

Original Paper

A Prison Education Counternarrative: “Mock Citizenship” in a Women’s Prison

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Abstract

In this article, we develop a perspective on the purposes and possibilities of education in prison through the stories of the first author, a prison educator and critical pedagogue. In the context of today’s prisons, we complicate universalist notions of citizenship by weaving theories of citizenship into the story of education. We share the daily concerns of a prison educator and explore the transformative possibilities that women convict students try on. We question how to shape educational practices in prison and contemplate the construction of a new “mock citizenship” informed by the realities of felony disenfranchisement. Our hope is to bring to the conversation something that has been lacking when discussions of incarceration occur: insight into the ways incarcerated students perform the role of citizen and how the purpose of prison education must extend beyond job readiness toward the creation of full citizens able to participate in the democratic process.

Keywords

citizenship, social justice education, critical pedagogy, prison education, cultural studies

1. A Prison Education Counternarrative: “Mock Citizenship” in a Women’s Prison

While there are larger rates of males in prison in the United States, and males are more often associated with the epidemic of “mass incarceration” (Alexander, 2012), females are the fastest growing sector of the prison population (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Davis (2013) contends that in broader society, females are often portrayed as inmates who have violated a social contract by transgressing their “fundamental moral” obligation to “womanhood” by becoming incarcerated. The legacy of such thinking makes it such that the “transgressions” against “womanhood” today, result in convicted women often being given the maximum sentence for their crimes (Ajunwa, 2015). With the penalties of incarceration come disenfranchisement, isolation, lack of educational opportunity: the stripping of elements of democratic citizenship. As Ajunwa notes, “Little attention has been paid to...the reintegration efforts of the formerly incarcerated and, in particular, formerly incarcerated women” (p. 299). There are two major policy areas fundamental to reintegration for democratic citizenship within U.S. society: education and voting rights. However, these policy areas, when associated with prisoners, are accompanied by scorn and draconian ideals of what the correctional system is intended to do—punish.

2. Policies that Disproportionately Affect Incarcerated Women (Note 1)

Scholars contend overwhelmingly that reintegration efforts for formerly incarcerated individuals improve dramatically with the introduction of educational services and continuing post-secondary schooling inside and outside the prison system (Western, 2007). In general, individuals in the prison systems in the U.S. have much less formal education than those in the general population. It was found in 2017 that 31% of the prison population has less than a high school diploma; in the general population, the figure was around 19% (U.S. Bureau of Prisons, 2017; Davis, 2013). This lack of formal education can translate to a lack of sanctioned knowledge or skills that are commonly associated with citizenship.

Because of the well-established connection between education and reduced recidivism (Davis, 2013), today many women’s prisons offer educational services and programs. For example, all federal prisons in the U.S. have high school education services (U.S. Bureau of Prisons, 2016). Many state prisons have followed suit. As of 2016, state prisons in Washington state have partnered with community colleges to pilot a high school completion program aimed at adult inmates over 21—a competency-based high school diploma program which serves as a new alternative to traditional GED offerings (Washington State Board, n.d.).

The success of education and schooling is typically measured by the rate of employability of formerly incarcerated individuals. According to Ajunwa (2015), education helps to “mitigate[e] the stigma of incarceration that ‘marks’ an individual as unfit for work” (p. 320). This is typical of traditional ideas about the purpose of prison education—to create better skilled workers. According to some scholars, however, reintegration of educated individuals into the larger society is important because of the need for these individuals to be able to apply role-taking and social interaction skills as a means to help

adopt a sense of citizenship into the polity (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). Unlike male inmates, job skills are not always the primary reason female inmates seek to further their education. “For women, whose personal histories are uniquely marked by domestic violence, abuse, victimization, reliance on a male protector and early motherhood, programming becomes a chance to educate yourself and learn how to live a normal life” (Sultana, 2016). We argue that education with an emphasis on democratic citizenship imparts the social capital necessary for successful reintegration into communities. For education to have a real impact, however, it requires legal and political support.

For over 20 years, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) has made it illegal for formerly incarcerated individuals to apply and receive federally funded Pell Grants (U.S. Congress, 1994) and dramatically decreased the ability of inmates to obtain further education. Democrats such as Congresswoman Donna F. Edwards believe that this lack of educational attainment for incarcerated and recently released inmates has led to higher recidivism (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). There is growing advocacy for educating inmates. The Restoring Education and Learning Act (REAL) was introduced in 2015 and would restore access to Pell Grants to those who are incarcerated (U.S. House of Representatives, 2015). Additionally, former President Barack Obama introduced a pilot program that allows some prisoners to receive Pell Grants which allows them to earn college credits while in prison (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The Trump administration has expressed continued support for this pilot program which involves around 60 institutes of higher education (Kreighbaum, 2018).

However, although the federal government has made strides to improve the educational attainment of inmates both in and outside the prison walls, many state governments, and citizens at large, view the extension of education into the prison system, especially for women, as a waste of resources (Editorial Board, 2016). In New York, opposition to funding of education for prisoners led to Governor Andrew Cuomo eliminating a proposed one million dollars that was slated for education in the prison system (from a 2.8-billion-dollar budget) to appease citizens that were upset that there were policies in effect to educate prison inmates. The opposition in New York concerning education for prisoners has led to severe cuts in funding for most programs. The number of college degrees obtained by prisoners in 1991 was 1,078. By 2011 that number had dropped to just 141 (Editorial Board, 2016).

These are telling numbers about the importance of education in the prison system across the U.S. As increasingly the funding is pulled from prison educational systems, and laws and policies are introduced or reinforced that preponderantly harm inmates and former inmates, the chances for prisoners to see democracy in action as citizens of the U.S. diminishes, and so do their hopes to get themselves into a better position in life.

Another set of policies and laws directly impacting inmates and former inmates is voting. Voting is one of the fundamental rights that we have as citizens of a democracy. Yet, as Michael Waldman writes in his book, *The Fight to Vote* (2016), we have been struggling with what that means since the founding of the nation. Taking away a prisoner’s right to vote has been around since ancient Greece and Rome (National Council of State Legislatures, 2016). “Civil Death” during this time often involved the

“forfeiture of property, the loss of the right to appear in court, a prohibition on entering into contracts, as well as the loss of voting rights” (para. 2). “Civil Death” aspects were brought to the U.S. by the English colonists. All but the loss of voting rights for felons have been abolished. Today, the lack of voting rights for those with criminal backgrounds is referred to as “felony disenfranchisement” and traditionally supported by interpretations of the 14th amendment.

States control voting rights, and approaches to voting for incarcerated individuals vary widely. For instance, felons in Maine and Vermont never lose their right to vote, even while incarcerated (Allard & Mauer, 1999). But in states such as Iowa and Virginia, felons and ex-felons permanently lose their right to vote unless given a gubernatorial pardon (National Council of State Legislatures, 2016). The procedure for getting one’s voting rights back after leaving prison are cumbersome, and statistically very few former inmates restore their voting rights, especially in southern states where the process is particularly restrictive.

According to the Sentencing Project (2013), “legal challenges to felony disenfranchisement laws have been mostly unsuccessful because courts have refused to apply the same legal principles regarding the fundamental right to vote to individuals with criminal convictions” (p. 7). Opponents to felony disenfranchisement claim that under §1 of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, rights of felons and other formerly incarcerated individuals should be afforded equal protection under the law, which includes the right to vote. Unfortunately, cases like *Richardson v. Ramirez* (1974), a case from California where formerly incarcerated individuals claimed that under the 14th Amendment the state was violating their equal protection rights, the courts sided with the state laws concerning restrictions on voting rights for certain individuals in their citizenry. Although there is some dissenting opinion regarding state laws that are highly restrictive concerning restoration of voting rights to former felons, courts have tended to side with the prevailing law.

In this article, we aim to address the lack of attention given to women’s prisons and complicate notions of education and citizenship. We share the daily concerns of Sultana (first author), a prison educator, and explore the transformative possibilities that her students try on. In our analysis, we question how to shape educational practices in prison and contemplate a “mock citizenship” informed by the realities of felony disenfranchisement. We began this paper sharing the broader policy literature related to prisons. Next, we share the impetus for writing this project, our positionalities, contributions, and approach to presenting a counternarrative. Our hope is to bring to the conversation something that has been lacking when discussions of incarceration occur: insight into the ways incarcerated students perform the role of citizen and how the purpose of prison education must extend beyond job readiness toward the creation of full citizens able to participate in the democratic process.

3. Methodological (Re)considerations: Using Narrative to Bring A Counternarrative

In Fall 2016, we gathered for a conference in the Northwestern U.S. and Sultana, at the time a professor in an educational program in a women’s prison, invited the other authors to participate in a discussion

group with her students. We were eager to participate for various reasons. Brian was formerly involved with a prison reform non-profit organization. Melissa, after attaining a PhD in cultural studies of education, was pursuing a law degree. Brittany had done significant work in anti-racist education including educating teachers about the school to prison pipeline.

It was an invaluable opportunity to dialogue with women in this *othered* space—a classroom behind bars. Students had been invited to voluntarily participate in a discussion on “culture and politics” with the authors. We began with light conversation, but the biggest question on the women’s minds at the time was who would win the presidential election. They watched some of the 2016 presidential debates on television, and they were intrigued by the discussions regarding the candidates and their positions on topics such as for-profit prisons, immigration, and women’s rights. Our discussion grew to include academic projects the students designed, how they felt about the prison they were in, their lives inside and outside, and the prison system generally.

We continued to discuss what we had seen and heard into the night. That we had participated in a passionate dialogue with a diverse group of adult women on the complexities and contradictions presented by the 2016 presidential election was not necessarily striking. What was striking—and what continued to beg for attention—was the fact that about a quarter of the discussants in this heated dialogue had been relieved of the fundamental right to participate in the democratic process under discussion. How, we wondered, did they reconcile this disconnect? And how could we as educators—privileged with full citizenship—interpret this positionality?

In this manuscript we do not claim to speak for these women, but inform our thoughts through the discourses they offer. Like aunts in the back yard after Sunday dinner, they invited us into their circle for a moment and we soaked up what we could. But knowing that these particular aunts do not have the voice that we do—and because their conversations linger in our heads—we pursue the implications here. Thus, we come into this project with three of us as outsiders. Brian, Melissa and Brittany are positioned as those not directly connected with the prison system. None of us have been incarcerated or worked directly with prisoners. However, we position ourselves as cultural studies scholars that have a deep connection with issues pertaining to social justice, of which, the topics surrounding the women prisoners would fall. Author #1, on the other hand, is an outsider on the inside. Working closely through an education program within the walls of the women’s prison, she is witness and participant, taking advantage of the special position of “honorary” insider afforded to her by her students while constantly aware of the opportunities that going home—outside the gates—afford her every day.

In our efforts to (re)imagine prison education, we employ a narrative methodology (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013). With narrative we problematize traditional notions of prison education by sharing the stories of Sultana. We consider Sultana’s story central to our analysis given her daily role working with incarcerated women and use her voice to create a counternarrative that challenges the narrow conception much of the public holds of prison education and helps to interrogate the performance of citizenship. We do not include a separate “theoretical framework” as a lens to share our

“findings”, rather we insert Sultana’s voice throughout the manuscript. Her narratives, which include memories of her students’ voices, are italicized to create a dialogue between the literature we reviewed and her lived experiences. We assert that this method of narrative allows us to be activists in our pursuit of justice for women convicts and advocates for change.

3.1 Sultana’s Positionality

I teach at a women’s prison because they gave me a job when I needed one. It wasn’t academia but...something about this population spoke to me. In all of my studies about the marginalized, the forgotten women, the exploited classes, where were the stories of women behind bars? Believing that the teacher is always taught, this seemed like an ideal bit of happenstance. During my interview, I was awash in newly minted doctorate fever, laying my gauntlet down against neo-liberal doctrines, standardized testing, and non-critical systems of education—nay, learning. I walked out of the interview aglow in my self-righteousness and pretty sure I had just cost myself a job. But...it seems that is what they wanted to hear. They rallied around the idea of new research about their corner of the world. I felt tasked.

Once you complete training and finally find yourself—alone—in a classroom with a couple dozen inmates/offenders/convicts, it takes a minute to remember your social justice mission. You have a job to do and a group to keep calm. These two goals do not always mesh. And, in that moment, I carry with me socially embedded constructions of the women I now face, so individual yet subsumed into a mass of gray fleece jumpsuits. My options are clear: I can separate them judiciously, by number, by security level, by crime; or I can take them as they come, label them students, see what happens.

With the understanding of who we are and the positionality that we have as scholars within this paper, what follows is a documentation of how we interpreted and theorized what we learned from a group of incarcerated women about their relationship to notions of democracy and citizenship. We argue that a critical pedagogy is essential to support their participation in the democracy and that—disenfranchised—they inhabit a type of mock citizenship reminiscent of 19th century republican motherhood.

3.2 Education and the Arcane Principles of Citizenship Formation

In *Another Kind of Public Education* Patricia Hill Collins (2009) begins by sharing a story from her senior year of high school about a prompt given to her asking, “What does the flag mean to you?” In the United States, the red and white stripes, and white stars on a field of blue are typically associated with freedom, liberty, and a patriotic nationalism. For Collins, an African American woman who had realized that the “American ideal of meritocracy was a myth” (p. 2), however, the flag was problematic. Her opinions about race, school, and democracy were not welcomed in her public school. Collins ultimately argues, “democracy is not a finished project but rather is constantly in the making” (p. 5).

With an understanding that education and democracy are interconnected and are always in the making, we must acknowledge that citizenship is a dynamic force with those same interconnections. We must question “citizenship” as well as who gets access to it, and how and where it is obtained in the current

political climate. Does higher education play a role in helping to shape those who are being released from the prison system? What does their new (mock) citizenship look like (Banks, 2007; Arthur & Davison, 2000; Aikwa & Unterhalter, 2005; Stromquist, 2005; Satz 2007)?

Quantz (2015) describes citizenship as the knowledge, skills, and values needed in a particular time and place in a particular society; and that in a democratic citizenship these knowledge, skills, and values are needed by citizens to shape their own government. For Turner (1993), citizenship is “that set of practices (juridical, political, economic, and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups” (p. 2). Collins (2009) narrows the context of citizenry, noting, “depending on where you stand, American democracy constitutes a reality, a promise, a possibility, or a *problem*” (p. 7, emphasis added). If being a citizen is a set of practices, if it requires “knowledge, skills, and values”, does everyone, regardless of position, have access to these “knowledge, skills, and values?” Collins’ flag narrative was considered a problem much in the same ways W.E.B. DuBois so prophetically described over 100 years ago: she was censured for trying to be both Black and American. As we learn in her story, her desire to share her truths about what the flag meant to her and its representation of citizenship were not welcomed in her public school. In refusing to accept her teacher’s suggested rewriting of her speech to be more “patriotic”, she was silenced. Without being able to share what she knew about her own reality, did she share the same citizenship status as her peers did? It is stories such as these—in which some individuals are considered problems and denied their voice—that complicate the relationships between democracy, citizenship, and education. The specific context of women’s prisons is a locale with many of these kinds of stories.

As the election progresses, my students have created several very detailed theories about who I am voting for. I refuse to tell them, intentionally playing devil’s advocate to complicate easy conclusions about either candidates or voters. They have strong opinions and I tried to steer away from talking politics in the beginning. However, they have access to news programs and are often more diligent than I am in keeping up with the latest news. The start of every class was a firestorm of did you hear/what do you think about...Finally, I (happily) gave in and we began to incorporate politics into our daily curriculum. Education became a framework for us to analyze political platforms, notions of inclusion and exclusion, and the ramifications of all that rhetoric. I can clearly recall the moment in class when I had to pause in the middle of a lecture about the causes behind the American Revolution because students demanded to know how it was possible that colonial women did so much work—were expected to do so much work—but it never occurred to any of the framers of the constitution that they deserved equal citizenship. As one student wondered aloud: Why did women bother to follow the rules if they got nothing for it?

If democratic citizenship is something that gets muddled in public schooling, a compulsory space of learning, what might muddling citizenship look like within general and higher education in prisons? We argue that notions of citizenship are not transferable to every population, and that education plays a

central role in its shaping. In fact, many people begin life as already marginalized citizens. Through the ways that race, class, and gender intersect and function, some groups have more at stake than others, such as women, people of color, and those living in poverty—all of which can occur simultaneously (Collins, 2009). We suggest that citizenship for marginalized people is not necessarily composed of the same “knowledge, skills, and values” as the dominant norm.

Perhaps for the typically White, typically male, typically middle-class conception of “citizen”, access to higher education is part and parcel of the rights they are accorded. But for incarcerated women, that is not the case. The connection between a critical education and citizenship for incarcerated women then becomes one based on recognizing that citizenship is a type of social capital intricately reflective of a certain type of education—an education intent on creating participant citizens, with the knowledge to actively participate in an informed manner in democratic processes. However, fragmented cultural experiences, like those often experienced by incarcerated women, often leave little room for considerations of the same kind of participation. The same conventions that push education out of the eyesight of these women are the same ones that belittle and beguile their ideation of citizenship.

Education is critical in the formation of citizenship and voting is a fundamental right of citizens. Prisoners, generally, are denied both. The deleterious effects of such denials may be evident in high recidivism rates. But in our experience with the women inmates in Washington, we saw glimpses of the potential for critical education to lead not only to employment, but to a deeper sense of citizenship that began in classes as mock citizenship.

3.3 Towards a “Mock” Citizenship

The definitions of citizenship provided by Quantz (2015) and Turner (1993) provide a starting point for many critical theorists of citizenship. The benefits of defining citizenship as a set of practices, knowledge, skills, and values are that we can avoid the imposition of nation-state-driven definitions that historically have been exclusionary. Current debates in critical citizenship scholarship focus on the extent to which certain private elements in people’s lives “count” as qualifying for citizenship (e.g., Kershaw, 2010; Longman, De Graeve, & Brouckaert, 2013), but a more relevant departure point for our narratives are debates regarding inclusion, exclusion (e.g., Lister, 1997), and the body (e.g., Beasley & Bacchi, 2000). These all become issues of critical importance in the context of education programs in women’s prisons because of the ways in which women convicts are included, excluded, confined, and free.

3.4 Feminist Citizenship and the Republican Mother

Lister (1997) is one of the foremost feminist scholars of citizenship. In her critique of citizenship, she theorizes ways in which women have been excluded from within and without. These exclusions are based on a classic characterization of citizenship as “membership of a community” and “the rights and obligations which flow from that membership and [notions of] equality” (p. 29). In traditional portrayals of citizenship, those rights, bestowed by the nation-state, are part of a tit for tat which obligates citizens to participate in the nation-state in a public way—earning wages, paying taxes, and

voting. The division of public and private inherent in this conception of citizenship demeans women and the domestic. When women are acknowledged, their duty as a citizen is to procreate (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Santos, & Stoilova, 2013) and nurture the next generation. Feminists critique literature that describes citizenship as a universal, inclusionary force: the universalism hides the ways in which discourses of citizenship exclude groups and individuals from exercises of power in terms of rights and practices. The dilemma posed by women's public activities and republican theories relegating women to the hearth and home found an apparently simple resolution. The problem of female citizenship was solved by endowing domesticity itself with political meaning. The result was the idea and image of the republican mother (Evans, 1997, p. 57).

A common mantra I hear goes something like this: We hate history because it's boring/ just old men fighting and lots of dates/and what has that got to do with me anyway/it happened a long time ago/but I need this credit to graduate. So my students said (and I agreed). But who said when/how history is taught? Can I blame a woman for declining to relish in her erasure? Take stock and lay claims like a Double Woman Dreamer (their power/my power/our power). And...a woman strides across the cover of our history book. A Lakota medicine woman anchors this narrative of pillage, pestilence, revolt, rebellion, sagacity, slavery, association and ascendance. A new mantra takes shape: I can't believe that women did so much work but never got credit/I wouldn't take that now /she did it even though she wasn't supposed to/and what does it mean that over half of Americans didn't vote? Good question, I replied.

Progressive prison reform touts education as the magic salve to what ails a society overly burdened by the specter of the ex-con. In this narrative, high recidivism rates reflect the difficulty ex-cons face in (re)assuming that sole mantle of success and viability in today's capitalist society—a job. This job-as-measure-of-success is supposed to subsume the effects of generational poverty, substandard education, violence and unhealthy living conditions. That, I would argue, is a lot to ask. When I speak to women convicts (if they must be named, this is what they prefer at my prison), education is a vital component of their plans for life on the outside. Few have graduated high school—many have not made it past middle school. For most of them, education is a life badge—one of those things all Americans get to check off as they progress up the ladder toward the American dream. For a few, it ends there—get the credit, get the certificate. I could assume that this tunnel vision is linked to truncated pasts and limited opportunities, specific to this population. But, I have also taught the chosen ones—upper middle class young men and women from America's wholesome zip codes—and many of them share this same vision. Get the credit, get the degree.

And, yet, many of these women convicts embody that old notion of the republican mother—the un(der)educated women relegated back toward domesticity, their citizenry disabled, openly embracing the charge to return to their children better equipped to raise future citizens. For them, education becomes transformative practice—the educated non-citizen set free from social consequence, able to resist and reimagine without the fear of losing the privilege of citizenship.

3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion

Lister (1997) describes the ways nation-state-bound notions of citizenship exclude women and other groups from within and without. Migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants are groups that, though their members may reside in a nation-state, are outside the definition of citizen. As such, they seemingly lack the rights afforded to citizens and are subject to maltreatment. Within those that are identified as citizens, the exclusions “are inherently gendered, reflecting the fact that women’s long-standing expulsion from the theory and practice of citizenship...is far from accidental...” (p. 38). Lister describes ways in which the false universalism of citizenship, firmly challenged by feminist critique, can analogously reveal the false universalism of “woman” in that the typical use of the term excludes women of color and of other marginalized groups. But because “the patterns of entry to the gateways to the various sectors of the public sphere remain profoundly gendered” (p. 39), solidarity among women is possible.

This solidarity is necessary to reconstruct notions of citizenship. What is needed, Lister says, is a conception of a differentiated universal citizenship that “embrace[s] both individual rights...and political participation”, which is defined as “a dynamic concept in which process and outcome stand in dialectical relationship” (p. 35). This conception moves away from citizenship as tied to the nation-state towards an internationalist, social justice-oriented perspective. Critical in the implication of Lister’s citizenship is the understanding that, “People can be, at the same time, both the subordinate objects of hierarchical power relations and subjects who are agents in their own lives, capable of exercising power in the ‘generative’ sense of self-actualization (Giddens, 1991)” (p. 35).

Women in prison are indeed subordinated by various institutions in society such as the economy and the legal system, and social sites such as their interface with guards and other prisoners. While their agency is limited, they are capable of making certain decisions. Lister’s discussion of citizenship, in terms of rights and practices, could affect change for women in prison.

So...one day I get pulled into a side conversation on the back end of a social studies class. “Don’t you think that people need other humans to be happy? Need human contact?” Before I can devise a careful answer, she clarifies: “no, I’m not talking about intimacy. I’m talking about being able to give someone a hug, hold someone’s hand, massage their tired shoulders. We can’t do that in here because it’s always considered sexual. Shouldn’t we have the right to human contact?” How do I answer that? Yet another instance in which my insider/outsider status gets tricky. Normal considerations of what is a basic right to be assumed and protected don’t always exist inside prison walls. Basic rights like being able to give your friend a hug. Or picking a tomato from the garden. Or criticizing your lunch offerings. Rights that I may take for granted as protected by my status as free citizen get very complicated in here.

Studies such as Amuchástegui and Flores (2013) show the power of a focus on women’s rights as a challenge to narrow definitions of citizenship. They investigated the changes experienced by women who sought recently-legal pregnancy terminations in Mexico. The change in policy status of abortion from illegal to legal legitimized woman as people worthy of care because they could pursue their health

decisions through official channels. The authors concluded that “the legalization [of abortion] fully allows for the exercise of a crucial right and thus enhances incipient experiences of citizenship for Mexican women” (p. 923).

Okay. What was I thinking? Focus. There is a heated argument going on in my head somewhere behind my eyebrows. I'm trying to stop and reverse a conversation with a colleague that may be going off the rails. But enthusiasm is difficult to reign in once unleashed. You see, I introduced a class to social theory and then set them loose. In a prison. I got excited when I started assigning research projects: find something you're interested in understanding—but it has to have a purpose—sociologists shouldn't just go around doing stuff that's fun. It has to include social justice! So they went out and researched: what is it about your past that makes you more likely to excuse domestic abuse? Do regulations that prohibit mother and infant co-sleeping erase the parental rights of incarcerated women? We grow our own food, so how do external food vendors monopolize our dietary choices to our nutritional detriment? And then they came back with plans, proposals, calls to action. Which caused me to say to my colleague (in the heat of the moment) “wow, I hope I don't cause a riot”. Nope. I definitely should have kept that thought to myself.

Certain practices manifest citizenship for marginalized groups. Vickery (2015), in an ethnography of two Black female social studies teachers, described the practices of teachers who used counternarratives and their intersectional identities as Black women to challenge traditional notions of citizenship and empower their students. The teachers, who felt excluded as citizens, taught their students a community-member-based conception of citizenship rather than one of a nation-state. As one of the teachers said in an interview,

I teach them about the community and what they can do for their community. For me, it is more important to teach a student where they came from, their personal history, and where they fit in the community. Students need to appreciate where they live and how they affect the community as a whole (Herman interview, 10/19/2011) (p. 169).

In Vickery's research, the participants were teachers in secondary education, but the community-based social justice intent of their practice is not dissimilar from the prison educators of Cantrell's (2013) interview study of prison teachers. These teachers had a strong desire to build agency within their students with goals of not only reducing recidivism but encouraging activism on the part of prisoners once they were released. Wright and Gehring (2008) go further in asserting that in their classrooms, prison educators can encourage the civility, authenticity, and autonomy required for prisoners to re-imagine themselves as citizens.

But how do we teach social justice to women whom society has named unjust? Women who reside at the mercy of that same system where resistance is met with swiftly and pervasively. How do we dare? I can still remember the first time I said “you people” in a class behind bars—I don't recall any previous utterances but I'm sure I've said it before. Half of the women stopped talking and just looked at me. “What's that supposed to mean?” I was mortified from the tips of my dreadlocked hair to the edges of

my brown skin. I believe that was the moment when I really saw my students, saw the women, each woman. And, with this new sight, I could “go there”—meeting real women with my real words in their real spaces. Soon, I began to see that many of them had already created nuances to concepts like “education” and “justice” that mimicked the best of Freire and critical scholarship.

Like the teachers in Vickery’s research, I needed to reflect on my own experiences of citizenship in order to craft an approach that made sense in these women’s lives. For me, citizenship was about responsibilities and relationships. Not necessarily as a nation-state but more commonly situated at the intersection of my evolving sociocultural identities. My students—disenfranchised but passionately opinionated—brought their situatedness to their mock citizenship. And, from within that mock citizenship (and the brashness it can nourish), the results of extreme multiple intersecting marginalizations—poor, female, daughters of immigrants, mothers of felons, Muslims, First Nations, lesbian—is a complex relationship with the idea of social justice.

Even with the legality of citizenship, these women perform a citizenship. Education for them becomes not just the means to an end (job) but the possibility of a new becoming. Education becomes a transformative practice that moves them from who they were toward who they think they could be. And, only through this transformation can the life of a citizen be envisioned on the outside. They talk about this new state incessantly: restating it, reframing it, democracy in the making. They mentor, coddle, push, and castigate each other in service to this new state.

I waded through several versions of a singular lament one day into conflict theory: “I just don’t get it what’s it got to do with me because I always thought that as long as things in my bubble were good none of that had anything to do with me”. Then, just as I was about to give up on explaining class consciousness someone shouted from the back of the room “you mean like valium!” I paused. Nodded. “I got it like when prisoners don’t riot even when they have the numbers because they don’t want to lose privileges, huh?”

3.6 Bodies in Prison

Lister’s (1997) vision of citizenship offers much potential with women in prison, but they complicate her theoretical framework in two ways: women convicts are stripped of their citizenship. That is, they are excluded from within in traditional ways (lack of access to traditional modes of citizenship beyond procreation) in their lead-up to becoming prisoners, and then become excluded from without when their rights to vote and engage in other aspects of citizenship are taken from them by the legal system.

Additionally, a challenge to Lister’s (1997) dis-embodied conception of a differentiated universal citizenship comes when the confinement of the bodies of women prisoners is taken seriously. Beasley and Bacchi (2000) note that the body, when conceived instrumentally with the discourse of a mentalist citizen, becomes “an obstacle, [rather than] a resource, and [such a perspective] does not perceive subjects/subjectivity as inextricably linked to bodies” (p. 343). They present as an example the importance of “breastfeeding mothers and persons with disabilities [being] constituted both as corporeal social actors and as citizens” in order to “gestur[e] towards the plural (bodies) [and] lodg[e]

bodies in their physical and social particularities” (p. 349). The particularity of bodies in prison surely calls us to examine both the mentalist concepts of rights while at the same time interrogating the effects confinement has on the bodies of (non) citizen female inmates.

“Well”, I say in a class on health and wellness, “it’s probably not a good thing that all you ate yesterday was a can of frosting”. The women bring me their canteen lists and we create a rating system based on the green, yellow, and red of a traffic light: eat regularly, indulge only occasionally, and eat rarely. Then, I task them with color coding their lists for easy reference. Moments later, a moan ripples across the classroom: “how are we supposed to eat healthy? It’s all red!” I glance out my classroom window. It is a sunny day and rows of peppers, potatoes, cucumbers, and squash look healthy. A breeze carries faint sounds from the chicken coop. Thinking that’s a great question, we dive into a discussion about the disconnect between our prison’s award-winning horticultural program and a diet based on sufficient caloric attainment as opposed to nutritional balance. The state’s policing of the body does not intend to create a better body—one better able to withstand the mental and emotional realities of confinement or histories of abuse and neglect.

4. Further Thoughts

Considering the importance of prison education in reducing recidivism (Davis, 2013; Western, 2007), the work of prison educators, such as Sultana, have much to teach us about the ways in which citizenship can be (re)formed, facilitated, and interpreted through critical pedagogy that values the connection between education and democracy. When we hear the narratives that contain fragments of the identities of women inmates and the choices they face when incarcerated, we may feel outrage, guilt, or resignation. The reactions of Brian, Melissa and Brittany after the discussion group in Sultana’s classroom included the following: You mean they can’t eat the food they grow in their garden?! And they go into isolation if they steal it?! They’re learning to think critically but if they act, they’re penalized for it! (see Author 2 and 1...)

These emotions should spark a call to action in the development of democratic curricula in the prison system. What knowledge, skills, and values can we bring to bear within our communities to develop mutually enhancing relationships that extend into the greater society? Some claim that prisoners take away funding from non-prisoner initiatives; some legislators claim prison education is a “‘slap in the face’ to law-abiding citizens” (Editorial Board, 2016, para. 4). At what point do the never-been-incarcerated learn to exclude the incarcerated from “we?” How and why do we systematically deny the right to education and voting in the U.S. to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals?

As educators, we see ourselves as part of a much needed collective “we.” We note that within this collective, we must resist, and this resistance often comes with a cost. As Collins (2009) explained in her story about the flag, her assumed silence sent the message that she doesn’t matter. As a young Black woman in society, her truths would make others become uncomfortable. The actions of her

teacher affected Collins' citizenship "knowledge, skills, and dispositions", and perhaps put her humanity at stake. Yet we know it is often the guidance of a teacher—who may feel conflicted because they are a part of the system (Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011)—that can stoke the sparks that have been silenced, or turn a student dream into a waking, complicated goal. The teacher can simultaneously encourage and complicate some of the practices of citizenship (Wright & Ghering, 2008). Castro and Brown (2017) note, "Critical pedagogues who teach inside prisons face context-specific challenges that can undermine anti-oppressive ideals of educational praxis, such as the unrestricted exchange of information and ideas between students and the instructor" (p. 100).

I hope my students learn that they are not an aberration. That society is full of citizen crooks who get accolades for their misdeeds so maybe they aren't as bad as they thought. They also began to see all the contextual stuff that feeds into where they are. Like the student who felt prison was a vacation from gang life: "at least in here, I can just chill, nobody's trying to kill me". Nelson Mandela speaks of how you can't fully control the mind/spirit even in prison. Here, for some, there is a type of freedom from social constraints that allows them to begin to think and imagine differently. You've stripped me of the outside world—now what can I be? For me it's like a Haiku...there is a newfound unexpected freedom in limitation if you are inspired to look. That is why I am beginning to see the promise set loose in a mock citizenship cut loose from social expectations and definition that allows these women to go places your average Joanne might not go.

I refer back to the 2016 presidential campaign where I initially decided to sidestep the whole event in class. Why would these women who can't even vote care? So many people who still have that right don't seem to care. But my silence was shattered by their demand for dialogue, for debate, for information. As I pressed them to move beyond surface growls of "I just don't like him", I began to discover something unshackled from notions of political correctness, conservative righteousness, or liberal intellectualism: they had nothing to lose by stating exactly what was on their minds. So they told me about a father that snuck over the border for 20 years to work and feed his family. They told me about growing up surrounded by neo-Nazis who might kill them if they got out and showed up at home with their Black BFF and new girlfriend. They talked about the lack of jobs back home and how selling drugs was preferable to letting your kid starve while you waited on some agency to help you out. And, now, with the privileges of citizenship removed, they no longer felt the responsibility to act like they were supposed to care.

And, yet. These are the women who are mortified that so many do not vote. These are the women who believe in education for the transformative role it can play in not only their lives but their children's futures. These are the women who know they screwed up and will do their time but wonder who—once the debt to society is paid—their country expects them to be.

Slowly, clandestinely, I tack upon my walls resistance. Images of voices released, discovered; knowledges shaken clear of dust. I smile at myself in my rebellion, in this careful mix of temerity and audacity. Avatars whisper of diversity and joyful sisterhood. Muscle and tissue are dissected, divested,

disclosed. Eyes dare speak across bridges. Tendrils cautiously test the waters and trespasses are made. I want my walls to pulse, to agitate and instigate, to separate and combine. Yet, I am careful. It is not just my freedom on the line.

In Lister's (1997) concept of citizenship, she emphasizes the split between those excluded from within and without. Prisoners are excluded from both within and without. And they likely were "problems" as Collins (2009) explained from the start. So what do we do with this contradiction of "critical knowledge" that doesn't necessarily feel empowering in women's prisons?

I listen as a student clarifies a point: so this republican motherhood was, like, a step, half step forward, right? All they could expect then? Teach the kids even though they (women) couldn't have rights? Well, I guess that's why I'm in the class. My son's here, 18 months old, and I don't want this to be the only thing he knows. So I gotta get this done so when I get out, he's got more chances. I can help him study, you know.

Looking forward to how teaching practice can be adapted in this space, words like these provide guidance. We begin by challenging our privileged notions of empowerment—we educated, outspoken, free folk. If we practice what we preach and believe that education is about more than skill acquisition for a future job, then the walls become less powerful. Then, we acknowledge critical knowledge is social capital—with the power to provide incarcerated women with the contextual tools to explore their own relationship to the nation state. They get to name and wrestle with the systemic inequalities embedded in gender, race, and poverty—even as they recognize their resilience and resistance to these forces. Prison does not define them: survival does. As cultural studies scholars, we are tasked to engage, to cross the line, to explore raw subjects, to protect and to follow where our students sometimes lead us. Like one student elegantly wrote: *it's funny but when they take away the physical, you really learn what love is.* We advocate for this type of education at every part of the journey.

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Note

Note 1. We would like to acknowledge that in our conversation of women in prison, we are speaking about “men” and “women” in binary gendered terms. Gender dynamics structure prison systems much in the same ways that gendered dynamics are structured throughout society (Davis, 2013). There is also an epidemic in this country impacting transgender persons in prisons at disproportionate rates. While this discussion is embedded within the larger gender binary issue that exists in prisons, it is beyond the scope of this paper. For more understanding transgender issues in prison, see Dean Spade’s (2011) *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*.