific linguistic structure or speech act, but instead, a challenge to hegemony must historicize and interrupt an idea:

Social change involves challenging a given form of (dominant) discourse and the production and assertion of other discourses within new material conditions . . . not at the level of abstract philosophical inquiry but in terms of the real social relations between historical forces and relations on the one hand and forms of discourse sustained or undermined by them on the other.²⁸

By adapting our understanding of literacy to include the ideological, we can visualize relations of power and material resources. Social change, then, must use an analysis of discourse and context, what Shirley Brice Heath calls the “Literacy Event,” as a lens through which to analyze the history of relations of power and the distribution of material and economic resources.²⁹ By understanding the formation of valorized forms of communication in context, we can, according to Street, understand the ways that valuation is ideologically informed.

Definitions, perceptions, and value judgments are opinions informed, when processed uncritically, by tradition, repetition, and

27. *Ibid.*, 437.

28. *Ibid.*, 441.

29. Shirley Brice Heath, “What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School,” *Language in Society* 11, no. 3 (1982): 50.

routine (ritual) rather than with observation and evaluation. Secular rituals, according to Henry Bial, seem natural and value-neutral as they “invoke the authority of some concept larger than the individual: the state, the community, tradition.”³⁰ Rather than forcing an interruption of comfortable ways of living, ritual grants familiar ideas as a sense of authenticity validating the preexisting and forestalling the new. The influence of the institution of incarceration works discursively through notions of fixed, ideal truths to power a rhetoric that allows dismissal of inventive thought. Considerations of “why” and “how” are overlooked or dismissed in favor of given, predetermined, state-sponsored values for “justice” and “crime.” Over time, accepted ideas or truths coalesce to form ideologies that leverage influence over competing ideas suppressing those that would challenge their dominance; in short, they combine to form hegemony.

Andrea Mayr explains that in Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony, power is not physical force but rather “one ruling class has persuaded subordinate classes to accept its own moral, political, and cultural values through concessions or ideological means. Power is therefore not exercised coercively but subtly and routinely.”³¹ In other words, it functions rhetorically. Central to Gramsci’s theories of hegemony is this notion that consent is given because of a perception of mutual benefit. Or, as Gramsci says, the state or institution “educates this consent, by means of the political and syndical association.”³² Through the language of policy and media, institutions are recursively powered discursively. The state manufactures and remanufactures consent by establishing definitions and the *appearance* of common, shared experiences and interests. Thus, as Karl Marx once explained, winning control of the means of production secures the future arrangement of the means of production. At the behest of private industry, the state controls what we believe to be history.³³

30. Henry Bial, “Ritual,” in *The Performance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 77.

31. Andrea Mayr, *Prison Discourse: Language as a Means of Control and Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 16.

32. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (New York: International, 1971), 259.

33. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 1998).

Street's understanding of literacy as ideological, then, gives us a way to understand power and access as distributed through systems rather than motives. Ideology carried by discourse (re)produces distributions of power independent of a speaker-writer's intent. In the context of prison literacy programs, facilitators often intend to do "good" yet ultimately validate the neoliberal exclusivity that drives incarceration. A system of educational programming for prisoners that reproduces rather than resists survives despite reform efforts because it works *with* the overarching ideological system. Advocates function as state agents as they address specific inequities (illiteracy) as the root cause rather than as signs of a more systemic problem. The system of blaming individuals and then sequestering them away into institutions marked by violence, militant authoritarian regimes, and disease "is considered so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it."³⁴

As a result, many reformers accept incarceration as a generally sound concept that has just been poorly executed or overtaxed. They seem to believe that the criminal legal system is merely "broken" and in need of repair. Suggested policy revisions improve specific conditions but without substantive change to the sorting, or othering, or the numbers of prisoners. Further, the culmination of institutions ideologically aligned in support of isolating and segregating "offenders" lends tacit support and recursive ideological maintenance in a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Gramsci says, "every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship."³⁵ Incarceration is not simply a product of legislation, but it is a product of a culture of incarceration that is taught across many contexts. Churches, families, schools, media, and more make us complicit in the propagation of criminality, yet they simultaneously posit it as a simple, natural reaction to threats and deviance. This oversimplification masks or completely effaces the systemic from media analyses, from community memory, and, as a result, from legislative sessions and voter ballots. When shown only the arrest report of an incarcerated person of color, white voters largely (dis)miss the historical roots of racism and disenfranchisement

34. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 10.

35. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 350.

and see only a behavior. The ways we conceptualize and evaluate uses of language reinforce cultural hegemony and offer immense comfort and stability to white educators and policymakers.

RESISTANCE AND RE-MEMBERING

I believe we can disrupt and interrupt this sense of comfort and empower educational programs, and literacy programs in particular, to be agents of revolution. Victor Villanueva explains that changes to hegemony “occur when there is widespread socio-historical criticism. Voices of discontent look back to the roots of oppression and articulate the socio-historical precedents. . . . The voices seek to persuade all groups that everyone’s needs could be better met if substantive changes were to take place.”³⁶ By historicizing “common sense,” Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals” point to the rhetorical construction and constructedness of truths held as natural and immutable. In other words, what seems to be a seamless progression of common sense ideas is revealed to be politicized discourse in service of a dominant culture. To effect a real redistribution of resources, whether economic, material, or ideological, those who would spark social change must demonstrate that seeming truths are not true for all communities; they must demonstrate the untruthiness of truths. There is a possibility for change in the reinfusing or re-membering of resistant historical narratives into public discourse and community memory.

It is the definition and understanding of literacy itself that must be revised to begin a process of change, rather than the processes by which incarcerated students acquire or demonstrate their education or their literacy. The ways a program identifies and defines its goals informs its relationship with state sponsorship and its use of students’ voices. When program administrators believe they are liberating but refuse to recognize their incarcerated students’ experiences and expertise, they validate the systems that placed their students there in the first place. As Gramsci tells us, “one could say that ideologies for the governed are mere illusions, a deception to which they are subject, while for the governing they constitute a willed

36. Victor Villanueva, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992), 23.

and a knowing deception.”³⁷ Regardless of intent, the instructors take on the role of oppressors. According to Marx and Engels, the only possible means for liberation from this mechanism, once set in motion, exists in the possibility that personal “history becomes world history.”³⁸ Liberation can only happen when the dominant population can finally “see” the antidemocratic systems by which inequity is historically and discursively produced.

Paulo Freire expressed a sense of “duality” among oppressed and colonized people through which they experience a constructed sense of self: “They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized.”³⁹ Echoing Antonio Gramsci’s theorizations of hegemony and consent, Freire demonstrates not only the ways in which oppression elicits complicity from those it dominates—the oppressed do not see the mechanisms as those by which they are dominated but instead see them as mechanisms that would enable their success—but also the ways in which its actions are invisible even (or especially) to those most affected. Freire explains, “The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete existential situation by which they were shaped Their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression.”⁴⁰ Hegemony exerts control by consent and even by enthusiasm. Those without access to resources and power often do not see themselves as oppressed but rather as just not quite yet fulfilled. To reveal the faults in common justice narratives, we all need to see their instability.

In other words, literacy must be explicitly mobilized as an agent of socioeconomic change, yet this change can only result if minds change *outside* the space of acquisition (whether classroom or prison cell) as well as in. Radical pedagogy suggests reversing the polarity of classrooms so that teachers become students of the learners. I am suggesting a trifold reorganization. The experts on criminalization (as well as the social problems that lead to it) are

37. Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, trans. by D. Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 196.

38. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 27.

39. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 48.

40. *Ibid.*, 45.

not the instructors but rather are the instructed, and the students in need of socioeconomic literacy are not the incarcerated learners but rather the instructors and even more so the communities that send them inside. While language use is the subject matter in the room, the ultimate education, in my opinion, is most needed outside. Educational programs, inside and out, act as a mechanism for validating popular myths and beliefs. By drawing upon prisoners' voices and their experiences with racism, near-permanent poverty, gender norming, and homophobia, these programs can use what I call a "voices-out" orientation to cut against popular narratives of meritocracy through texts and acts that reach out to the public from incarcerated spaces. When authorized as expertise, narratives told by those on the inside point to the untruthiness of commonly accepted myths and "truths" destabilizing the ideologies that maintain hegemony and its prison system.

However, simply being told revolutionary ideas is seldom enough and an ineffective means of sparking social change. White working- and middle-class voters have the privilege of overlooking conflicting social narratives. They can dismiss troubling accounts of prisoner-writers. Rather than betray the values of their families, churches, and political leaders, many simply refuse to acknowledge contradictory narratives or alternative histories as their lives are comfortable and they see no pressing need. Instead, they rely upon social and economic privilege to provide de facto support for systemic forms of oppression that they purportedly reject. After all, as Victor Villanueva tells us, "there is more to racism, ethnocentricity, and language than is apparent There are long-established systemic forces at play that maintain bigotry, systemic forces that can even make bigots of those who are appalled by bigotry."⁴¹ These processes are at work in prisons and have particular implications for prisoners. Textual artifacts are not enough to disrupt the massive ideological inertia of incarceration. Critical projects will need a mechanism to turn observers as well as participants into advocates with motive and intent. Abolition requires the personalization and ideological reorientation that happens through participation.

41. Victor Villanueva, "Hegemony: From an Organically Grown Intellectual," *Pre-Text* 13, nos. 1-2 (1992): xiv.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

While the majority of literacy programs available to prisoners remain entrenched in functional literacy, a few do now exist that recognize the validity of prisoners' existing literacies and expertise and complicate the academic linear model of expert-to-learner education. Tobi Jacobi explains that for a literacy program to successfully move beyond the discursive replication of dominant criminalizing ideology, it must promote "engaged dialogue on writing, justice, and life experiences by valuing incarcerated writers' voices."⁴² In these programs, facilitators set aside notions of affluence as evidence of expertise and authorize authentic dialogue. Prisoners' voices are brought out from behind prison walls in what I call a "voices-out" orientation. These kinds of literacy programs can challenge the norming, silencing effect of the prison by orienting their activities toward bringing prisoners' experiences and expertise *out* from the prison to teach community members, voters, and policy makers about social problems from what is usually a very unfamiliar perspective. Literacy, then, becomes a process of validating expertise as evidence of political and economic problems and collectively unraveling layers of obscuring privilege and compartmentalization. To authentically perform critical literacy, literacy programs must value prisoners' experiences rather than trying to repress and reform according to an imposed set of status quo values.

Community programs that use direct-service volunteers in order to counter the judgment and ideological inertia around criminality are not new, although they are rare. In 1973, the Women's Options for Recovery, Transitions, and Health (WORTH) program was created by a group of women in response to a request for support for women made by a county sheriff in the Pacific Northwest; women incarcerated at the jail were not issued clothing or personal hygiene products and the sheriff asked the group to provide them. In the mid-eighties, WORTH began recruiting volunteer representatives from community service agencies to speak to participants about women's health issues, alcohol and drug recovery, negotiating and exiting abusive relationships, and workplace

42. Tobi Jacobi, "Slipping Pages through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail." *Community Literacy Journal* 2, no. 2 (2008): 70.

(re)entry skills.⁴³ I joined the program in 2012 after it lost its volunteer staff and initiated an overall redesign. In order to better engage the mission of the parent organization, we reoriented WORTH around activities intended to influence change outside of the jail while still providing access to community resource information and to volunteers' expertise. Sessions became participatory workshops focused on specific literacies, and organizers created an interactive series of training seminars that repositioned volunteers as learner-facilitators and incarcerated women as participant-teachers. Writing activities became a central component of each session, and volunteers began helping participants share their writing online and through public venues.

Because of institutional constraints, I am not comfortable sharing program participants' writing here. However, overall, responses to our changes were positive. Participants told facilitators they used to enjoy getting out of the pod, but they felt lectured and judged. Since the reorientation, participating women say that it feels as though they're letting people hear them who otherwise would never know what it's like to live their lives.⁴⁴ Community volunteers also report changed feelings about incarceration. One stated, "I have discovered that [prisoners] are simply community members—not evil villains out to commit heinous acts. They are our friends, coworkers, neighbors, and family members: sisters, aunts, grandmothers. Some hold master's degrees, many have children. They could be you or I [*sic*]."⁴⁵ Other respondents expressed similar changes in perspective, and subsequent conversations have been driven more by questions than by presumed "truths," and more volunteers have expressed an interest in engaging in direct service as a means to learn rather than as a means to help or to fix. More importantly, each volunteer is now, to some degree, an advocate for a changed response to social problems, and while some may still support incarceration, they do so with hesitation and consideration that they may not have the entire picture.

43. WORTH volunteer, interview with the author, February 17, 2015.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

In my terms, WORTH participants “speak truth to power” through stories of struggle and trauma and tragedy that are underscored with authentic hope and chance. By revealing the unequal valuing of multiple, divergent literacies, learners outside prison walls begin to recognize the extent to which their values and assumptions are products of what they’ve been told more than what they have experienced. Juxtaposing memories that refuse to comply with popular narratives against those that do interrupts dominant ideologies long enough to see the ways that our understandings of community and criminality reflect our identities more than our choices. Hegemony’s institutional apparatus pressures those without privilege into a limited set of options while offering tokenized exceptions as models for reform efforts that ultimately do little more than suppress would-be revolution. Given the urgency of the inhumane treatment of those living behind prison walls, the pervasive intrusion of surveillance and incarceration into public life, and the privatizing nature of our neoliberal, capitalist hegemony, it is clear that we, as a society, need to hear from those of us who are most oppressed by these mechanisms and institutions. An authentic pursuit of social justice must take seriously the abolitionist commitment to ideological, social, and economic alternatives by bringing voices normally silenced by incarceration and isolation into conversation with those who would otherwise remain contently oblivious.

As Keith Gilyard reminds us, with regard to racism, any action that seeks to upset the norming power of systemic oppression must explicitly take that oppression as its object and the performance of resistance as its mode.⁴⁶ In order to interrupt the homophobic and racist notions upon which incarceration and its neoliberal hegemony are built, programs attempting to enact real change—a redistribution of material and economic resources across marginalized communities—must interrupt the epistemologies that privatize and normalize gender and race in the language of public life. Or, as Bruce Herzberg explains, real ideological critique is dependent on community members’ ability to

46. Keith Gilyard, ed., *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton, 1999), 83.

“transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy.”⁴⁷ Engagement with texts or reports is not enough; they must be able to see the cuts where narratives patch their values together to make constructed truths.

I believe that we will only achieve systemic, widespread change by designing and implementing community programs that bring the personal experiences of those whose lives (not necessarily their motives) are resistant into conversation with those who are blinded by the myths of hegemony. Rather than teaching-in, we need conversations-out. In the documentary film *Visions of Abolition*, Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore call for a political ideology of prison abolition that is nuanced and multifaceted.⁴⁸ Rather than attempting to abruptly reverse the past four decades of prison expansion with a single vote or action, they suggest public education that results in support for incremental moves toward the deconstruction of mass incarceration. To move forward, the public must not only comprehend but also personalize the anti-democratic nature of incarceration and seek ways to deincarcerate and solve problems as a community rather than ways to police, punish, and fragment. While not a complete solution, an ideological interruption may provide a gap through which to historicize and activate. As Lois Ahrens explains, “everyone, not just those with fancy educations, can and must understand the complicated politics and economics underlying prison expansion if we are to stop [it].”⁴⁹ Or, to put Tobi Jacobi into conversation with Victor Villanueva and Ahrens, we all need to “trouble” our “truths” so that we can shape a comprehensive, historicized, nuanced understanding of the very “real costs” of incarceration.

47. Bruce Herzberg, “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 3 (1994): 312.

48. Setsu Shigematsu, director, *Visions of Abolition: From Critical Resistance To A New Way of Life* (United States: Visions of Abolition, 2011).

49. Lois Ahrens, ed., *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2008), 19.

ABOLITION

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