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## Bending Bars: A Dialogue between Four Prison Teacher-Researchers

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# Bending Bars: A Dialogue between Four Prison Teacher-Researchers

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## **Bending Bars: A Dialogue between Four Prison Teacher-Researchers**

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This dialogue illustrates the various ways the four authors have undertaken literacy work inside prison--from writing workshops in jails and prisons, to exchanges between college students and incarcerated writers, to college classes in correctional facilities, to investigations of fragmented documents from a progressive era girls' training school. We situate these ongoing efforts as methods for supporting writing that might heal the individual, social and cultural wounds evoked by our country's mass incarceration policies and for making that writing public.

In Spring 2015, we presented a panel focused on prison teaching, writing, and representation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. We spoke from our varied experiences working with contemporary prison writing and teaching contexts as well as work with archived writings from a girls' prison in the Progressive Era. *Survive and Thrive* editor, Rex Veeder joined our conversation and invited us to extend our thinking into this online written forum. We offer the metaphor of bending bars in our title to evoke images of strength, power, and actions that often feel superhuman. To bend bars with words within the U.S. criminal justice system is an act of bravery and strength, one that often succeeds for individuals and groups of writers and one that just as often fails, perhaps even resulting in unwelcome and unanticipated disciplinary action. We hope to bend the bars that sometimes constrain our own teaching and learning parameters by looking across our shared commitments to literacy work inside prisons and jails.

To do this, we spent several months revisiting the questions that initially drew us together in a more structured way than is usual in a panel presentation. We drafted brief statements to key questions and then responded to and extended each other's words by sharing our own experiences.

1. How do entrenched institutional narratives shape literacy practices in prison?
2. What research methods can we use to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of prison?
3. How might the social circulations of prison writings (from prisoners and prison teachers) motivate the development of progressive pedagogies and practices that work toward shifting the balance of power in the U.S. criminal justice system?

Before we invite you to consider those issues with us, we'd like to make visible our experiences within the world of prison/writing teaching and research.

Wendy Wolters Hinshaw is an Associate Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University and Director of Writing Programs. Her research focuses on how art and writing by prisoners shapes and is shaped by the historical, institutional and cultural contexts in which it circulates. In 2014 she helped to start the organization Exchange for Change, a Miami-based prison writing organization that provides writing programs inside area prisons and transitional facilities, and also facilitates writing exchanges between writers in prison and students in area universities and high schools. Exchange for Change believes in the power of these written partnerships to promote dialogue and effect social change.

Cory Holding is an Assistant Professor in the University of Pittsburgh Department of English Program in Composition, Literacy, Pedagogy, & Rhetoric who teaches and writes about the rhetoric of gesture. Holding became involved with college education in prison in 2009 as a tutor, instructor, and course coordinator for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Education Justice Project, and continues to aim toward building support for prison education justice work in rhetoric and composition studies, recently collaborating with a group of EJP scholars and Peter Odell Campbell on a discussion of "Prison Education and Prison Abolition" at the 2014 Race and Pedagogy National Conference at the University of Puget Sound.

Tobi Jacobi is Professor of English at Colorado State University where she teaches writing and literacy theory classes and directs the Community Literacy Center and SpeakOut! writing workshop program (<https://csuclc.wordpress.com/> and <https://speakoutclc.wordpress.com/>). SpeakOut! connects university and community writers through weekly writing workshops that culminate twice annually in the *SpeakOut! Journal*. Since 2013, she has been collaborating with Laura Rogers on an archival recovery project focused on visual and textual artifacts from a progressive era training school for girls in upstate New York. She grounds her teaching, research, and outreach work in feminist and critical literacy practices by advocating for literacy access as an activist practice. Her edited collection (with Dr. Ann Folwell Stanford), *Women Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out* was released in 2014.

Laura Rogers directs the Writing Center and is an Assistant Professor of English at Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences where she teaches writing, literature and film classes. She has been involved in prison literacy education since her work in a prison college program in upstate New York from 1984 through 1995, when the program was ended because of a loss of state and federal funding. After the loss of the college program, she established and continues to teach a voluntary writing workshop at a men's prison. She has collaborated since 2013 with Tobi Jacobi on a project focused on fragmentary documents recovered from a girls' training school in upstate NY. She has also been researching the history of prison writing groups in an effort to uncover an unknown aspect our discipline's history.

While we each work and live in different places across the United States (PA, FL, CO, & NY), we share a commitment to envisioning literacy as a powerful tool for change in the lives of women and men entangled in the U.S. punishment system, and for possible resistance to that system. As Louise DeSalvo argues in *Writing as a Way of Healing*: "Sharing our work removes us from a solitary brooding on our personal hurts as we listen to other people's struggles, learn of other people's triumphs.... We become responsible for the words we write in a way we might not if we didn't anticipate sharing" (208). We are delighted, then, to share our perspectives on the value of literacy work in carceral contexts and have constructed a dialogue based upon three issues that feel central to our work and commitments to envisioning change in the U.S. justice system through pedagogical and rhetorical interventions.

### **How do entrenched institutional narratives shape literacy practices in prison?**

**TJ:** I currently have two projects that are emerging from carceral contexts. The first extends ten years of teaching at a local jail in northern Colorado as I consider the ethics of engagement and self-care for the students, community volunteers, and writers inside in both physical and affective ways. The second interrogates the emergence and value of fragmentary narratives emerging from a recently discovered set of texts from a girls training school in upstate New York in the 1920s and 30s.

I'll start with the contemporary work. The county jail where I have offered writing workshops for over ten years sleeps 500 people with an average of about 420 men and 80 women. We have had the good fortune and support of a proactive programs staff who help to mentor between ten and fifteen student, teacher, and community volunteers working with weekly workshops. The jail provides staff support for processing the volunteers, assists with classroom setup, and hosts a bi-annual program celebration each May and December. They also provide paper and, until recently, pens. For me, pens have come to represent a lot of what seems broken in the U.S. justice system. In early August 2015 I received an email from the jail volunteer supervisor with a casual line included about the elimination of pens from all programming. How, I wondered, would we run a writing program for 90 minutes each week without access to the primary tools of writing? Okay, I thought, how about specially designated and collected pens? No. Regular pencils? No. Stubby four inch pencils are the only allowed writing implement we may use. "Don't worry" I am told. "The inmates will adapt." But, of

course, they shouldn't have to adapt. A four inch pencil (that whittles down to three when sharpened) doesn't seem like a reasonable adaptation to expect. It doesn't feel humane. The change has not gone unnoticed by the writers as we enter week three of the program. Complaints are amassing, but as volunteers we can do little more than pass along the varied comments and hope for some humanity on the part of the jail operations team. Is it worth losing the program over? Prison writing teacher/scholar Tiffany Ana Lopez argues that those of us who move freely through prison doors have a responsibility to serve as critical witnesses; yet I often wonder what the tipping point is for people who choose to live activist work within repressive systems. Will the loss of pens inspire creativity or dismay? Both?

Imagine my surprise when I walked into the jail on the first night of our workshop this fall and heard the (supportive) programs staff person mention that we were still going to have access to lined paper. Lined paper? I almost fell over at the thought that lined paper was in jeopardy. When did lined paper become at risk? Is lined paper more at risk than unlined? Is all paper in jeopardy? When we teach and work in universities and other spaces in the free world, material goods like pens, full sized pencils, and lined paper are simply tools of our trade, expected, almost invisible extensions of our ideas and communications. While we may rely more heavily on keyboards and cyberspace for most communication, we don't note the relative privilege of these physical writing tools until their presence is threatened.

At the heart of both the pen eradication and the suggestion that lined paper remains a privilege lay other implicit wonderings. Is this an attempt to limit the communication practices and functionality of people confined behind bars? It is often painful to write with a stubby pencil. Hands and arms cramp. There are no erasers (no need for revision, I suppose). The institutional line on the pens and paper is, of course, safety. Limiting inmate access to the life stuff of communication protects....I can't even finish that sentence, so flawed feels the logic. Limiting access to the very tools that may help a writer work out the challenges that led to incarceration or to reach out to family, friends or even a legal team defies categorization as safety or protection.

Questions of erasure and limited communication link well to the second site of literacy work that currently occupies my thinking: fragmentary medical, institutional, and personal documents from girls incarcerated at a state training school in the 1920s. This progressive era institution surely invoked its own set of rigid guidelines for the making and enforcing of identity narratives and setting forth a literacy sponsorship guided by institutional records (e.g. medical tests, social histories, parole notes) as well as less formal letter writing and exchanges with family and friends. As Royster and Kirsch (2010) argue, there is utility in the act of "critical imagination" as one dwells in the archives and a pressing need for "strategic circulation" of women's texts in ways that move beyond mere recovery. The institutional narratives that determine and limit our understanding of girls and women incarcerated in the 1920s remain disturbingly unmoved almost a century later, a theme I will return to as I reflect further on this archival work.

**LR:** Like Tobi's, my response emerges from two different projects. I have been engaged in prison literacy work for close to thirty years as an instructor in a now defunct college in prison program (ended by loss of state and federal funding) and with a creative writing workshop in a men's prison. Additionally, Tobi and I are research partners in our investigation of recently discovered archival materials from a girls' training school in upstate NY. These materials--medical intake forms, letters, photographs, and social work reports--from the New York State Training School for Girls in Hudson, NY (1904-1975) were recently discovered by a local resident at a garage sale.

This sentence particularly resonates with my experience: "Pens represent a lot of what seems broken about the U.S. justice system." What seems especially "broken" to me is the contradiction the restricted access to those pens represents; on the one hand, the workshop is "allowed," encouraged even (Tobi notes the supportive and "proactive" nature of the prison staff who ensure the existence and continuance of the workshop). On the other hand, the withdrawal of the pens and their replacement with stubby, hard-to-write with pencils sends a clear message that whatever "safety concerns" the pens represent are privileged far above literacy, communication and the ability for incarcerated writers to, as Tobi notes, "work out the challenges that lead to incarceration or to reach out to family." All writing workshops in prison exist under conditions of surveillance and security, issues that often take precedence over communication. I can recall, for example, students in the college program who had corrections officers search their possessions and confiscate their writing or literally take their "suspect" writing out of a computer printer. Human communication is regulated. My dissertation research, for example, consisted of interviews with six men in a maximum security prison. I was on my way to a classroom for an interview when one of my interviewees passed by me in a line of men being escorted to a different part of the facility. He did not look at me or speak to me. When we met, he apologized for not having acknowledged me but said that he could have been "written up" for speaking. For those of us who have had spent any time teaching inside, such stories are all too common.

Tobi observes that she cannot bring herself to finish the sentence "Limiting inmate access to the life stuff of communication protects..." However, Foucault notes that the modern prison, since we no longer draw and quarter people, had to create what seemed like a new kind of punishment: "the expiation that rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclination" (16). "Limiting inmates access to the life stuff of communication" not only punishes "the heart, the thoughts, the will, and the inclinations," but belongs to a "political technology of the body" (30). The restricted use of the physical implements of communication works to control the body as Tobi notes that "hands cramp" and writing is painful; who wants to write when it literally hurts? Tobi's narrative is emblematic of the contradictory nature of prison literacy practices: allowed, but restricted, encouraged, but negated.

Foucault further observes that prisoners are "situated in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix" them (189). The archival material from the girls' Training School "captures and fixes" the girls in multiple ways through medical intake forms that present the girls as "specimens" that have

been measured and weighed, to social work home visit forms that note class markers such as shabby furniture or working class neighborhoods, to warrants of commitment that “fix” the girls as deviant or criminal. As Tobi observes, “questions of erasure and limited communications” haunt our work with the archival material as these documents are a testament to the erasure of the girls’ voices and the restrictions placed on their communication. Even though the documents are fragmentary and present a very limited snapshot of life at the TS, the erasure of voice and identity and restricted communication is apparent. Even letters or documents authored by the girls, such as 15 year old Lila’s letter to a TS official or a letter of apology written by Agnes for an unknown offense, seem ultimately unknowable as they were produced under institutional and social guidelines that limited the girls’ expressions of agency and identity. These 19th century institutional narratives are indeed mirrored in contemporary accounts; entrenched erasures and loss of communication are echoed in Tobi’s narrative of restricted access to the most basic tools of writing for incarcerated writers today.

**WH:** Two years ago I began connecting students in my university classes with incarcerated writers in a women’s prison roughly 80 miles away through a writing exchange program. Since that time I’ve had the privilege to watch exchanges between these and other writers grow and develop, and to help start an organization, Exchange for Change (<http://www.exchange-for-change.org>), that’s devoted to bringing writing programs into prisons and transitional facilities as well as sharing that writing through exchange classes and publications that raise awareness and foster dialogue in our community.

It’s clear to me that institutional narratives that link literacy programs to managing and improving inmate behavior have a large part in making my organization’s prison literacy programs possible. In the relatively short span of Exchange for Change’s existence, we have watched the DOC’s relationship to us move from one of caution and skepticism to growing embrace. We have allies in high positions in the DOC who help us smooth over any difficulties we’ve had in individual program sites and who encourage us to expand our programs to new sites. This is a profound relief for us, because we are committed to bringing writing programs into institutions at all levels of the corrections systems, and we understand the tremendous need in these institutions for creative, intellectual and critical resources for prisoners. At the same time, we understand that the reason the DOC wants us in their institutions is because we make the act of imprisonment easier. We dutifully submit assessments that demonstrate low rates of disciplinary incidents among our participants, and cite research that further links prison art and writing programs to improved inmate behavior. We understand that our program serves as a source of motivation for our workshop participants, but we also know that disciplinary reports often come without warning, without provocation, and can just as likely reflect an officer’s mood or a fellow inmate’s grudge as they can an act of disobedience.

As Boudicca writes in *Women, Writing, and Prison*, “I live in constant fear of committing the smallest infraction and drawing attention to myself. I never know when the thread will unravel and a sword will fall on my head. I have been under investigation for the most minor infractions: having one too many pencils, leaving dust in a corner of my cell, wearing my crew socks folded down. Each staff



has a different pet peeve or personal interpretation of the rules. It is much worse to be investigated than disciplined – one time I was confined without a bathroom for more than seventy-two hours.”

“In this camp, I put my head down in humiliation and accept whatever treatment is meted out. To resist is to gain punishment. To speak out is to gain punishment. I hate the Department of Corrections. I despise everyone who works here. Not all DOC employees and officers are malicious or spiteful, but I still despise them for working here. They see and do nothing. They hear and do nothing. They witness and do nothing. The State pays them for silence.

The most important way that entrenched institutional narratives shape literacy practices in prison is through their focus on individual transformation. Prisons are designed to restrict movement and view, and that includes vision of self. Simone Weil Davis writes, “To write as an incarcerated woman is to write into the implicit assumption of predetermined guilt and an oft-reiterated obligation to rehabilitate on paper. The work of emerging from crisis becomes dangerously blurred with the *mea culpa*, and both are stage managed, as much as can be possible, by the correctional context” (“Inside-Out: The Reaches and Limits of a Prison Program,” *Razor Wire Women* 209).

Prisoners are compelled to reconstruct their understandings of themselves and the stories of their lives along narratives of crime, punishment and individual redemption. The focus on individual transformation in prison discourses and prison programming is intense, and they reshape the stories that prisoners tell themselves and tell others about themselves.

**CH:** As the last respondent to the question, “how do entrenched institutional narratives shape literacy practices in prison,” I want to echo Tobi and Laura’s emphasis on the relationship between technologies of literacy and, as Laura writes, “conditions of surveillance and security, issues that often take precedence over communication.” Tobi and Laura focus primarily on writing technology, and I will add that restrictions on access to *reading* technology are significant to the broader prison project of “limiting inmate access to the life stuff of communication.” I have taught in prison settings where incarcerated students had some limited access to educational computers, only inside the space of the education complex—but these computers, of course, could be used for word processing only, as neither free nor incarcerated teachers and students were of course permitted any access to the internet. Students in this program were often asked to undertake significant research projects. But in order to perform research requiring materials not included in the prison or educational program library, students had to rely on packets of research material brought in by instructors—a dynamic that ensures, even against the best of intentions, the influence of the free teacher’s research biases on incarcerated student’s research conclusions.

Regardless of the writing technology available to students in prison, almost no incarcerated person, in any U.S. facility, has access to the reading and research technologies available to most free people with access to a computer and a public library, let alone the collected resources of a University. The manner in which incarcerated students are able to use writing and reading technology is surely related to Wendy’s insightful claim that the “most important way that institutional narratives shape literacy practices in prison is through their focus on individual transformation.” If, as Wendy argues,

“prisons are designed to restrict movement and view,” including “vision of self,” then a significant part of the mechanism of this restriction in the context of prison education is general access to writing technology—however delimited—combined with general lack of access to reading and research technology.

With respect to lack of access to writing technology, Tobi describes a situation of unexplained deprivation: the elimination of pens and even regular pencils from programming; followed by the disturbing assurance that “lined paper” is not currently slated for elimination. The jail administrators that Tobi describes make no attempt to justify their actions in terms of “security”—unlike the guards who search Laura’s students’ possessions and confiscate pages of “suspect” material. But security itself is a pervasive institutional narrative—and “civilian” educators inside prisons often experience and witness the effects of security narratives in situations when it seems that actual security cannot possibly be an issue.

There would seem to be no possible security reason for even questioning student’s access to lined paper—and yet the narrative of security as the all-consuming goal of prison staff remains the unspoken justification for any such action. Because the total power of administration and the lack of autonomy of prisoners is the presumed basis of prison security, the story of security remains the ultimate, even when unspoken, trump card when it seems that there can be no logical explanation for a given prison procedure. Michael Dillon writes of the drive, fundamental to our present governmental systems, to “secure security” itself, as a story to be protected above and against the human being. This creates a set of paradoxical security systems that “incarcerate rather than liberate; radically endanger fear rather than liberate; and engender fear rather than create assurance” (15). The narrative of individual transformation is thus also a narrative of security. In the prison (so the prison says), this individual transformation can only be possible—can only be allowed—when an incarcerated person’s body is not safe, but rather secure. The entrenched narrative of security shapes all practices in prison, but especially any, including literacy, connected to human freedom of expression and thought.

### **What research methods can we use to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of prison?**

**LR:** Two young women, one African-American and one white, gaze seriously from the sepia toned photo. This photo is part of the collection of archival documents Tobi and I have been researching. How do we possibly begin to understand this haunting image and the additional, fragmentary, Training School material? This question has preoccupied me for the last year; this work, along with past prison literacy research projects I have been engaged in, has raised many questions for me about how to practically, ethically and responsibly conduct research investigating the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material conditions of prison. Gesa Kirsch’s ideas about feminist research have been a useful conceptual framework for me to use to investigate the literacy practices of incarcerated and other marginalized and disenfranchised writers.

Kirsch states that research “On women should be for women.” While her work focuses on ethnographic research with women, we can adapt these ideas and consider that “research about incarcerated writers should be for incarcerated writers” as feminist scholars such as Kirsch are concerned with “issues of interpretation and representation as they concern ‘others,’ especially persons and groups alienated from social, political and economic power” (ix). We can use Kirsch’s work to investigate three major areas of concern for prison literacy researchers: context, or the total institutional environment in which our research takes place, ethical issues such as rights of incarcerated writers and researcher responsibilities, and questions of representation, or whose stories are told, by whom, and for whom, in order to ensure that incarcerated writers benefit from our research. These three areas have all been issues of concern for me as I have contemplated how to begin to understand the voices of these long silenced women, the many other voices that spoke for them, and the words of the incarcerated writers I have been working with in prison writing workshops and college classes for close to thirty years.

The historical materials, for example, raised several issues of context for us; the director of the NY State Archives required us to ask permission to work with archival Training School material, we have been instructed to only use first names of the Training School girls, and access to this material remains a concern. Several past prison literacy research projects powerfully invoked questions of context for me as the State Department of Corrections questioned the legitimacy of my non-quantitative research, institutional IRB boards complicated issues with the state, and the prison itself required me to use their barely functional, ancient tape recorder instead of my newly purchased one. Researchers should be aware that prison literacy work, which takes places in multiple institutional contexts (IRB boards, department of corrections agencies, the prisons themselves) involves gatekeepers with goals and interests that may be very different than those of literacy researchers.

These archival materials also raise questions about how we represent the voices and stories of “others” who may not have the means or agency to represent themselves. How do we ethically tell the stories of these young women, long deceased and limited in their agency during their incarceration at the Training School? How do we ethically represent the voices of the incarcerated writers in our jail and prison workshops? Kirsch tells us that while “feminist researchers...hope to empower the people they study...researchers are inevitably implicated in the process of speaking for others” (46). Kirsch invokes many questions faced by prison literacy researchers: who is being represented and “spoken for?” Who is performing the representation? How are incarcerated writers, stigmatized as “throwaway” members of our society and limited in their interactions with people from “outside,” representing themselves to us? While there are no easy or clear answers to these questions, it is important that we keep them in mind and remember, as Linda Alcoff reminds us, that these difficulties do not mean that we should not speak or conduct difficult research; Alcoff states that “We should strive to create whenever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than for others” (Kirsch 63). We can, for example, work to speak “with and to” when working with archival prison documents by considering- and attempting to involve- the entire community context for these materials. We can create reciprocal research relationships with incarcerated writers by representing them by names they have chosen, including

their voices in our research, creating conditions for dialogue, and thinking about the implications of our research for not only each incarcerated writer we work with but the two million citizens currently incarcerated in our country.

As research with marginalized writers is becoming increasingly foundational to our profession, we can adapt Kirsch's admonition that research "on women should be for women" as we consider the consequences of our research for incarcerated writers, the members of our profession who are asking important questions about prison literacy work, and the society in which we live which has the highest incarceration rate in the world.

**TJ:** Like Laura, I often turn to feminist writing and literacy scholars to understand how literacy practices and emerging texts can be read as actions for social justice. Many of the issues Laura raises about representation and ethics remain on the forefront of my mind as I work with both writers long dead and those who are very much still alive. Scholars like Gesa Kirsch, Jackie Jones Royster, Anne Ruggles Gere, Deb Brandt, and Jessica Enoch inspire relevant and innovative ways of thinking through the significance of historical women's representations of imprisonment and selfhood.

When thinking through work with contemporary writers, I have adopted a range of methods for data collection. Research is never divorced from active teaching in the jail, however; in fact, the relationship I build with writers enables the qualitative interviews, as I suspect it might in most community literacy research endeavors. At the jail where I volunteer, I conduct program evaluations that offer a sampling of participant responses (sampling due to the high turnover rate in participation since it is a jail), participate in informal ethnographic practices as I teach each Wednesday, and invite women to give qualitative interviews based upon their writing histories. One analytic tool that has been useful to me in both contexts has been feminist analysis of narrative representation; that is, the process of looking contextually at how writers tell stories and have stories told about them (and respond to those tellings) with particular attention to the ways gender, sex, and sexuality are "told." In doing so, we are able to engage what narrative researcher Molly Andrews calls "narrative emplotments"; that is, the narratives--both normative and radical--that organize our lives and how we understand them.

**CH:** Before answering the question of "what research methods can we use to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of the prison" we might first ask why. *Why do we need to "understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of the prison?" What are the stakes inherent to attempting this understanding? What about this understanding is useful for the goal of resisting and ending prison and imprisonment?* Asking these questions does not entail rejecting the possibility of ethical research-in-prisons—rather, it may be that these questions should be asked before, or perhaps as the first part of, the question of method.

Laura rightly describes "three major areas of concern for prison literacy researchers: context, or the total institutional environment in which our research takes place, ethical issues such as incarcerated writers and researcher responsibilities, and questions of representation." These areas of concern—in

particular the question of context—are ideal frames through which to consider not just “what research methods,” but also “whether to research.” Partly because of the inherent violence of the “total institutional environment” of U.S. prisons and jails, many forms of writing and literacy in prison are not visible as such, and would not be discernable via methods common to University literacy research. The prison context begs the question of whether free (not incarcerated) researchers should be undertaking such projects in the first place.

In seeking to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of the prison, we might expose practices that are hidden, or that are not meant to be read as literacy practice (see Rawson 131, Campbell and Holding 202). We might subject writers to punishment. We might—even if we do neither of these things directly, in part because we have followed guidelines for ethical research set down by our disciplines and institutions—end up promoting an understanding of prison literacy that contributes to the greater effective working of the prison itself.

The methods we employ to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the prison must be context-based, changeable, and malleable, to be sure. But they can also be *abolitionist*. This might mean many things, including re-articulating the differences among all of us who would be involved in prison literacy research not in terms of writer-subject and academic-researcher, but rather as the researcher and writer who is incarcerated and the researcher and writer who gets to leave the prison at night. And if there must remain—and there must, given the institutional realities of academic labor—a part of our research that is “ours,” for our own purposes, we as free researchers should consider the question not of how it might also be “for” imprisoned research subjects, but rather of how we might work together to align our research projects toward common goals. The methods of research in prison should be defined through the exigencies of research in prison, and the exigence of this research should derive always from collaboration with people who are incarcerated. Rather than seek to understand, we might instead seek to join.

An abolitionist method would presume that we cannot and should not design research questions without recognizing the complicity of the free researcher’s own writing and literacy practices with the discursive and material environments of the prison. An abolitionist method would be one that, rather than help us understand writing and literacy practices within prison, instead seeks to discern a given prison and/or prison system’s *impediments to writing and literacy* for the purpose of resistance. It adapts our inciting question: *what research methods can we, as free scholars, use in collaboration with incarcerated scholars, to seek out the prison’s barriers to writing and literacy, and work to break them down?*

**WH:** What I appreciate most about Laura and Cory’s responses is the way they help us understand the complexity of our roles as prison literacy sponsors as well as researchers: most of us are not simply observing and researching literacy practices in prisons, but actively sponsoring them through creating our own literacy programs or strategically supporting existing programs that share our critical literacy and abolitionist goals.

In order to ethically and effectively research writing in prison I think we have to look at the institutional impediments to writing, as Cory suggests, as well as the ways in which the institution sponsors writing and stories more broadly. What are the stories the institution tells, and what stories does it encourage those inside it to tell? What are the stories they are compelled to tell? I also think we have to pay attention to the stories we (on the outside) are compelled to tell about prison and prison writing. Prison is a material and discursive environment, which means it is shaped by and also shapes the language and symbols outside it. How does it shape us as witnesses? How does it shape how we witness?

In her essay “‘All I Have, a Lament and a Boast’: Why Prisoners Write,” Bell Gale Chevigny suggests that “[t]he best prison writing continues to testify to hidden experience, to critique and resist institutionalization, but it also helps writers to find themselves, make themselves whole, forge significant contact with others, and make reparations” (246-47). Here Chevigny articulates the multiple purposes that prison writing can serve, as well as the array of purposes that prison literacy teachers-researchers-activists have argued that it must serve in order to make an impact, not only in the lives of the imprisoned participants, but on broader social change in our current system of mass incarceration.

While all prison arts and literacy programs may be providing crucial access to resources that otherwise would not be there, all such programs are not necessarily working to resist our current system of mass incarceration. As literacy researchers and sponsors, we must consider the kinds of literacy practices we enable as well as suppress.

**How might the social circulations of prison writings (from prisoners and prison teachers) motivate the development of progressive pedagogies and practices that work toward shifting the balance of power in the U.S. criminal justice system?**

*CH: The space of a tactic is the space of the other...it must play on and with a terrain imposed on and organized by the law of a foreign power...This nowhere gives a tactic...a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment and seize on the wind the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment...In short, a tactic is an art of the weak (371). —Michele De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life**

It is certainly possible that the “social circulations of prison writings” can foment changes in the “balance of power in the U.S. criminal justice system,” but in order for this possibility to become reality, I think certain conditions need to be met. I’ll draw out this point in part via writing from current and formerly incarcerated students from the Education Justice Project (<http://www.educationjustice.net>), who submitted contributions to a panel on “Prison Education and Prison Abolition” at the 2014 Race & Pedagogy National Conference.

First, the progressive “social circulation” of prison writing needs to foreground the words of current and former people in prison, and other people most impacted by the U.S. criminal justice system—but we need to ask, as Shawn Ross argued at the 2014 Race and Pedagogy conference, the question of circulation *among who and for what end*. If we are not confident that circulation of writings is *per se* an

effective anti-prison tactic, than we need to ask how we can make it so. Circulating the words of incarcerated people cannot do much to change the balance of power within this system, unless the mechanism and reception of this circulation can foment the structural undermining of U.S. incarceration per se. In the same panel discussion, Eric Lash noted the need for prison education to be carried out in effective opposition to outside-of-prison structural inequalities that help contribute to the prison system. From this perspective, the “social circulation of prison writings from prisoners and prison teachers” would be vital for any attempt to leverage prison writing against the carceral status quo. But, as Lash argues, just any circulation would not be adequate—this circulation would need to occur within and among communities most affected by the U.S. criminal justice system, and it would need to be a circulation not just of prison writings, but a circulation of tools and mechanisms for resistance.

The “social circulation of prison writings” can merely support the U.S. criminal justice system—by framing prisons as effective social institutions—as wonderful places for corrective and rehabilitative education. It is important for circulators to recognize the polysemous quality of the rhetoric of circulation, and to be mindful of multiple valences for this important work.

The objective of changing the balance of power within the U.S. criminal justice system begs the question of the prison, itself. As Kemuyah ben Rakemeyahu at the 2014 Race and Pedagogy conference noted, “political positions are inconsequential to an educator’s obligation to...the expectation that all correctional staff and volunteers will support prison objectives to limit the movement, thinking, and behavior of prisoners.” Any activity that occurs at the sufferance of prison administrations, including the social circulation of prison writing, is not, as ben Rakemeyahu said, “exempt from this truth.” In this conversation, I ask us to be open to the possibility that we are asking the wrong question. We could ask not, “how can we shift the balance of power,” but “how can we work to end the U.S. criminal justice system” as it currently exists.

We need to be optimistic, but cautiously so, about the anti-institutional power of pedagogy that occurs within the space—and so in its circulation implicitly reproduces the logics of—imprisonment. The potential tactic of the social circulation of prison writing must be acknowledged as (even if it might be among our most effective tools) a “tool of the weak,” because this circulation is predicated on pedagogy that takes place under the authority of U.S. carceral control. As we practice the social circulation of prison writings, we need to keep in mind how we can paradoxically deploy this circulation always outside of and against the space of prison.

**TJ:** Perhaps in similar ways to Cory, I've been thinking a lot about how circulation may or may not result in measurable change within the justice system as I work across the coordination of a contemporary jail teaching program and an unfolding archival research project. While I hold hope that the *SpeakOut! Journal* will circulate far and wide and encourage others to bring diverse writers such as prison writers into their courses and onto their reading lists, a progressive pedagogy aimed at the justice system cannot be divorced from the institutional realities of working inside jails and prisons. Work with currently incarcerated writers often raised the possibility of literacy-based

advocacy and the reality of the limitations of time, materials, positionality, and access to literary worlds. As I discussed earlier through the lamentation of lost pens and other tools of communication, there are significant risks to navigate when working inside. Even publications themselves are subject to approval by correctional staff who are obliged to review work for gang references, coded language, and inappropriate characterizations of personnel. Yet once the writing moves beyond the institution, there is a kind of freedom in circulation. Journal issues and anthologies move through the institution with pride and then out into the wider community through local libraries, independent coffee shops, and individual requests. The brief framing that each *SpeakOut! Journal* contains works both to acknowledge facilitators, writers, and supporters and to introduce readers to some of the activities and intention preceding the production of the writing itself. While an issue of a journal or collection of writing aren't overtly pedagogical textual documents themselves, they do often represent and perhaps translate such theory into representative artifacts by design. A set of poems responding to Mandela's rhetoric or a feminist perspective on women's bodies can communicate the will for meaningful cultural change to readers.

In the archive, it feels a bit different. I want to know that there are meaningful reasons to raise the spectre of adolescent moments that many women likely suppressed as they forged on in their lives and survived America's Great Depression and a second World War. Many likely never shared their time at the Training School with family and friends once released from its gaze. What does it mean, then, to offer archival research on imprisoned girls as part of a campaign for change in a contemporary system? As I think about the circulation that I am sponsoring and encouraging for the girls who are represented in a box of found personal and institutional materials, the line between productive social circulation and exploitation feels tenuous. There must be a purpose for dredging up the specters of girls whose deeds and even lives are long gone. There must be exigence and relevance, resonance even, in the ways that their stories reflect upon and call attention to the experiences of girls incarcerated in today's U.S. prisons and jails.

The notion of meaningful change through social circulation both within and outside of carceral spaces feels like an opportunity to engage in the kinds of radical/feminist rhetorical listening and action that scholars like Royster (1994), Royster/Kirsch (2012), Ratcliffe (2005) and Glenn/Ratcliffe (2011) have been calling upon us to recognize for the past several decades. The work of piecing together a telling of the story of Lila, Katherine, Agnes or Mattie can open space for understanding how to improve conditions of poverty, gender and racial inequity and move toward justice. yet, It feels radically insufficient to argue for equality in a time when existing conditions for men, for all confined peoples, are abhorrent. Rather than seeking equality within the walls of existing structures, but might it mean to tell, to fragment, and to use the stories of prisoners past in order to fight for justice today? How might the strategic social circulation of stories participate in shifting the narrative we are writing for the people at most risk of confinement today, those challenged by addiction, poverty, homelessness, cultural and racial discrimination, and mental illness?

**LR:** Cory and Tobi raise important questions about the potential for the social circulations of prison writings from both incarcerated writers and prison teachers for motivating pedagogies and practices



that “work toward shifting the balance of power within the criminal justice system.” I share Cory’s concerns, along with those voiced by the Education Justice Project students, about the potential for prison writing as a catalyst for meaningful change when it occurs inside of the system that risks being seen as “wonderful places for corrective and rehabilitative education.” Foucault believes that all prison personnel- even teachers and writing workshop volunteers- are implicated in a network of power that controls prisoners’ bodies as all documents produced in the prison “capture and fix” (189) inmates within the “normalizing gaze” of the correctional facility. We must always be alert to the potential for collusion. Our workshop participants are accounted for, “busy” in a program. Anne Folwell Stanford, for example, notes the uneasy feelings of collusion she experiences as a jail workshop teacher and her awareness of her privilege to as a white, middle-class academic free to leave Cook County Jail after her workshop is over (281).

Yet, Tobi, like Foucault and Stanford, observes the potential for resistance as the words of her jail workshop writers are circulated beyond the confines of the jail and communicate the “will for meaningful cultural change.” As I contemplate the potential for the circulation of prison writing to contribute to meaningful change, I reflect on the words of a student in a prison college class I taught many years ago. The class was discussing their very reasons for writing. One student picked up his journal, a coveted black and white speckled journal. “I wish this could be buried somewhere and dug up in like a hundred years,” he said. “I just want someone to know I was here.”

“I just want someone to know I was here.” It is no secret that we hide our prisons in rural areas, far away from the centers of population where Foucault notes that prisoners in the Middle Ages were drawn and quartered in a public display. Our images of incarcerated citizens come to us from popular media that sensationalizes, oversimplifies and dehumanizes. A seemingly simple request from an incarcerated writer for recognition of his existence- his individualism and humanity- may not do much, as Cory acknowledges, to “change to balance of power within the system,” but if these words find themselves into a publication such as Tobi’s *SpeakOut! Journal*, perhaps the potential for change within a public that envisions prisoners as barely human exists. We must be mindful, however, of the delicate line between voyeurism and a desire to understand the realities of lives hidden and seemingly discarded behind bars and razor wire.

Jennifer Sinor, in *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing*, notes that “In determining the value of a society, you need only to investigate what gets discarded. Our literal and cultural detritus tell us as much about who we are as do our museums and libraries” (3). It is not a stretch to call incarcerated writers confined on the margins of our society the “discarded” of our society, their words considered as “cultural detritus.” The archival documents from the NY State Training School for Girls Tobi and I have been working with were literally discarded documents resting “on the historical curb” (Sinor 3). As Tobi observes, circulating and publicly sharing personal and institutional documents that were probably never meant to be shared raises urgent ethical questions. We have shared the fragments of the stories of the long- dead Lila, Katherine, Agnes and Josephine in multiple venues, ranging from academic conferences to public events such as library talks and pop-up museums in the communities from which these documents emerged. Community members

have responded by sharing their own stories of family members who may have been employed at the Training School or may have been incarcerated or in the foster care system. Audience members have noted how medical forms present the girls as “specimens” and speculate about the humane treatment of the girls during their incarceration. Audience members’ contemplation of the documents at academic conference has led to conversations about contemporary issues of confinement and incarceration. These kinds of conversations seem to be at the heart of the reasons for sharing these documents. Heidi A. McKee and James Porter observe that a radical move archival researchers can make is to “shift from seeing the archive as *documents* to viewing the archives as *persons...*” (77). McKee and Porter go on to argue that “Kirsch and Royster remind us, of seeing the text and the person as part of a larger community” (78). Can we use the writings of those considered past and present “cultural detritus,” the throwaways of our society, to enlarge community perceptions? “To fight for justice” as Tobi hopes? These seem to be the most ethical reasons to resurrect the voices of Lila, Katherine, Mattie and Josephine, so that research “on the incarcerated” becomes research “for the incarcerated” in an effort to rethink our ideas of justice and address the pressing issue of the incarceration of over two million of our citizens.

## Conclusion

“Writing to heal...and making that writing public...is the most important emotional, psychological, artistic, and political project of our time” (DeSalvo 216).

Our dialogue illustrates the various ways we have undertaken literacy work inside prison--from writing workshops in jails and prisons, to exchanges between college students and incarcerated writers, to college classes in correctional facilities, to investigations of fragmented documents from a progressive era girls’ training school--in an ongoing effort to support writing to heal the individual, social and cultural wounds evoked by our country’s mass incarceration policies and to make that writing public. In our collective lifetimes, we have not witnessed nor participated in a more critical time for action and reflection than the moments we are now living. We call for an active response to the confinement of thousands of women and men in the United States, even as we recognize the culturally fraught nature of “confinement” as a term and concept. We used to hide women away when their bodies stretched and morphed into something new, when their ability to create and sustain life became too apparent. Too, we now confine them elsewhere, in the upper stories of crowded county jails, in the economically dependent rural counties of states eager to keep jobs and incriminate poverty, addiction, race, and immigration. We confine women to cellblocks because their bodies are too dangerous to allow into the rest of the jail as we do with other inmate workers. We confine transgender bodies to units that might well house 50+ people but cannot for fear that difference will invite unknown actions. In the name of equality, we default to a rotational solitary confinement wherein it becomes more palatable to adopt alternating 23 hour lockdowns for men and women in jail rather than investing in alternative ways to finance a healthy number of staff or simply reduce the imprisoned population. In the name of confinement we limit the circulation of words, ideas, even bodies themselves. A progressive, abolitionist approach to literacy work inside

aims to communicate the necessity of fostering voice and identity as primary to the work of reimagining how we understand the notion of justice in the United States.

### Notes

Learn more about the New York Training School for Girls by visiting the Hudson, NY chapter of the Prison Public Memory Project: [www.prisonpublicmemory.org](http://www.prisonpublicmemory.org).

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