

A LINGERING COLONIALITY: CONSIDERING THE EPISTEMIC AND
STRUCTURAL (IM)POSSIBILITIES OF UNIVERSITY-SPONSORED
PRISON WRITING PROGRAMS

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of English

MAY 2014

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of ANNA CHARIS PLEMONS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful without words, and even if I knew the right ones, I find that more thanks are due than I can fit in this space.

To the writers at New Folsom, thank you for welcoming me into the space you have created with your words. It is brave and sacred, and I am honored that you have shared it with me. To Spoon and Marty, the tenders of the writing circle, thank you for sharing your classrooms with me and for teaching me about teaching inside. To my dad, Jim Carlson, and all the artists who participated in Arts in Corrections through the years, thank you for making opportunities in prison your business. You have worked tirelessly, in challenging circumstances, to bring pencils, pastels, half-notes, and dance steps into places that have not always understood or valued your work. Learning more about the history of AIC has convinced me that things that once were possible can be possible again.

I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the inspiring scholars who made up my committee. Patricia Ericsson, Victor Villanueva, and Kristin Arola, I hope that you see in this text the fruits of your patience with me as I muddled through. Thank you for introducing me to such a rich cross-section of what is, and has been happening, in our field.

And to Jason, thanks for your acts of support, both great and small. None of these words would have made it to paper without you.

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Abstract

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May 2014

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Walter Mignolo suggests a fused relationship between modernity and coloniality. I suggest that prison writing sponsorship carries the possibility of this coloniality in the ways that sponsors account for and justify programs. Specifically, I suggest that the way scholars use student texts assumes a modernistic fixity that may not be there. In response to this critique, I provide a theoretical lens for looking at the prison writing classroom that suggests that both the writing communities and the texts they create are inherently organic and might not be measurable, package-able, and exportable in the ways we want them to be.

This remixed theory brings together grammatology, ecosocial theory, and actor network theory, each of which operates on the assumption that a fundamental instability underlies relationships between people and things in their networks. Taken together, these theories help describe the messy, complicated, and contingent work being done by prison writing communities and lead me to assert that such communities stand to lose

when program sponsors dictate the type of work being done, and/or require explicit or implicit evidence of transformation from program participants.

Whereas the aforementioned theories work to disrupt a modernistic paradigm for understanding and evaluating prison writing programs, indigenous methodologies open up possible decolonial options for thinking about how we construct, and carry out, acts of sponsorship and research in the prison system. The theory and praxis suggested in this text makes use of the particular history of Arts in Corrections at New Folsom, the maximum-security prison where I have been a guest teacher in the classrooms of two incarcerated teaching artists, both of whom are serving life without parole sentences. In the interplay between theories that speak to the instability of things and methodologies that privilege relationality and relational accountability I offer *joining* (versus helping or transforming) as a possible posture for scholars interested in the sponsorship and study of out of school writing communities.

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Dedication

To the fellowship of writers at New Folsom

PREFACE

I gave a completed first draft of this text to Marty Williams, the incarcerated teaching artist whose story is interwoven herein with my own. I would have also liked to have also shown it to Spoon Jackson, the other incarcerated teaching artist to be introduced in Chapter 1. However, by the time it was completed, Spoon had been moved without notice down to a Level Three institution in southern California, leaving the crowd of pigeons that he used to feed through the chain link between the sallyport and the Small Side Yard shuffling around, hungrily pecking at the concrete. The chaotic and transitory California prison is, by its mission, at odds with the type of relational methodology this text points toward. And my inability to discuss the finished text with Spoon frustrates the end to my own small story.

Although I did not get to officially good-bye to Spoon, I did have a chance to say *good-bye forever* to Marty. That was over a year ago. He is still at New Folsom, so I see him in class. We continue to have conversations about teaching and writing in prison. Since we already said *good-bye forever*, now we just shake hands at the end of class and chat our way out the library door that opens onto the sallyport. He waits for a guard to let him back onto the yard that bridges the sallyport and his housing unit. I turn and walk the other way, without looking back, down the windowless hallway of the Medical Clinic where inmates wait on narrow wooden benches for dialysis or pill dispensation.

It is a strange space between *good-bye forever* and an actual transfer. It has afforded me some extra time to learn from Marty and to let him speak back to the theory I see forming in the interplay between the seemingly disparate scholars whose ideas appear in this text. Five years ago I did not expect that Marty and I would be talking about

composition and coloniality. I knew Marty was a self-made scholar, but I was not sure, even as I handed him the draft of this text, that he would want to serve as a reader for this particular project. And even though I had attempted to eschew a cliquish, insider discourse as I wrote, I was not sure that I had made my thoughts readable. Nonetheless, it was important to me to bring the text back to the incarcerated teachers at New Folsom before it went into the public record.

A month after I gave Marty the draft we sat down together to talk about the text. I was really touched to learn that he had read it through three times and scribbled in the margins. And I knew that he had heard me when, as an initial response to the text, he quoted Thoreau: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.” I laughed. As is usually the case, the thing I had wanted to say had already been said long, long ago in a sentence or two. Thoreau, invited to the conversation, gets at the heart of part of the issue I have attempted to lay out. There *is* a fundamental problem with conscious designs intended to enact good upon another in his or her own house—and maybe even a deeper violence when the place the recipients of such good are living is not their home at all.

I am grateful to Marty for bringing Thoreau into the conversation. I am also deeply grateful to him for his criticism of the initial draft. And, of course, I will always be grateful that he allowed me to be a guest teacher in his classroom.

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING INSIDE: AN INTRODUCTION

*We can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous.
There is no purity and, in our lifetime, no end to this process.*
--Adrienne Rich, *Contradictions*

*We differ in the presentation of theory, not in our
capacity to theorize.*
--Lee Maracle, *Oratory: Coming to Theory*

This dissertation is the story of a personal and professional incongruence, a state of disharmony, a recognition of things unsuitable. Specifically, it is a collection of related observations about how a lingering coloniality functions within the epistemology and structures of inquiry employed in the discipline of Composition. In suggesting that Composition still carries and masks a colonial logic in the ways we think, write, and do, I implicate myself and set myself at the center of the critique. This is not a rail against others. It is a set of insider observations intended to add to, honor, and augment the complicated and compelling constellations of inquiry already being taken up by the Composition community. To be more specific, it is a threaded story intended to support, through critical inquiry, the community literacy work of the discipline.

My intention for the following critique of how we think, write, and do is a closer attention to the incongruences between our intention and our practice. This is very different than a wholesale rejection of Composition's off-campus projects. Community literacy work, as many have already articulated (Goldblatt, Mathieu, Branch) is messy, complicated, and often heart-wrenching. The contexts can be overwhelming in their

complexity and seemingly impossible with material and ethical constraints that ever threaten the intended work. One such seemingly impossible context of Composition's off-campus work is the U.S. prison. The prison is closest to my heart and has been the site within, and from which, I have made the observations that follow. If I think about the Composition community as a sort of home, it feels portentous to enter the house only to begin asking questions about its foundation and pointing to the fissures that show up between gaps in the carpeting. But then again neither does it feel right to pretend they are not there.

My critique, and the corresponding considerations of what to do with a sedimented coloniality, brings together critical theory, ecosocial theory, and a derridean theory of grammatology. More specifically, I use critical theory to “see” how coloniality functions and is fostered in our still-modern structures of inquiry. At a textual level, Grammatology is the basis for my understanding of the unclose-able nature of texts. Using a derridean lens exposes the tension between the closable logic of expository writing as we teach it and the increasingly open uses of writing employed in high-stakes, out of school locations. Ecosocial theory helps describe the out of school writing community as a complicated web of human and non-human actors that facilitate, instigate, and generate a wide range of authorial purposes. My response to what these theories suggest about the prison classroom is built around the scholarship on indigenous methodologies. The scholarship on indigenous methodologies describes the possibility of structures of inquiry that privilege relationality and relational accountability. In turn, studies built on relationality and relational accountability carry possibilities for “decolonial options” as described by the critical theorists taken up in this dissertation.

Before I begin to discuss theory I want to describe the context that has made this body of scholarship salient for me.

Arts in Corrections as Actor and Context

I grew up in Northern California during what my friend Marty calls “The Golden Age of Arts in Corrections.” That Golden Age found me roaming through my parent’s house, full on occasion with musicians, poets, sculptors, actors, makers of paper crafts, flutes, guitars, and beaded jewelry. The common thread at these periodic gatherings was that all the artists who came with wine, and bread, and ripe tomatoes were employees of the Department of Corrections—Artist Facilitators hired to oversee Arts in Corrections (AIC) programs at each of California’s 33 prisons. During his twenty five with Arts in Corrections my dad, Jim Carlson, was an Artist Facilitator at San Quentin, an Arts Program Administrator (with oversight for all the institutions), and then an Artist Facilitator again at New Folsom, where he is still employed, although AIC has long since lost its state funding.

Among other things, this dissertation is an extended treatise on my tangled, complicated relationship to Arts in Corrections. The stories herein are personal. I have chosen not to pretend an academic detachment that Eber Hampton (1995) suggests is not possible anyway. Like Lee Maracle (1990) I see that the separation of theory and story—words that “prove” from words that “show”—is a futile exercise. Maracle says that “there is a story in every line of theory” (7). Out of respect for the dialectical wholeness between proving words and showing words, I have woven my own stories throughout with the voices of scholars—some dead, some still around, some famous, some less so.

And I have tried to avoid any hierarchical organization that subsumes one in the service of the other.

This text is small, local. It registers on both the axes of time and place. It is not the grand narrative of Arts in Corrections. That text remains to be written. This story, as I have said, is about me finding that the type of professional relationship I wanted to have with the teaching artists at New Folsom was not possible within the structures of inquiry ubiquitous in the academy. In telling the story of how I tried to work within and make sense of this fundamental incongruence I find that my voice cannot be separated from the base and treble of both harmonic and discordant notes. It is important to me to honor these voices, especially the ones who think about and see things differently than I do. Therefore, I have attempted to give each voice that seems to want to speak its say with as much respect as I currently know how within the genre of academic critique. In the spirit of Bruno Latour, I imagine that all the actors in my networked story have something to say so I have tried to leave space even for the walls to talk.

My experiences with Arts in Corrections was the impetus for my return to the university as a doctoral student and continues to be the terministic screen through which I read many of the threads of composition scholarship, particularly the work on community literacy and prison writing programs. Each chapter tells pieces of my story teaching and being taught inside the prison and trying to reconcile my experiences at the prison with the structures of the university where I work. Since all of the chapters, to some extent, are oriented around the Arts in Corrections program a brief version of its history is offered here for context.

The UCLA Library Archives has a special collection that documents the now terminated AIC program. Beyond the archival collection, information about Arts in Corrections shows up in both scholarly and narrative texts (Tannenbaum 2000, Tannenbaum and Jackson 2010; Cleveland 1994; Cleveland 2000; Cleveland 2003; Bernstein 2010; Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 2011; Brewster 2010; Brewster 1983; and Wenzer 2011). As I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, although none of its sponsors described it in these terms, Arts in Corrections was an example of the type of collaborative sponsorships that cropped up around the country in the 1970s and 1980s. It was an official unit within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) with a permanent budget line in the California state budget. By the 1990s, state funds were being used to employ Artist-Facilitators at each of California's 33 prisons. Artist-Facilitators were professional artists who were hired as state employees to oversee the AIC program at each institution. They usually taught classes in their area of expertise, functioned as intermediaries between the institution and the community, and oversaw the day-to-day work of contract teaching artists. According to the historical note in the archive:

The program began as the pilot Prison Arts Project at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, CA in 1977 with funding provided by the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, the San Francisco Foundation, and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The success of this initial program led to the Legislature appropriating \$400,000 to augment the 1981 Department of Corrections budget, establishing the Arts in Corrections unit within

the department's Office of Community Resources Development. (University Archives Record Series 721)

Over the next 30 years, a series of contractors, most notably the William James Association and ArtsReach (UCLA Extension), oversaw the hiring, training, and managing of the contract teaching artists who were dispatched to each institution for residencies of varying length. Program designers felt it was important to establish a “gate-keeper” between the Artist-Facilitators and the task of hiring contract teachers. The intention of this bureaucratic protection was the ethical boundaries between Artist-Facilitators and custody staff as well as Artist-Facilitators and inmates. William Cleveland (1994) says it this way:

Given this fairly unorthodox educational approach, the larger program was purposefully organized outside the purview of the Department of Corrections’ Education Department. This was done, in part, to ensure that the state’s credential requirements would not get in the way of A-I-C’s hiring the state’s most accomplished fine artists. It was also done to protect the program from the territorial wars that are typical of the correctional milieu. (57)

Through this collaborative sponsorship model incarcerated men and women were able to access professional instruction in “painting, drawing, sculpture, murals, photography, poetry, creative writing, theater, and music” (UCLA Archive). By the 1990s AIC had become the “largest institutionally-based arts program in the United States” (UCLA Archive). In 2003 AIC lost its funding and Artist Facilitator were absorbed into the Department of Corrections’ Education Department, the very bureaucratic unit AIC creators had worked to avoid. In January 2010, under the auspices of a well-publicized

state budget crisis, the CDCR eliminated the reassigned remains of the AIC program. Although the *death* of AIC was traumatic for those associated with the program, I think it is significant to point out the structure of the AIC program, embedded as it was in the state budget, helped it to *stay alive* longer than many of the other prison programs which sprung up around the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

The *life* of Arts in Corrections is the hub of a complex set of personal and professional experiences for me. My dad, hereafter referred to as Carlson, received his pink slip in 2009 as part of a final wave of AIC's official dismantling. I suggested he write a book about his experience. He said no, but suggested instead that I try teaching inside. I cannot be sure exactly how I thought his not writing a book and my agreeing to come teach writing as a volunteer made sense in that moment. However, these five years later I can see that Carlson did to me what he does to every artist who crosses his path—he made the invitation to participate, all the while deftly eschewing projects that focus on him or history in general. In agreeing to spend some time at New Folsom, I join a long line of folks, including Michael Franti, Rosanne Cash, Louis Rodriguez, Norton Buffalo, Michele Wenzler, Mary Youngblood, Linda McRae, Philip Yancey, Rick Estrin, Tommy Emmanuel, and the Tim Robbins' Actors Gang, who have accepted Carlson's invitation.

Opportunity and Relationality at New Folsom

When I began as a volunteer teacher at New Folsom in 2009, I walked into an emotionally intense rending apart of incarcerated artists from three decades of sanctioned opportunities to use both state and community sponsorship to create materials of their choosing in a dynamic, relational space. The AIC room at New Folsom that I entered in

2009 was, in every way, the culmination of seventeen years of financial investment in arts materials and instruction coupled with nearly two decades of goodwill politics between the incarcerated artists, Carlson, and the prison administration. In 2009, the AIC room at New Folsom had important political connections at every level of the CDCR. These political connections afforded AIC a slow *death*.

They have also seen the ethos of AIC refashioned as the Creative Arts Program (CAP). The Creative Arts Program cobbles together federal funds allocated for mental health services. It also receives additional program materials from the Inmate Welfare Fund (which sponsors a range of self-help programs such as AA, NA, Toastmasters, etc.). Under the mental health umbrella, CAP has been able to keep the four inmate clerking posts that it had during the AIC era. These posts allow inmates to be paid prison wages to teach and organize the group offerings. Although CAP has been able to keep the Art Room in C-Facility open, it cannot pay outside teachers or provide substantive materials. It is a makeshift patch too closely tied to Carlson's own efforts. It does not have the bones to stand on its own. At least not yet. Nonetheless, it is the program through which I have entered New Folsom as a volunteer and has been the context for my teaching experience.

In this complicated context, I recognize that what I know of prison and my experiences therein are unusual, but they are also worth describing. I hope that readers can see that most of what is "unusual" about AIC/CAP is a reflection of the program and its leadership, not my personal connection to it. The representations of AIC cited earlier corroborate my story of finding that AIC/CAP has been able to enact tacit, yet significant, disruptions in prison business as usual—respectful guards, inmate led classes, uncensored

conversation, public performances on the yard, etc. Examples of these types of classroom spaces are hard to come by in the scholarship on prison literacy. As I will argue in Chapter 3, a significant part of why AIC/CAP at New Folsom has been able to accomplish and offer all that it has is because it is based on a program model that values and evaluates opportunities versus outcomes. Furthermore, Carlson, without describing his work in these terms, has built a program based on a relational methodology. After joining the work at New Folsom in 2009, I attempted to bring the dialectic concepts of opportunity and relationality to the design of my scholarly work only to find that the structures of academic inquiry to which I had consented worked against both notions in concrete and tangible ways. The incongruence between the methodologies I observed in action at New Folsom and the methodologies sanctioned by my academic institution formed the basis for the critique that runs throughout the following chapters.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 2, “Joining the Work: Complicating Prison Literacy Sponsorship,” situates the Community Arts Program (CAP) at New Folsom inside the context of the scholarly conversation on community literacy. Particularly through the published work of Spoon Jackson, incarcerated teaching artist formerly at New Folsom, I examine the ways that AIC/CAP complicates and also reifies archetypal grand literacy narratives. I then consider the place of such narratives within a broader argument for *literacy as acts of creative resistance* scaffolded by small, organic, tactical moves. I discuss the role of the bureaucratic insider and the program sponsor in establishing classrooms that are organic enough to accommodate the work the writers want to do.

Chapter 3, “Writing Subjects: Making the Case for Opportunities That Support a Range of Authorial Purposes,” focuses on the current conversation about prison literacy, highlighting the way that rhetorics of transformation, particularly in the form of individual salvation narratives, still form the basis for much of the “what” and “why” of prison literacy programs. The survey of current scholarship highlights the wide range of authorial purposes articulated by incarcerated writers. The discussion of authorial purposes sets up an extended use of Stephen Duguid’s articulation of the opportunity model. AIC/CAP is offered as an example of the type of programs that emerged as part of the political economic rupture Duguid describes. Moving from the notion of transformation to the concept of opportunities begins to open up some space for scholars and teachers to reframe both the structural and rhetorical context of the prison classroom. Furthermore, discussion of rhetorics of transformation and varied authorial purposes form preliminary guideposts for the critique of academic epistemology and structures of inquiry in Chapters 4 and 5.

The discussion in Chapter 4, “Derrida Goes to Prison: Theory, Meaning, and the Colonial Impulse in Composition,” draws the conversation about rhetorics of transformation specifically into composition scholarship. In this chapter I look at literacy myth as it functions in composition scholarship broadly and in community literacy work more specifically. I also describe a disciplinary meta-logic that conflates the epistemic function of writing with its presumed material value. This conflation of epistemic function and material value carries a distinctly colonial implication. I suggest that viewing texts as rhetorical tools (versus closable manuscript) has implications for how

compositionists might approach prison writing and opens up room for a theory of writing that does not require that scholars mine student text for made-meanings.

As I began suggesting in Chapter 3, as long as out of school writing communities must justify their value through statements of meaning (narratives of transformation, salvation, confession, etc.), composition scholars who traffic in these texts perpetuate the colonial commodification of both writer and text, undermining the “good intentions” of their work. Both the Burkean notion of language as symbolic action and the Derridean theory of Grammatology point to a theory of writing-as-action where unclosable texts are circulated in service of complicated, layered, and dynamic rhetorical purposes. Thinking about writing-as-action that creates unclosable texts directs the scholar’s gaze away from individual texts toward a study of the broader rhetorical uses of writing for out of school writing communities. This reorientation makes room for a discussion of writing in out of school writing communities that does not commodify the narratives of individual writers. This chapter does not include any specific examples from the AIC/CAP classroom since its focus is on the “home” context of the composition teacher. Chapter 5 begins to look more specifically at what happens when I approached the CAP classroom, and its two incarcerated writing teachers, with a transformational project.

Chapter 5, “Coloniality and Academic Inquiry: Thoughts on a ‘Failed’ Study of Two Incarcerated Teaching Artists,” takes up a second and related critique of how a lingering coloniality functions in the structures of academic inquiry. The chapter begins with an extended discussion about coloniality, using the work of Walter D. Mignolo on the relationship between modernity and coloniality as a theoretical centerpiece. In the second half of the chapter I use the example of my own “failed” study to examine the

way that coloniality is still fused with the rhetorical and structural modernity of academic study. Specifically, I use the text of my Institutional Review Board termination notice to examine the inherent modernistic assumptions about the relationship between knower and known that are unavoidable in the academic research methodologies we still employ.

The IRB text forms a backdrop for looking at how and why my study was untenable.

Chapter 6, “Ecosocial Systems, Accountable Relationships, and Decolonial Options in the Study of Prison Writing Programs,” ties ecosocial systems theory and Ann Berthoff’s notion of forming to the derridean theory of writing outlined in Chapter 4. Taken together, these theories suggest a study of the prison writing program that privileges relationships over discrete texts and works to disrupt antiquated subject-object relations between sponsor-scholars and incarcerated writers. Where ecosocial theory describes the community of writers, scholarship on indigenous methodologies outlines important considerations for developing and sustaining respectful, reciprocal relationships. Specifically, the work of Shawn Wilson on relationality and relational accountability opens up opportunities to look at the ways my teaching experiences at New Folsom have, and have not, been respectful and reciprocal. The chapter closes with the work of Steve Biko as it speaks to the roles of insiders and outsiders in relational paradigms.

Chapter 7 concludes this collection of essays with a look at how relationality is emerging in current scholarship. And, in lieu of a conclusion, Chapter 7 looks at three last examples of relationality in the AIC program. The chapter closes with two questions from Eli Goldblatt that help scholar-sponsors complicate their own work and consider

how the related critiques outlined here might move them toward more organic, relational models for program design, implementation, and assessment.

A Word on What This Text Is Not Attempting

The U.S. prison grows with terrifying speed. The horrors of the place and its well-documented record of destroying communities, ravaging families, and dehumanizing U.S. citizens shame its alleged reformatory intention. Much has been said about the prison as a political economic machine (Davis 2005; Gilmore 2007; Hartnett 2010; Meiners 2007; Mauer 1999; Parenti 1999; Rusche and Kirchheimer 2003; Alexander, W. 2010). Much has also been written about its affect on families and its connections to systemic racism (Alexander, M. 2010; Davis 2003; Pager 2007; Patton, 2008; Mauer 1999; Lawston and Lucas 2011; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Braman 2002; Forman 2002; Herivel and Wright 2003). The realities of the U.S. prison in the 21st century have led to arguments for its dismantling (Davis 2003). Since a significant and compelling body of scholarship already exists on the *what* and *why* of prison, such arguments will not be reiterated here. However, I do want to say a word about the notion of resistance and position myself as someone who supports acts of resistance and disruption with the same commitment and energy as I do all the articulated goals of the writers who come to class.

Early on in my experience talking about prison with my colleagues in the academy I ran up against revolutionary rhetorics for the prison classroom and found myself silenced when and where I suggested not all the incarcerated men I had met wanted to participate in revolution as my colleagues on campus were describing it. I took

some of the conversation from campus back to the prison classroom. The dialogue that ensued was as mixed as I expected. Some inmates advocated violence as a means to revolution. Others did not. One man got really agitated, stood, started waving his arms, and stepped back from the table. He said, “This isn’t fuckin’ Attica. I am not interested in that shit.” His comment became a guidepost for me as I moved forward in my role as sponsor-scholar. It informed, and continues to shape, my interest in the conversation about authorial purposes as outlined in Chapter 3. The context of prison writing programs is impossibly complex, in large part, because the context is impossibly unjust. In such an extreme context the need for real and immediate change is obvious and palpable. But the definitions of what counts as change, and whose interests are served in such programs, are much less clear. It is in the murky waters churned up between the shores of prison abolition positions and “Three Strikes” policies that all sponsor-scholars of prison writing function. I understand that I am complicit. The conversation about complicity will be taken up in Chapter 6. But I also understand that every single conversation I have had in the prison—in the classroom, in the sallyport, in the cellblock—has ultimately ended with me walking out the front gate to my car and my life outside the walls. I take seriously the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological danger that hovers ever always in and around the lives of incarcerated men and women and work to remember that they must live—some for the rest of their lives—in a place that I only visit.

Instead of recycling the scholarly conversation on prison, I want to focus my own contribution on a reflective attention to how I, and scholars like me, add to the problem by enacting unintentionally colonial methodologies. However, and on this point I want to

be clear, I intend to keep building writing relationships inside the prison and reject the moniker of “neo-con jailer” and all such glosses that presume that sponsorship of anything other than protest is a placation strategy. There should be protest. The momentum of the U.S. prison in the 21st century is as terrifying as its critics suggest. And, if the tide is not turned, more and more of us will find ourselves swept into its terrifying wake. But protest cannot be our only response. And it cannot be the only agentive option available for the men and women inside. Because protest as the only option is no option at all.

On The Matter of Agency

Jason Haslam’s (2008) articulation of the complicated nature of prison writing resonates with my own experience and the critique I am undertaking in this text. Haslam suggests:

To take the study of prison writing as one aspect of the larger field of prison studies, we can see that it inextricably tangles the material and cultural, the contemporary and the historical, the activist and the analyst, the personal and the public. At the end though, prison writings—and prison studies—share not only a history of resistance with nineteenth century slave narratives (which likewise engaged the literary, political, and militant), but also something of a paradox—a hopeful one—with that earlier abolitionist movement: prison studies is an interdisciplinary, interactivist form fighting for its own obsolescence. (479)

Haslam’s comments do more than presume agency for the incarcerated writer. Haslam sets an agenda for prison writing that resonates with Miles Horton’s admonition that we

keep “our eyes on the ought to be” (Branch 2007). Prison writing, at its most hopeful and most agentive, does lead to its own obsolescence as incarcerated writers are able to physically get out of the prison system. However, most the incarcerated writers who speak in this dissertation are serving life without parole sentences (LWOP), which means that they will leave the prison in body bags, either by violence or old age. Therefore, even as I share Haslam’s hope, I see that the conversation about agency must also attend to something other than obvious acts of transformation or liberation. Agency, as I have observed it at New Folsom, rarely takes the form of emancipation, rarely gets to tell grand narratives of victory. Agency in the history of AIC/CAP looks more like getting a 30 foot rope into San Quentin for the public performances of *Waiting for Godot* or taking a guitar back to the cellblock. It looks like Northern and Southern Mexican gang members smuggling poems to each other through an intermediary since gang code demands that all face to face encounters be made with shanks. Sometimes it looks like the penning of a political essay for independent Bay area newspaper, but most days it looks like fifteen men in blue shirts sitting around a table writing as fast as they can.

Taking up a critique of the very structures and epistemological underpinnings of a discipline might seem like a fool’s errand akin to shouting at a wall or scooping water from the sea. But I do not imagine that bureaucracies, of imprisonment or education, are too monolithic or too vast to be moved by increments. And, of course, many hands still make for light(er) work. Therefore, all the essays in this dissertation presume and demonstrate a situated agency for both the incarcerated writers within the prison and the literacy sponsor within the academy. To presume that there is no agency for the writer or the teacher of writing is a wholesale rejection of both activities at their root. However,

the agency of both the writer and the teacher of writing is a living thing that must be tended. And the tending of agency within cruel and illogical bureaucratic apparatuses is an active business. Which brings me back around to my reasons for attempting to look more closely at the ways that some of the most basic “ideas about things” and the structures for studying and sponsoring writing communities within Composition work against the agentive acts of writers, teachers, writers who teach, and such.

Because, as Jacques Derrida points out, all writing is already always being erased and written over and into even as it is coming into being, I cannot know exactly how this text will be read. But I can say that my intention is always more respect, more listening, more joining of the work that has already been, and will continue, happening, with or without university sponsorship.

CHAPTER TWO

JOINING THE WORK: COMPLICATING PRISON LITERACY SPONSORSHIP

*Literacy is valuable – and volatile – property . . . a grounds
for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as well as
potential hope, satisfactions and reward.
Wherever literacy is learned and practiced,
these competing interests will always be present.*
--Deborah Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*

Spoon Jackson played Pozzo in the 1987 San Quentin production of *Waiting for Godot*. Jackson's performance in *Godot* was preceded by his enrollment, in 1985, in a non-credit bearing poetry course taught by Judith Tannenbaum. Years later he began teaching poetry at New Folsom where he was serving a life-without-parole sentence. It was at New Folsom that I was a guest teacher in his classroom. And it was at New Folsom, on a summer afternoon, that I asked him to sign a copy of *By Heart*, the book he co-authored with Tannenbaum.

Jackson's literacy narrative seems to reify the well-worn literacy myth of "have-nots" aligning themselves with academic sponsors to move from powerlessness to a place of economic viability and autonomy. A close look at the space in which Jackson finds himself as a writer and teacher is an appropriate starting point for building an argument that takes into consideration the situated complexities and "competing interest" of exploitation and hope that Deborah Brandt notes are always present where literacy is "learned and practiced." With these complexities and competing interests in mind, I will look closely at the ways that the Community Arts Program (CAP) at New Folsom, where Jackson taught, complicates and also reifies archetypal grand literacy narratives. I will

also use the specific example of CAP to build a larger argument about community literacy sites—one that aims for *literacy as acts of creative resistance* scaffolded by small, organic, tactical moves. Thinking about literacy sites as organic, tactical spaces *without* an eye toward the strategic is important for a few key reasons.

Tactical moves are made by those without power (de Certeau). When programs move toward institutionalization and strategic power, they inevitably move away from the margins and the voices of those without power are subsumed. Thinking about literacy as an act of creative resistance fundamentally requires that the resistor retain some ownership of, or agency over, the program. Second, the institutionalization of literacy programs sets them on a trajectory and establishes momentum that almost always becomes self-serving. People are employed who then expect paychecks. Infrastructure grows. And infrastructure is always hungry for more infrastructure. The genuine support of creative, resistive literacy acts demands a type of space—a type of moment—that is not endangered by the births and deaths of the literacy acts themselves.

I want to focus on the literacy community, but realize the impossibility of distancing myself from institutions in general, and in this case, the totalizing institution of prison (Grabill 2). Making a case for organic, tactical moves inside the institution is tightrope work. Grabill sees the need to view communities and institutions as mutually reinforcing, suggesting that if we do not see literacy as situated within these communities/institutions, we will be unable to spot the ways that local people and places construct alternative literacies (117). That being said, recognizing the situated nature of local literacy practices is not the same as conceding all agency to the institution or supporting the creeping institutionalization of organic literacy practices and communities

where they spring up. Essential to Grabill's argument is the clear articulation of ethics for any sponsor of literacy. Anyone who endeavors to commit themselves to such an effort must be clear on the "how," "why," and "with whom" of his or her commitment (53). Lorie Goodman reiterates: "Our grounds for action must remain under revision. We can never suppose that we are 'just' serving; we must always ask, 'In the service of what and whom?'" (in Mathieu 93). This clarity, of course, leads back to a clear-eyed view of the institution in which the literacy practice or community is being established.

The connection between institution and community that Grabill suggests functions primarily by way of literacy sponsors, defined by Brandt as "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (19). In this study, CAP is the direct literacy sponsor, but Brandt's notion of a sponsor is complicated by the context in which CAP operates. At present, CAP facilitates non-credit bearing creative writing and poetry classes in addition to a wider set of courses in visual arts, music theory, and performance. The most recent version of CAP sponsorship is difficult to situate bureaucratically. It is currently staffed under the umbrella of mental health with additional program materials coming from the Inmate Welfare Fund which supports inmate self-help programming (such as AA, NA, Toastmasters, etc.). CAP employs four inmate clerks who teach and organize the class offerings. Furthermore, in any given year, dozens of volunteer artists from outside the institution come in as guest teachers and performers, working with the incarcerated teachers who teach the bulk of the classes. Thus the sponsorship for the program is, in some ways, loose and difficult to define.

Because CAP facilitates relationships across race, class, and gender and makes attempts to mediate the clearly unequal relationships of power between members of the community, the work of Brandt, Branch, and Grabill offer important theoretical framing for the study. However, because the Community Arts Program exists inside a maximum-security prison it requires an additional lens that takes into account the specific histories, limits and implications of working inside. To that end, I will look to scholars to articulate the constraints and possibilities of literacy work inside.

Moral Ambiguity, Trickster, and Prison Myth

It would be ill-conceived to begin talking about CAP as a site of creative, resistive literacy without recognizing that the literacy sponsorship for the program is bound up in the specific context of a particular maximum-security prison, inside the wider prison-industrial complex, inside the political economy that allows and encourages its growth. We can read about prison, and work to understand the systemic operations that explain how prison came to be, why is it growing like crazy, and who stands to benefit. However, bringing the systemic critique to ground level often obscures a real, representative description of prison work.

Branch, who has taught inside, understands the obscured and situated nature of the prison classroom (10). He nonetheless makes a case for “carving out space to act,” even within the systems that “appear so restrictive as to almost determine action” (12). He suggests that rather than “claiming to work for ends separate from the institutions we teach in (an impossible ideal), we need theories of pedagogy that allow for moral action in morally ambiguous contexts,” suggesting a resistive agency that shapes even as it is

itself shaped (11). Branch: “A teacher in a prison is never apart from that prison, and never apart from the penal system and the criminal justice system either” (93). In that sobering context, Branch creates some wiggle-room for individual agency by evoking the trickster figure who, by definition, functions in places of moral ambiguity (189). The trickster, in the case of the prison classroom, is drawn by Miles Horton’s “magnetic pull of the *ought to be*” (Branch 18).

In *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*, Lewis Hyde describes the boundary-crossing trickster who acts without the paralysis of a totalizing moral judgment over the sacred work at hand. Trickster tales describe the double movement of hegemony—maintaining boundaries and simultaneously allowing ruptures (13).

Trickster as agent is the “character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart” (14). About the goings on of prison there is much myth, myth that supports the status quo and myths created in opposition to it. Myths about prison fills the cavernous spaces where words would go if we knew how to talk about the complications and contradictions of the place. It seems impossible, or at least daunting to go looking for the words that substantively communicate what New Folsom is really like, or explain why I would choose to do work there that is in perpetual danger of supporting a profoundly oppressive system.

In my work at New Folsom I cannot claim the role of sage or all-seeing eye. So I claim the role of witness. I am not the trickster who creates agency and bends the rules behind bars. The trickster teachers and tactically savvy administrators are the ones who make CAP work. So I will start my work as witness the only way I know how—with a memory.

Making a Case for Work Inside the Prison-Industrial Complex

My first experience on the yard at New Folsom was as a guest. I was invited to a concert made up of inmate Jazz bands, each with a coach from the outside. I tried to hold as still as possible, only moving my eyes to survey the bizarre scene—concrete everywhere, brittle grass, bent backs in oversized prison denim with bold block letters, army green officers with black sunglasses, and signs that said “NO WARNING SHOTS WILL BE FIRED.” I was ten miles from home on another planet. Carlson leaned over and began overlaying the scene with important details. “See that guy at the mic? He is the number two Kumi on this yard (*note: Kumi, the Swahili word for “ten” is the sum of four plus one plus five and the name for a powerful prison-instigated Bay Area gang*). And see the guy next to him? He’s a Southern.” Historically, C-Facility had been a site of violence between Black and Southern Mexican gang members. Entire cellblocks had been locked down for yearlong stretches. Recently a guard had been stabbed.

The more I listened the more I understood that prison, already obscured from the public eye and all but severed from public memory, is complicated in ways that I, an observer, would never come to understand. It is full of violence and some “seriously sick shit,” as one inmate recently told me. But, as evidenced by the concert I was attending, it could also be a site of creative resistance. At one point, I sat down within conversational range of two inmates. We talked about the upcoming parole of one man who had been inside since the year I was born. He explained to me that “two hundred bucks and a bus ticket” was going to be a rough transition.

The bus ticket story fits easily into a narrative web of scholars and practitioners like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Eric Cummins, Stephen Hartnett, Erica Meiners, Howard Winant, Victor Villanueva, Charles Mills, Marc Mauer, Georg Rusche, Otto Kirchheimer, and Buzz Alexander. Some speak directly to the political economy that is feeding the insatiable prison system on a steady diet of U. S. citizens. Others describe the landscape in less overtly materialist terms, but cannot seem to altogether escape noticing the heavy clouds that rain acid-justice disproportionately on poor urban neighborhoods.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out that 60 percent of California's prisoners come from a five-county region in and around greater Los Angeles. This means that the State of California has committed to spending 60 percent of its billions of correctional dollars every year on selected men and women from a relatively small geographic area. Those dollars, however, are attached to the bodies of these people, which mean they are spent all along the 1-5 corridor in converted farmland rather than in the urban neighborhoods that so clearly need support.

The political economy of the U.S. prison turns my stomach. It has also brought scholars and activists from a variety of disciplines to the Prison Abolition Movement, roughly defined here as a set of strategies and positions focused on loosening the corporate clutch of capitalism on U.S. systems of punishment, in large part by stemming the tide of people being sucked into the system. Thinking again about Los Angeles and all that is lost when generations are chained, bused, and scattered across the central valley is motivation enough to join the cause. Communities are hemorrhaging. And the blood

that is lost shows up on the evening news as a conformation of pervasive “tough on crime” anti-logic.

There is ample evidence that “tough on crime” really means surveillance and punishment of the poor. Christian Parenti uses examples from New Jersey and Massachusetts to point out that those in the drug trade who can afford to, pay their way out of the system with their illegal profits, thus avoiding mandatory sentencing and the spectacle of the courtroom. The discrepancies between sentencing for powder and crack cocaine are well known. And then there are the stories like Enron. Punishment does not linearly follow crime. For that reason, the stories and numbers offered by scholars like Gilmore and Parenti need to find a place in the conversation. Almost nobody I know in prison thinks that prisons should go away. There are people whose violent and/or deviant acts violate the social contract in ways that justify imprisonment. But that reality does not account for the exponential increase in the use of incarceration in the United States, or the ways that class and race based policing and judicial practices disproportionately target poor, urban neighborhoods.

Considering the momentum with which the prison industrial complex (PIC) grows and the scope of its effect on the poor, a radical prison abolitionist position argues against opportunities for inmates, assuming that such opportunities serve the system, or to state it in more vulgar terms, placate the slaves on America’s new plantation. I understand the rhetorical sense in matching one extreme position with another. Yet, I also see that the incarcerated folks I know at New Folsom are caught, against their will, in the crossfire between the opposing political movements for and against prison growth. In response, I argue that scholars, activists, and particularly teachers can (and must) work from inside

and outside the PIC in tactical, organic, critically resistive ways despite the moral ambiguity that surrounds the work.

So what can tactical, organic, critically resistive literacy look like? As Stephen Hartnett articulates, a critical resistance that aims at empowerment, community building, and social change must incorporate the aesthetic and the pedagogical alongside the political. In his frame, Hartnett sees that these three key components to a critical resistance are synergetic members of the same body. It is not enough to take an ideological political position. Likewise, teaching in the prison or encouraging creative endeavors without an eye toward critical resistance—both of dehumanizing systems and personal processes—is in danger of continuing a long history of control and manipulation under the guise of “rehabilitation.”

I suggest that prison classrooms where inmate teachers, for example, facilitate literacy alongside a wider offering of the arts are sites with real tactical purpose and import. If the people inside stop participating in organically constructed ways of their own choosing, the broader conversation about what do to with incarcerated people becomes abstracted in ways that are ultimately unhelpful and end up (re)commodifying incarcerated bodies as Eric Cummins (1994) points out in his treatise of the radical prison movement in California (discussed later).

There are myriad charts and graphs that explain the *what* of the U.S. prison. There are even charts and graphs that deal with the *why*, threading its development to capitalistic agendas delivered through political mouthpieces and the evening news. But amid the charts and graphs there needs to be space for unlikely organic things to happen and space for incarcerated writers, who choose, to reimagine themselves outside of their

crime, even if that (re)imagining does not seem to change their material situation—at least not in ways that feel palatable to scholars looking in from the outside.

Beginning to (Re)Imagine: Big and Little Literacy Narratives in the CAP program

When I teach at New Folsom, I am a guest in a few different writing classes and one intensive journaling group. I work with classes on both a mainline yard and in the mental health unit. Ducats, the roll call sheets that authorize inmates to attend, can have up to 20 people on them. But by the time the last writers trickle in, attendance is usually in the teens. Guards are not always eager to call inmates out of their “houses.”

Depending on the day of the week, some writers don’t get called at all since the gang violence between Northerns and Southerns precludes their use of the yard on the same days. Incarcerated writers have described the CAP room as safe and sacred space. They talk of taking off their armor when they enter, and speak of the even more arduous process of putting it back on when they leave. They describe the portal as a time-space continuum of sorts and sometimes talk about how the jarring of coming and going can be too much. On any given day, a writer, having weighed any gains against the pain of leaving choose not to come, any gains weighed against the pain of leaving.

In the room, I am learning, there is code of safety that makes space for each writer’s work, even when it reifies the dominant narrative. We offer comment and critique for each other, but we also allow writers to write from the place where they stand. Grabill says it this way: “Programs and teachers cannot force critical consciousness after all, nor can they minimize personal and/or functional needs” (113).

Barging in with a narrowly defined agenda is both unproductive and profoundly disrespectful.

Sometimes writers draw from a place of thinly veiled fiction. Often, especially when writers are new to the class, the writing fits neatly into clichéd prison genres—memoirs from the street or poems about the steamy lady who is waiting back home. Sometimes the writing is real, raw, and thoughtful. Sometimes it is combative, explosions orchestrated by razor sharp intellect. I take my cues from the group whose default posture is a *patient knowing* based on years of watching new writers inevitably feel the need to say some of the same old things on their way to saying something new. Writers offer each other suggestions and challenges that sometimes start heated conversations that zig and zag through race, class, gender, and politics. The exchanges that are made are made with the coin of the realm—scraps of public writing. Everyone who comes, writes. Most who come, read aloud. And each public offering is wrapped in a *patient knowing* that each man has to wait for his own word.

This *patient knowing* somewhat overlaps with Paul Loeb’s “radical patience” described by Paula Mathieu in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in Composition*. Mathieu summarized Loeb’s idea as the “ability to remain engaged in the messy, unpredictable process of public participation without burning out or becoming cynical” (47). I have watched incarcerated writers responding to each other with this long-term vision and have tried to likewise adopt the posture. The violence and control of a maximum-security prison make it predictably unpredictable. The moral ethic of Grubill requires that teachers in this space be ever sure of their intentions, and careful with the power they wield. A respect for the work of CAP requires that teaching guests adopt the

local turn toward radical patience, both with the other writers in the circle and with all (read *nearly everything*) that is out of the control of those who make the program work. Bringing impatience to this place threatens its very existence.

As a guest, and even as a sponsor, of this local literacy community, I forfeit the right to unreflectively speak my mind to the guards who are also caught up in this maddening ecosystem. Appreciating the delicate, tactical nature of what CAP is attempting to do requires a patience that often chooses small actions instead of big ones, or sometimes (what appears to be) no action at all. The politics of the prison ecosystem seems absurd at best, cruel and arbitrary at worst. I have seen volunteers come into the institution and immediately adopt a change-agent posture that seems focused on the material conditions of inmates, but, I would argue is often times, at bottom, an unreflective coping strategy for processing their prison experience. Unreflective action on the part of volunteers can dangerously subsume the articulated desires of inmates, ending with volunteers making decisions for which inmates are ultimately disciplined (Cummins). The rules of the prison may, over time, be negotiated, but they cannot be ignored, because when they are, the punishment comes back *every time* on the incarcerated men and women who choose to risk community partnership.

From 2009-2012, when I would teach at New Folsom, I would teach as a guest in the classrooms of Spoon Jackson and Marty Williams, both of whom were inmate teaching-artists and long-term CAP clerks (the title of clerk allows inmate teaching-artists to make prison wages while teaching and handling the administrative duties that keep the program going). Jackson was a teaching-artist at New Folsom for almost ten years. He is currently in this thirty-sixth year of a life-without parole sentence. His first contact with

CAP (then Arts in Corrections) was a poetry class taught by Judith Tannenbaum at San Quentin, an experience he writes about in *By Heart: Poetry, Prison and Two Lives*, the memoir he co-authored with Tannenbaum. Jackson writes about how he showed up for Tannenbaum's poetry class and sat in silence, with his back to the wall in a ring of chairs he set up as a perimeter of defense. Then, after a year, he brought a stack of poems. And played Pozzo in "Waiting for Godot" at San Quentin in 1987. Then authored a book. And continues to write peer-reviewed articles that I can find at my campus library.

This list of Jackson's endeavors reads like the reifying salvation narrative so readily accessible, even in scholarly discourse. In *Right to Be Hostile*, Erica Miener points out the troubling genre of salvation narrative that are especially prevalent in places like prison classrooms. Meiners' offers a sample from the genre: "I was born; I had problems; I made the wrong choices; I was apprehended by the police; I was incarcerated; I found God and He helped me. And...my life is now on a better track" (139). The primary problem with salvation narratives is that they focus on the individual and his or her criminal act, thereby circumventing critical attention away from the wider political economic landscape. Eve Ensler's 2003 documentary, "What I Want My Words To Do To You: Voices from a Maximum-Security Women's Prison," unwittingly offers a glaringly flat-footed window into the composing of salvation narratives. Ensler designs writing prompts that continually situation writers inside their crime, encouraging remorse and individual responsibility. At multiple points she talks over writers as they are explaining or reading their work, making suggestions about their feelings and their experiences with their families. Even when writers push back or dismiss her inappropriate over-stepping, she does not change directions. Ensler's PBS documentary

is representative of the genre that Meiners and others have openly critiqued. Critics of the salvation narrative script rightly find that it is wholly inappropriate for literacy sponsorship to delineate the socio-emotional boundaries of the writer.

For me, however, narratives like that of Jackson significantly complicate the genre, calling for a both/and space where incarcerated writers have the freedom to tell their stories as they see them, even when those tellings seem to come back around to worn out myths. In *By Heart* Jackson describes the scenes—prison library, prison classroom, and prison theatre production—where he “finds his voice” and credits reading and writing with bringing a sense of purpose and creative outlet that helps him reimagine himself, or at least get back to what was lost early in his public schooling. He writes, “I learned a few new words each day and each one brought a geyser erupting inside my mind and soul. The more I read and studied, the clearer life became. I became richer and deeper inside . . . I had to till the endless gardens in my mind, heart, and soul” (2). Of the library years before he began attending poetry class he writes, “For eight years I had stayed to myself at San Quentin, learning who I was and what I was about. I avoided crowds. Although my heart, mind and soul burned with thoughts, vibes, and feelings, I let none surface and stepped over wounded, dying, or dead bodies as everyone else did” (2). Jackson writes of his expectations about the poetry course: he was sure he would not like it, considering poetry to be the realm of “women, squares, nerds, weirdoes, professors, and highbrows, people caught up in some unreal academic world” (2).

But he *does* begin to write. And writing does change, in small, organic, tactical ways, his material situation. He becomes a published writer and teacher. At one point, when offered the opportunity to move to a different institution where he could more

closely align himself with a university, he chose to stay at New Folsom, calling the program he had helped build “a mecca for the arts.” Jackson navigates impossibly narrow constraints without strategic control over some of his most basic needs. And yet, as a teaching artist at New Folsom, he got to decide—in one specific moment—whether or not to move from one institution to another, weighing his opportunities as a teaching artist in each place. With Jackson in mind, I find support for the articulation that writing and teaching bring some small agency and serve to alleviate, to some extent, the oppressiveness of doing “life without.”

Thinking about the way that Jackson moves inside the prison, creating spaces and moments that transcend incarceration, calls up the image of the trickster with parallels between Jackson’s literacy narrative and Hyde’s analysis of the literacy narrative of Frederick Douglass. In *Trickster* Hyde uses the trickster myth to situate the life of Frederick Douglass. Hyde concedes that “a person as serious and moralizing as Frederick Douglass” does not seem to embody the trickster myth, but takes up some trickster qualities because he is so clearly situated on the margins (226). Douglass was born into a deeply conflicted moral system, a system in which he adopts the Hermetic position of theft. He “steals” literacy from his father who is unwilling to give it, and that stealing of literacy leads Douglass to see, in his own words, a “pathway from slavery to freedom” (228). Hyde suggests that the acts of reading and writing, when performed by Douglass, are acts that “undercut plantation culture” (229). Hyde continues: “If Douglass hopes to be the active disenchanter of his master’s world, he must speak and write” not just to any public, but specifically to a white public—the public of his oppressor (229). This speaking across the color line, this breaking of the rules of silence, this contestation

of the “white world’s fictions about slavery,” leads Douglass to articulate a sense of freedom. The quality of the silence that Douglass must break runs parallel through Jackson’s narrative. Choosing to write, for both Jackson and Douglass, is a choice against silence and a move toward public engagement with the oppressor and/or his proxy. And in both instances breaking silence through literacy fundamentally disrupts, or at least disorients, the well-tended hegemonic fiction.

Hyde’s analysis of Douglass also exposes complications to the Frederick Douglass literacy myth where all ends well for those who learn to read and write. Douglass *does* gain some tactical—and maybe even strategic—power in his lifetime. But, as Hyde points out, despite the fact that Douglass lives to see much of plantation culture collapse, no utopic phoenix rises from its ashes: “Yankee culture [has] its own organizing divisions, some of them odious and remarkably indelible” (237). Looking back on his own life, Douglass writes in his 1855 autobiography about his youthful enthusiasm in adopting a good cause with good people. With the encouragement of his white supporters, Douglass speaks and writes to and for an audience and is “made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisped” (quoted in Hyde 243). This close circle of white supporters “prompted, sanctioned, introduced, and authorized Douglass’s voice; they were also his sympathetic listeners” (245).

Hyde describes Douglass as a man “moving from speechlessness into speech as he enters what he thought was a world organized to include him” (246). But time proved otherwise and in the eventual writings of the *Frederick Douglass’ Papers*, he is described by African American readers as finally developing a “colored” voice: “I have read his paper very carefully and find phrase after phrase develop itself as in one newly born

among us” (247). Douglass’s literacy moves from aligning with his early literacy sponsors to choosing to pursue what Hyde calls an “essential self” in the voice of the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. This movement charts a course through a profound disillusionment with his lack of true membership in the white circle of his literacy sponsors to a new rhetoric that is not formed within or dialectically responsive these same sponsors.

Douglass as Trickster: Literacy Sponsorship and Tactical Moves

I want to make the case that Douglass uses literacy in tactical, organic, and nuanced ways that resonate both with Jackson’s story and the underlying principles of the CAP program. Douglass starts with a salvation narrative of sorts which catches the imagination of his literacy sponsors, who (intentionally or not) co-opt and attempt to censor his story as well as directly manage its telling. Douglass: “It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story, month after month, and to keep up my interest . . . ‘Tell your story, Frederick,’ would whisper my revered friend, Mr. Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always follow the injunction, for I was now reading and thinking” (243).

So Douglass, Hyde’s trickster at the threshold of possibility, leans hard against the edges of hegemony. This is the same dangerous ground where incarcerated writers like Jackson and his students find themselves. They are sponsored to a point, and that point—that edge—is the focus of much of the extreme prison abolitionist debate. What is the real use of tactical power? Can literacy programs inside maximum-security prisons be anything other than a grand and cruel placation of America’s new slaves as some

abolitionist scholars have described it? What is really to be gained by incarcerated men and women who choose to read and bravely write their own story?

Proponents of programs like CAP talk about (re)discovering humanity. Opponents of such programs argue that a discovery of humanity without the material gain of physical freedom is at best a sham and at worst a deep violence. Yet between the poles of mental escape in a totalizing system and physical emancipation there is a wide open space where rhetorical work for various purposes does happen. One such purpose is survivance. Malea Powell (2002) writes about rhetorics of survivance. She finds in the writings of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Charles Alexander Eastman a “language of survivance (survival + resistance) that they, consciously or unconsciously, use in order to reimagine and, literally, refigure ‘the Indian.’” Powell suggests that it is the particular *use* of language that “transforms their object-status within colonial discourse into a subject-status” (400). Language use is likewise important for Douglass. Douglass’s story does not really begin with a salvation narrative. It begins with his pursuit of something that was being strategically withheld from him. So he pursues literacy, finds sponsors, writes a salvation narrative, outgrows the space that once felt free, and moves for the first time into a voice that is his own.

Hyde writes that after 1847 Douglass no longer “forgets” his dark skin and crisped hair. “He becomes black, reimaging his family history and redirecting his voice to a more receptive audience” (247). Hyde suggests that this is a reluctant rebirth brought on by Douglass’s profound tiring of the trope of the self-education savage. The liminal space between man and his trope suffocates, “but what were his choices? If there is no way to stay poised on the edge, which is the better fate, cannibalism or anthropomy, to be

eaten by ideology or vomited into exile? Unless he wanted to leave the country, he would have to work with the hand that history had dealt” (248).

Therein lies the fundamental seat of contradiction for literacy sponsorship in places like a maximum-security prison where the literacy myth of economic gain does not hold. The teachers I knew at New Folsom are serving life-without-parole sentences. Barring some cataclysmic event they will leave prison in body bags—either by violence or old age. They can choose organic, tactical moves inside the belly of the beast but their choices will not lead to physical freedom. Their choices can, and often do, offer a measure of agency in a near-totalizing institution. And such agency has real value, even if it is tactical and contingent.

Agency and Sponsorship: Getting to the Specific Context of CAP

Fundamental to an organic, tactical position is the understanding that the people inside can, and must, participate in organically constructed ways of their own choosing. Broadly, if teachers like Jackson and Williams stop teaching, and the writers they are working with stop writing and speaking in public and semi-public spaces, the outside conversation about what to do with incarcerated people becomes abstracted in ways that are ultimately unhelpful and end up (re)commodifying incarcerated bodies. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*, Cummins goes into great detail about how the Bay Area Left’s co-option of the *hyper-sexualized inmate outlaw* ended up disrupting community support for inmate-initiated reform at San Quentin. The situation Cummins describes is highly complicated with lots of moving parts, but what is clear, even at a surface level, is that incarcerated writers fostered connections with the

Bay Area Left based on the promise—or at least the imagining—of a strategic alliance. The incarcerated writers at San Quentin mistook the Left’s interest for real, material opportunity. By the bloody end, the community outside the prison had withdrawn its support for the writers at San Quentin. Cummins argues it is likely that the Left never really understood, or imagined actually providing, the type of support the writers at San Quentin were asking for. The San Quentin story, as Cummins tells it, calls back to the details of Frederick Douglass’s experience with white sponsorship of his abolitionist agenda.

Understanding the messy and impossibly contradictory nature of prison politics, CAP works to circumvent a strategic political agenda. It also rejects, outright, the notion of rehabilitation (the “R” word) with its terrifying history of abuse. Without a political or rehabilitative agenda, CAP chooses to narrow its own articulation of itself to this: basic opportunities to do creative work in community. This seemingly small agenda inside the massive machine of the U.S. prison seems almost laughably foolish. But the lack of hubris is quite possibly the very thing that has allowed the program to exist amid the twin extremes of violence and control that define prison.

As tactical and organic as it may be, CAP does require sponsorship. As Grabill understands, a program like CAP must have an *insider*, an agent with considerable institutional power (141). CAP has retained, for the moment, a version of that position in Carlson and the other mental health staff that he has brought to the program. Observations of Carlson and the other staff in action call back to Mathieu and the way she recognizes the well-timed dance of the bureaucratic insider in the work of Iris Marion Young (1990) and William M. Sullivan (1995). Young reframes rights more as *doing*

than as *having*, a position in keeping with de Certeau's original statements about tactics belonging to those without strategic power. Sullivan makes a bit more room for the agency of the insider, suggesting that although "institutions make certain practices possible and others impossible . . . individuals can also change institutional orders" (122). Taken together, Young and Sullivan both describe institutions in action, and it is the understanding that bureaucracies are less stable and more pliable than we sometimes suggest that makes the role of the insider crucial.

Mathieu continues to speak to CAP's seemingly small, tactical agenda of offering basic opportunities to do creative work in community. She frames tactical work as grounded in a hope characterized by a "critical, active, dialectical engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures" (xv). Her claims about what tactical work should look like and what it should be aiming for call back to Miles Horton's "eye on the ought to be." She suggests that tactical projects "accomplish only themselves" and to imagine otherwise is a set up for disappointment and disorientation (xix). Mathieu:

One works for and hopes for change in the powerful systems that script our society, but one does not look to transactional rewards as a needed extrinsic exchange for the act of writing. The doing of the thing itself has to be enough pleasure or reward, because being heard in a fractured public and making change in the world is a slow and unpredictable process. (47)

Mathieu understands that organic, tactical work seems to aim low, and even when its sail *does* catch a breeze and fly, it does not expect that it has become a bird.

I attended a debriefing, some years back, where Williams and a few other teaching artists met with a band of visiting musicians who had spent six days inside. It was the seventh year that the musicians had made the trip from Alaska to California. When they come, these particular musicians bring an energy to the CAP program that opens up spaces that close again when they leave. Williams thanked the artists for coming and described his personal process for dealing with the coming and going of volunteers. And I, as witness, heard again the same thing Williams has been telling me for years—that a tactical orientation allows him and the other teaching artists agency in an otherwise totalizing place.

I end this witness back where I began, with three scholars who speak directly to the dangers, contradictions, and ambiguities of literacy acts, literacy communities, and literacy teaching in a maximum-security prison. Brandt calls for a framing of literacy that understands that it is always situated. Branch calls on Horton as he makes the case that “to work toward something that seems impossible to realize is not the mark of a futile activity” (11). Literacy sponsorship that operates primarily through tactical and organic means in the morally ambiguous context of a maximum-security prison should give us pause. But a clear-headed and well-informed look at the prison institution does not need to preclude tactical work from inside and outside the system.

Teachers, in any institution, who continue to show up day after day cannot escape some belief in individual agency. Branch claims, and I agree, that all classrooms where literacy practices are taught or supported ascribe some agency to those literacy practices. “Educational literacy practices are supposed to take students beyond the literacy practices already familiar to them when they enter the classroom. Why else would we presume to

teach? (214). Here Branch brings the conversation about agency right down to brass tacks. We do teach. And for most of us, an unresolvable moral ambiguity will always accompany the work (216).

William Cleveland (1994) notes that the originators of the Arts in Corrections program “began by acknowledging that whether or not it has been encouraged, art has always been part of prison life” (55). Marty Williams has said much the same thing through a story he often tells, holding an invisible guitar in front of his body for emphasis. He says that before there was CAP he was playing his guitar against the wall on the yard. The bearded, bandana-wearing literacy sponsor who showed up outside the prison gate with poems under his arm did not give Williams permission to write or play music, did not transform him into a writer and musician. That was something Williams gave himself. What Williams, and other incarcerated teaching artists I know, will say is that literacy—defined here as acts of creative resistance—will be part of the prison fabric whether or not it is scaffolded by the organic, tactical support of bureaucratic insiders and volunteer teachers. The question is not whether or not these literacy communities make sense to outsiders, but whether or not they find support to function in the ways of their choosing.

CHAPTER THREE

WRITING SUBJECTS: MAKING THE CASE FOR OPPORTUNITIES THAT SUPPORT A RANGE OF AUTHORIAL PURPOSES

This is our bridge to you, and we built it ourselves!
--Nancy Jean King from *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother*

*Surviving together is an important enterprise,
whether surviving consists in the search for food and
shelter or in the quest for a viable identity.*
--Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*

I have the somewhat regular experience at national conferences of mentioning that I teach at New Folsom only to have someone else in the circle say that they have taught, at one point or another, in the prison system. I am usually surprised, although I should not be. Literacy education has been part of the prison landscape going as far back as Cherry Hill in 1822 (Kahan 2012). Between the penitentiary of the Pennsylvanian Quakers and the machine that is the U.S. prison at present much has changed. But what has not changed is the way that literacy work is closely associated with rhetorics of transformation (Rolston). This makes sense when we consider the prevalence of an ideology that links literacy with social good and social mobility. In *The Violence of Literacy*, J. Elspeth Stuckey (1991) suggests that the fusing of literacy and its presumed material value is part of that wider “myth of a classless society” to which we imagine we no longer ascribe.

We believe our society provides equal opportunities for all and promises success to those who work hard to achieve it. We believe the key to achievement is

education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy. In a society bound by such a mythology, our views about literacy are our views about political economy and social opportunity. (vii)

I do not imagine that any contemporary scholars care to quote Stuckey as a foundation for an argument about literacy sponsorship. Her work was problematic when it came out and outdated at this point. And yet, in the context of the prison classroom, I see that an overly simplistic causal relationship between literacy and material value still often forms the basic argument for literacy sponsorship inside.

Arguments like those made by Stuckey and others point toward an explanation for why literacy work cannot seem to shake the practice of trafficking in rhetorics of transformation even when it seems obvious enough that literacy does not carry, with any notable assurance, an economic value (Yagelski 2000; Alexander 2011; Young 2007). That clarification is helpful for sponsors as they reflectively consider the types of arguments they may want to make about literacy inside. Of course, this is not to say that literacy does not have value or even to suggest that it lacks material value. Rather, bringing Stuckey into the conversation reminds us that the value of literacy for the individuals and communities that acquire and employ it is complicated, contingent, and organic. Instead of guessing after literacy's value, in the course of this chapter I suggest that we attend to the creation of opportunities that allow for a wide range of authorial purposes, even ones that do not aim for transformation.

The scholars in this chapter describe complex and sometimes contradictory classroom spaces attended by students with a wide range of authorial purposes. As Tobi Jacobi (2011) notes, classrooms inside carceral institutions require a nuanced reading.

Such a reading should not, however, avoid attending to the ways that prison scholars often end up entangled with the rhetorics of individual transformation ubiquitous in the prison story line. The scholarship and history in this chapter is intended to open up a larger space for considering ways of valuing the prison writing classroom without looking for, or even requiring, individualistic narratives of transformation. I suggest that one starting point for scholars who want to move away from the collection of transformational narratives, and the colonial implications of such work, is a shift in focus from the notion of *transformation* to the notion of *opportunity*. The discussion of *opportunity* as a key term in program planning and evaluation, and the specific history of the Opportunity Model as described by Stephen Duguid, will be taken up in the second half of the chapter. Duguid's Opportunity Model describes the historical moment into which Arts in Corrections was *born*. Framing the *birth* of AIC within the Opportunity Model contextualizes both its ideological impetus and particular program structure. This in-depth treatment of opportunity as a key term is intended to legitimize its potential use by prison literacy sponsors moving forward.

This chapter should only be read as an introduction to the paradoxical terrain of scholarship on prison programming. Its scope is narrowed to (mostly) recent scholarly articles on prison literacy sponsorship and a few scenes from the Arts in Corrections (AIC) classroom. It does not address the scholarly conversation about how the prison crisis has come to be or the political economic context for its astronomical growth. Likewise, it does not take up prison (auto)biographical monographs by incarcerated writers or prison teachers, of which there are many. Nonetheless, this survey of recent scholarship is important because it highlights, among other things, the overwhelming

sense of goodwill and the tireless work being done by a growing contingent of scholar-practitioners across the country. In Chapters 4 and 5 I will describe some lingering epistemological and structural barriers to the types of work many scholar-practitioners intend to do with, and for, incarcerated writers. The following discussions of things-as-they-stand informs that critique.

The Story of the Girl Who Did Not Write a Book

A confession: as I mentioned in Chapter 1, the impetus for my first teaching stint inside was a book project. Like many who have gone before me, I entered the prison dangerously armed with a preconceived project and a change-agent mentality. I was determined to help Carlson write a book he did not want to write about why opportunities for creative expression are important in prison generally, and more specifically, at the intersection of California's burgeoning prison population and financial crisis. He suggested that before I consider writing a manifesto for prison arts programs I needed to try teaching inside. I agreed with equal parts curiosity and trepidation. By the end of my first two-day stint—one day on the mainline yard and one day in the mental health unit generally referred to as “The Taj”—I had given up the goal of writing Carlson's book, and began to see why it was that he had shown little interest in the endeavor in the first place.

My experience of these two prison classrooms was complicated, layered, and difficult to describe. There was really nothing definitive I could say. Every time I tried to articulate a broad observation of the place and/or its writers, competing narratives would begin to crowd in at the margins. In the span of two days I had met writers who

were working on Hollywood scripts that were sure to make them famous and writers who were penning political articles for grassroots Bay Area publications. One writer suggested that all Black inmates in California are political prisoners. Another countered with a highly individualized narrative of the path that led him to a Level Four institution. There were stories about parents on drugs, foster care, and abuse. There were also stories about two-parent middle class families and summer vacations. The man who had the words “FUCK YOU” tattooed in block print above his left eye gently shook my hand and wrote about his recent public performance of a traditional dance. One writer showed me pictures of his beautiful daughter, beaming as he relayed her interest in photography. He was stabbed within the year by his own gang and moved to protective custody. He was a great leader and a strong writer. I had hoped he would someday take over the class. But then he left New Folsom on a gurney. I never saw him again.

Walking the Line: Some Scholars on Prison Literacy *or* Why Prison Writing Programs are So Difficult to Talk About

As I look through some of the more recent scholarship on prison programming, I see other scholars struggling with some of the same contradictions, complications, and paradoxes that, for me, define the experience of teaching in prison. The last decade has seen some movement away from a focus on individualized narratives of transformation. The article by Gregory Shafer (2001) in *English Journal*, is an example of the wider discourse some ten years back that kept the conversation at the level of the individual. In his piece, Shafer tells his tale of bringing literacy to the “dark and shadowy” halls of Coldwater Correctional Facility (75). It is clear enough throughout the piece that

Shafer's intentions are good and his reading of his own experiences teaching inside are honest and earnest. Nonetheless, underlying Shafer's story is the transformational discourse ubiquitous in prison writing. Ten years later, Ed Wiltse's essay (2011) attempts to traverse the territory more carefully, yet still manages to mix important witnessing with problematic assumptions about the ability of his program to get outside or beyond the disciplining structures of the institution (6). In Wiltse's program, university students can substitute a course paper for weekly book club meetings with incarcerated volunteers at Monroe Correctional Facility. This dialogic exchange is intended to complicate how the university students understand social problems (8). But, as an example, one university student's assessment of a prisoner's narrative ends with curiosity about an individual crime: "It is so crazy and makes me wonder what he is in for" (13). Such comments from university students, coupled with Wiltse's own description of the program demonstrate that issues of appropriation and reification may not be as clearly settled as we might have hoped. But then there is also this beautiful statement in Wiltse's text by one of the incarcerated volunteers: "It felt good to know that every Wednesday for six weeks for at least an hour I would be able to discuss life, not self-help themes of life but life as a whole" (16). Wiltse's program, like most that I read about, is a mixed bag of valuable, life-giving opportunities for incarcerated men and women inextricably tangled with nuanced, complicated, and often paradoxical narratives which could easily form arguments against prison programming.

In 2010, *Radical Teacher* ran a special issue on *Teaching Against The Prison Industrial Complex*. The articles in the issue discussed ways teachers could use the classroom space to think critically and resistively about the issue of mass incarceration in

the United States. All articles were oriented around the notion of a radical prison abolitionism that articulates a “demand for economic, political, and social self-determinism for all people” (Drabinski and Harkins 5). By design, the special issue did not address, in any substance, the classroom inside the prison. In 2012, *Radical Teacher* published a second special issue on prison, this time focusing on *Teaching Inside Carceral Institutions*. In the introduction to this second special issue, cluster editors Kate Drabinski and Gilliam Harkins construct a negotiated space for the conversation about classrooms inside by suggesting, like Erica Meiners (2007), that there is a school-to-prisons pipeline (or school/prison nexus as Meiners now describes it). Placing prisons on a continuum, or in a nexus, with other educational spaces allows Drabinski and Harkins to justify collecting and publishing articles from teachers in the prisons because those teachers are working to “negotiate the structural contradictions of educational and carceral space while remaining focused on the pedagogical needs and interests of specific people in a specific classroom” (3). The way Drabinski and Harkins articulate their position on prison teachers/prison teaching points back to the fundamental tension between *institution* and *person* that is present in any educational space. Said another way, the U.S. prison in 2013 is an extreme context for the long-standing, important, and complicated conversation about what it means to critique and oppose systems that we can never get outside of—systems that are made up of people, systems that include us.

A Complex Range of Authorial Purposes

Included in the *Radical Teacher* special collection is an essay by Atif Rafay (2012), a student and Teaching Assistant in the University Beyond Bars program at the

Washington State Reformatory. The article seems like it is going to challenge the idea of teaching in prison, but ends up making a case for why course offering in the prison can be agentive for incarcerated men and women. Rafay's description of what inmate agency looks like makes ample room for a wide range of inmate purposes:

Even if many prisoners attend classes only to avoid punishment or to obtain employment credentials, or as a desperate attempt to prove themselves worthy of clemency, even if others are there merely for a pastime or for some contact with the free world, and even if the levels of academic accomplishment that most attain and the credentials they receive are mediocre, some may nonetheless learn something and perhaps even come to value learning. (12)

Rafay's final comment can be read as assuming that the incarcerated men and women who show up to class do not bring with them an intrinsic value of learning and that the classroom experience is what transforms them into value-ers of knowledge and knowledge making processes. In the same volume, Robert Scott (2012) makes a case for setting up classrooms that are responsive to the various agentive purposes of attendees, and he manages to do so without making the problematic move Rafay makes regarding transformation: "If we want to challenge the prison system in the era of mass incarceration by means of teaching college classes in prison, we must learn how to hear the students' articulation of what is needed. We have to embrace the students' interests where *they* are and listen to what *they* need to get somewhere with *their* work" (29). Implicit in Scott's call is an understanding that incarcerated men and women are doing educational work with or without the formalities of a classroom space. The foundational notion that incarcerated people show up to class with an educational goal or project

already formed, if not articulated, is rhetorically and pedagogically important for the way it frames teacher-student relationship. It also resonates with my experience teaching inside. The incarcerated writers I have met over the last five years have chosen to come to class for a variety of reasons, but none of them came without some reason of his own and some sense of ownership and value of the process.

Eleanor Novek and Rebecca Sanford (2006) add to the list of writer purposes. They report that writers in their journalism class, among other things, pay “homage to loved ones on holidays or to remember family members” (117). Others seek a sense of “validation and individual attention” (118). And still others use the opportunity of writing in community to create a “sense of normalcy” that connects them to people and events outside of the prison (116). Ann Folwell Stanford (2004) observes that some of the women in her class “write against the official discourse of the jail, some write with it, some do both at the same time (277). Furthermore, she notes that some writers bring their written work and course certificates to court appearances as demonstration of change or personal growth (282). Anita Wilson (2007) reports that there was a consensus among the writers she worked with—they come to “get away from the cockroaches” (185).

Attending to the “We”: Explicitly Social Authorial Purposes

From proof of transformation, to the feeding of memory, to a reprieve from insects, the authorial and educational purposes of incarcerated men and women are as varied as the people themselves. However, some purposes appear across contexts. The theme of program participation for social purposes, for example, threads through much of

the scholarship on prison programming. An attention to the social purposes of incarcerated students is significant considering the context in which these classrooms exist. In the context of prison, opportunities for meaningful social connection are rare and beautiful things. A surface level attention to the social might seem to support the radical abolitionist argument that prison programming is primarily a pacification strategy. However, a more nuanced attention to the way incarcerated students describe their social needs is beneficial for sponsors across the political spectrum. Even Drabinski and Harkins' definition of radical pedagogy, positioned at one extreme of the conversation, calls for an attention to specific people in specific classrooms. Building on Drabinski and Harkins, I argue that programs that do not account for the social purposes of incarcerated students miss an important opportunity to reflexively respond to a clearly articulated need.

Josie Billington (2011) addresses the social, describing her program as one that distinguishes itself from other literacy interventions by making “reading a creative, social, life-enhancing activity [and] shared experience” (70). Billington also describes her program as a therapeutic intervention—a term that is problematic for my purposes here. Nonetheless, the way she articulates the social aspect of her program resonates with other scholars who teach inside (67). Novek and Sanford describe the social needs of incarcerated students in much more intense terms: “Many female inmates write to overcome the social isolation of prison. Writing offers contact with a wider audience, meeting the visceral need for communication and supporting psychological survival” (116). Wilson (2007) describes her research as particularly focused on the social and the “ways that people seek to keep a sense of social identity in an institutional world” (189).

In summary of their empirical study, Halperin et al. (2012) claim that “participants benefit by being part of a social network” (10). Like Billington, Halperin et al. use a rhetoric of transformation—terms like *rehabilitation* and *change*—to describe their program. This is problematic for my purposes, but their attention to the social is nonetheless significant.

Focusing on the relational affordances of classroom space, Stanford (2004) suggests that the social purposes that incarcerated students bring to class work to form a *We*—a cohesive group identity of sorts. It is beyond the purview of this chapter to address the scholarship on social identities and the complications and power dynamics therein, but I do think that Stanford’s use of the *We* describes an important potential affordance of the classroom space inside the near-totalizing, dehumanizing carceral institution. Stanford sees this affordance, this making of a *We*, as a particular form of resistance: “Often writers will begin to see themselves as a ‘we’ and thus subvert the individualistic rhetoric that permeates the discourse of rehabilitation and punishment. As part of the workshop’s ‘we,’ they also function as witnesses to each other’s experience rendered through the poems” (285). By Stanford’s definition, “writing that affirms a ‘we’ in jail is itself radical work” (291).

In describing the SpeakOut! Writers Workshops sponsored by the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University, Jacobi nods to Stanford in her own articulation of why the *We* is significant to prison programs. Jacobi suggests that the SpeakOut! program operates on three levels, two of which pay close attention to the *We*. SpeakOut! offers individuals opportunities to engage with text, but it also offers “groups of women opportunities to write and respond to writing together and often recognize their

own experiences in the stories of the other writers” (44). Furthermore, SpeakOut! offers women prisoners the chance to publish their work in a biannual anthology. Thus, there are layers to the *We*—there is the *We* of the classroom and the *We* of the anthology, both of which Jacobi sees as having radical potential.

Although the context is different, Kirsten Coe’s article (2011) on a teaching garden at Auburn Maximum Security Prison supports Jacobi’s articulation of the *We* as potentially radical or at least potentially agentic. Coe tells a beautiful story of how the *We* plays out for the students in her class. In the summer of 2011, Coe taught Ecology as part of the Cornell Prison Educational Program. The 21 students in the course used a 50x100 foot converted green space as a field site. Coe relates the experience of watching a guard heckle the students as they were being escorted from the teaching garden to the school building on one of the final days of the course. “So what are you guys now? Farmers, weed growers?” he asks sarcastically. In response, one of the students responds, “No. We are ecologists” (60). Coe’s story is instructive for folks who intend to teach inside. Although Coe is more ready than I would be to ascribe to the experience a transformational outcome, she nonetheless describes an educational scenario where students are invited to a group status, as ecologists, that was not available to them before the teaching garden was established. And that group status, as evidenced in the verbal exchange Coe witnesses, becomes agentic as it literally gives the student words with which to speak back to the adversarial guard.

Returning to Stanford, I see that the *We* fostered in her program is closely related to her own critical self-reflection and her willingness to let the program model evolve based on the students’ articulations of need (280). The following extended excerpt from

her article shows how Stanford's critical self-reflection and attention to student articulations of what was needed led to concrete changes in what her program offered:

It tapped into my concern that I was offering only palliative moments and, in so doing, actually supporting and making the very system of which I am so critical actually look good. My acute awareness of privilege as a white middle-class academic, free to come and go in this enclosed space, added to my unease and growing sense of collusion (this issue alone warrants a separate article). Instead of the one-time sessions, I switched formats and began holding workshops that lasted four to six weeks per tier. Although this obviously did not resolve the issue of racial and class privilege or of collusion with the system, it did offer participants some continuity and the opportunity to create a body of work. (281)

Stanford is slow to ascribe to the classroom experience any grand transformation. What she does describe—some continuity and some opportunity for sustained projects—appear to be important to the students with whom she works. That is what makes her move to longer-format sessions important. Making any move, any change to the format, is difficult to enact inside the cumbersome and illogical prison administrative apparatus. Stanford's bureaucratic context makes her move all the more significant to the conversation about the value of organic, reflective program models.

In a similar vein, Scott suggests that prison programs must attend to the articulated social purposes of the students therein and therefore makes a call for increasingly fluid and open classroom models: "If we are determined to have liberatory pedagogy in prison, it will have to proceed in an un-deterministic manner. That means abandoning vanguardist proselytizing for the left, and being open to the possibility that

the most important lesson from the college course can be in the dynamics of interaction between the classroom participants” (26). In both Stanford and Scott, there is a reoccurring tension between ethics, ideals, and the material constraints of working inside the near-totalizing carceral institution. Both Stanford and Scott respond with descriptions of classrooms that are flexible enough in structure to respond to the expressed needs of the students therein. However, for obvious reasons, classrooms with loose structure leave themselves open to critique from those outside the prison who see programming as institutional placation of inmates. Program sponsors who build more organic programs will find in the work of Jacobi and others a careful articulation of what should count as activism.

Literacy for/as Activism

Speaking into the conversation about what counts as activism in prison, Rafay considers the opportunity for education as definitively subversive. “I am sympathetic (and not just grateful) to educators who regard as subversive in itself their provision of education to those ordinarily excluded from it. I doubt they would claim, except perhaps for strategic rhetorical purposes, that their work fulfills the dream of genuine educational or social justice.” He argues, however, that even when and where the dream of genuine educational justice cannot be realized, a Gramscian agency inside the system can be seen as “plausibly radical” (14).

For Jacobi, the penning of counternarratives by incarcerated women forms the basis of individual and collective activism. These narratives function as an opening for “more ardent activism” in the individual lives of incarcerated women and also through

the publications of inmate work that is distributed in the community outside the prison (41). Jacobi's attention to the way that literacy inside the prison can be dialectically responsive to "coalition-building and grassroots alliances" outside the prison manifests in a program model that works hard to put the writings of incarcerated women into circulation where they can serve outside movements (46). Yet, even where the context of the prison classroom is linked to broader activist movements outside the prison, Jacobi and Becker (2012) make it clear that the role of the writing teacher should not be conflated, or erroneously expanded, beyond its bounds:

Facilitators are not social workers, correctional guards, substance abuse counselors, or parole officers. We are not in the business of addiction recovery, public safety, family reunification, or even conventional education, though our efforts may complement work in those areas. As we have indicated, our focus on literacy and particularly written expression, craft and alternative publication along with our grounding in feminist and queer pedagogy creates a commitment to the written word as active participant in progressive social justice and grassroots organizing movements. (37)

A prison writing teacher with an activist orientation who can understand and maintain his or her primary "commitment to the written word" does tightrope work. As Eric Cummins (1994) points out, the interplay between community activists and incarcerated writer/activists can be fraught. When and where it ends in bloodshed, it is almost always the blood of incarcerated men and women that is spilt. And even when it does not result in violence against incarcerated men and women, the potential for manipulation and appropriation, or at least misunderstanding, is always present.

The Ethics of Aiming for the Un-Determined

Articulations of what prison writing teachers are *not* leads back to the fundamental questions of *what* and *for whom*. Jacobi, calling for an acknowledgement of teacher complicity, asks it this way: “Can literacy programs result in sociopolitical change or is it ‘just us’ sitting around a table cultivating a momentary sense of agency through collaborative moments?” (47). This is an important question. Embedded in Jacobi’s question is a cluster of others: Does sociopolitical change need to be the aim of prison literacy programs? If not, what do we say we are doing? Is that work ethical? What educational purposes have incarcerated men and women articulated? If the educational purposes that incarcerated men and women articulate are not political, do we still value them? James Kilgore (2011), an incarcerated teacher at High Desert State Prison in California, decides not to make guesses about where his class falls on the continuum between educational justice and “mere” activity:

Ultimately, I am not sure if these classes were a triumph or merely a temporary respite from the ethos of hatred and violence on the yard. Definitely they were not liberatory in the Freirian sense...Nonetheless...for me those sessions remain a cherished set of classroom moments, a series of inspiring exchanges where lights of awareness came on and the vast reservoir of wasted human potential that rests inside every prison classroom manifested itself in ways that neither the students nor myself ever previously contemplated (49).

Kilgore describes his classroom as surprising and productive without clearly defining what was produced. It is this *un-determined*, to use Scott’s term, description of the

classroom with which I want to end this synthesis of scholar voices. The notion of things *undefined* and *unformed* grates against established ways of knowing and ways of being in the academy. And, as I will argue in Chapter 5, the impulse to make the un-definable and un-formable things inherent in prison programming fit into the established forms of the academy comes at a real cost to both individual and programmatic integrity.

The following section links Arts in Corrections to Stephen Duguid’s broader survey of how prison programming responded to evolving theories of deviance through the 20th century. Understanding the sociopolitical moment in which AIC came to be is an important precursor to understanding the structure of its model, and the particular affordances and drawbacks thereof. Duguid’s Opportunity Model, overlaying the specific story of Arts in Corrections, suggests a theoretically grounded and sufficiently organic space within which the myriad authorial purposes described above were sustained and supported.

Duguid’s Deep Ecology, The Opportunities Approach, and Arts in Corrections

Stephen Duguid’s article, “Subjects and Objects in Modern Corrections,” approaches the recent history of prison programming from the perspective of deep ecology. He suggests that the subject/object dualism of the modernist frame ideologically informs how we conceptualize and respond to “crises and malfunctions” in our world. Duguid suggests that in the face of such crises, we often employ a “mastery agenda” whereby we “‘master’ the crisis—in this case global warming, climate change, loss of biodiversity, resource depletion, etc.—through the use of technology, conservation, and common sense. We can ‘fix’ the problem’ and the ‘problem’ is *it*, not

us.” In contrast, deep ecologists argue that it is the “‘mastery agenda’ itself that undermines any possibility of solving these kinds of problems and to move forward we must establish a more reciprocal relationship with the natural world” (241). Duguid brings this deep ecology frame to his observations of the prison classroom. He points out that almost every aspect of the near totalizing prison institution is intended to maintain subject-object relationships. The prison classroom, and particularly the writing classroom, has the potential to disrupt, at least temporarily, the subject-object binary, offering some “fragmentary subject-subject, I-Thou occasions” (241). Duguid’s articulation of fragmentary I-Thou occasions fits with the ruptures of the prison status quo articulated by Jacobi, Stanford, Novek and Sanford, Wilson, and others. And like other scholars, Duguid is quick to point out that the prison classroom has just as much potential to fall into the subject-object relationship “between keeper and kept, reformer and deviant, coach and client, and—since education is often not immune from such a world view—teacher and student” (241).

Duguid’s brief history of prison programming surveys the three major 20th century schools of thought on deviance and its origins. The Sociological Approach suggests that environmental factors cause criminal behavior. The Psychological Approach looks to “cure” the “deficits and errors” of the criminal mind (243). And the Biological Approach suggests that a biologically determined “delinquent brain,” instead of Freud’s maladies of the mind responding to its environment, could explain the instance of “super-deviants” that are “driven by individual (biological) factors not shared by most men.” Fed by both theory and research in psychology and biology, medical explanations of deviance dominated between 1949-1977 (244). Decades of close study and treatment

of *deviants* passed without much, if any, notable progress toward a cure, leading Robert Martinson to answer his own question from his 1974 piece, “What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform.” Martinson’s answer was, indeed, nothing. Martinson, writing again in 1976, adds:

It may be that there is a radical flaw in our present strategies—that education at its best, or that psychotherapy at its best, cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendency for offenders to continue in criminal behavior. Our present treatment programs are based on a theory of crime as a disease—that is to say, as something foreign and abnormal in the individual which cannot presumably be cured. This theory may well be flawed, in that it overlooks—even denies—both the normality of crime in society and the personal normality of a very large proportion of offenders, criminals who are merely responding to the facts and conditions of our society. (190)

In leveling his critique, Martinson opened up a small window through which the sociologist reentered the conversation. What emerged was the Opportunities Model, which more or less adhered to the idea that incarcerated people could and would make choices about their own transformation if given the space and tools with which to do so.

The Opportunity Model Described

Duguid notes that political momentum, as a backlash to 25 years of the Medical Model, pressured prisons to begin working with the private contractors, school districts, charitable associations, community colleges, universities and other community-based bodies who were proffering a range of activities and programs aimed at meeting inmate

needs, including but not limited to “recreation, education, training, counseling or therapy.” Duguid sees that these counterpublic spheres inside the carceral structure demanded space—literally square footage—in which to operate. And in many ways it was the physical space “that create[d] an environment conducive to the possibility that actual ‘transformation’ might occur” (246). Of course, the Opportunity Model still made ample use of the discourse of transformation and more or less left the conversation about transformation at the level of the individual even while working to establish reciprocal, dialogic encounters between incarcerated people and those on the outside. Nevertheless, the model itself also opened up a bit of rhetorical space in which to challenge the subject-object orientation on which the previous models had been built.

During the 1970s, programs across North America saw a purposeful rearticulation of incarcerated people as agentic subjects—students, learners, actors, writers, etc.—operating, to some extent, in ways of their own choosing. According to Duguid, programs that made use of the Opportunities Model had the following key values in common:

- prisoners were given a wide range of choices
- participatory management styles were in place
- the prisoner was encouraged to assume the identity of student or learner
- coercion was limited or non-existent
- peer pressure was relied upon to maintain order
- there was a focus on contact with the outside community (247)

Duguid notes, “Above all, these programs were complex in nature, multi-faceted, attempted to address a variety of needs and desires, and were grounded in institutions and

affiliations outside the bureaucratic orbit of the criminal justice system” (247). Duguid significantly highlights that the locus of program sponsorship was often outside the Department of Corrections and that this sponsorship, in small but important ways, “opened up the prison system to outsiders.” The results of these collaboratively sponsored programs “were often messy, untidy, chaotic but seldom if ever disastrous” (253). To an extent, subversive and progressive activities were allowed alongside those that more closely tracked the individualistic and reformatory ideology of the prison system (246). Programs that made use of the Opportunities Model worked to counter the notion of inmate as object, made direct and multiple links to the outside community, and spanned a wide range of activities. Said another way, the programs that were successful were so because they understood that the transformation from an objectified subject to an agentive one required space for opportunities. And such a space embodied a “democratic ethics, a diverse set of political linkages, and an inevitably complex set of needs and relations” (251).

By the 1990’s there was a direct and severe return to the Medical Model, and a stripping away of many of the sponsored programs that had been allowed to develop in the previous two decades (247). Duguid, writing in June of 2000, makes a call for a return to, or at least revision of, the Opportunities Model of the ‘70s and ‘80s. He reiterates the need for spaces inside the carceral apparatus that function as “version[s] of the ‘public sphere,’” offering incarcerated men and women a “place for practice and experimentation” (252). Although Duguid unabashedly adheres to a rhetoric of individual transformation, I would argue that the democratic, dialogic spaces that he describes need not be so closely tied to a developmental discourse of personal change.

Even as he articulates a transformational program, Duguid appears to understand that such a program cannot be forced:

Some students may experience the contrast between prisoner/object and student/subject in an intensely personal way and be literally transformed as a result, never willing to return to the role of object. Others may have a much less intense notion of the difference, while still others may only observe the phenomenon from afar. This is, of course, no different from the experience of any random sample of university students in terms of their relationship with their temporary institutional affiliation. (252)

So, even as he is calling for transformation by way of spaces and opportunities, Duguid seems to see that such things are impossible to impose. What is important for me in Duguid's frame is the way it situates the Opportunities Model of the '70s and '80s in the particular historical moment when the Medical Model fell, temporarily, out of political fashion. It was during that moment that Arts in Corrections was *born* along side a host of other community-based prison programs across the country.

Arts in Corrections as an Opportunity Model

To my knowledge, nowhere in the record of AIC is the program described as following the opportunity model as Duguid has outlined. Nonetheless, using Duguid's lens, this section describes some of the ways that AIC offered a wide range of choices, employed participatory management styles, encouraged attendees to assume agentive identities, eschewed coercion, relied on attendees to maintain order, fostered meaningful relationships with the outside community, and established shared models of sponsorship

at least partially outside the prison (Duguid 247). A discussion of how AIC exemplified Duguid's opportunity model is directly relevant to composition, even if the details of the program do not line up with the specific composition models to be discussed in the next chapter. Composition's public turn has clearly taken the discipline off campus. These forays off campus and into the community complicate how we think about teachers, students, and what counts as writing. And, as Eli Goldblatt (2007) outlines in *Because We Live Here*, when they are done well, these forays put composition scholar-teachers into trench-level relationships with community members, community organizers, non-profit organizations, and granting agencies. Linking the contemporary prison scholars in this chapter to the particular history of Arts in Corrections as an example of a collaborative project between a public university, a private foundation, and the California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (CDCR) offers one deep context for considering what the relationships that Goldblatt and others call for might look like.

A brief history of Arts in Corrections was established in Chapter 1. That history links the *birth* of AIC to a few important connections to public universities. Initially, AIC grew out of the University of California Los Angeles ArtsReach grant, and its champion at the William James Association was Eloise Smith, who brought along her political connections to University of California at Santa Cruz. The initial links became less crucial as other people and other entities entered the web of actors responsible for creating and sustaining AIC during its 30 year run. Nevertheless, university sponsorship played a key instigative role. Also, the shared sponsorship of AIC (UCLA ArtsReach, the William James Association, and the CDCR) created a particular context wherein outside sponsorship strengthened the quality and type of programming. Furthermore, the

financial sponsorship from state coffers meant that the elimination of the program was bureaucratically cumbersome. The prolonged *death* for AIC directly translated to prolonged program access for incarcerated men and women across the state.

Unprecedented Opportunities

Duguid's frame attends to the quality of any opportunity, and the quality of any opportunity in prison, I would add, can and should be measured by its ability to disrupt the status quo. Michele Wenzler's (2011) documentary, *At Night I Fly*, showcases some of the politically unprecedented ways that the AIC space stretched, and sometimes even ruptured, expected *ways of being* in the prison. In Wenzler's film, an Associate Warden sits in the AIC room talking to Jackson and Williams (the two Life Without Parole inmates introduced in Chapter 2). The conversation is honest and both inmates challenge the idea that the Associate Warden is trying to communicate. The dialectical back and forth between the three men stands in stark contrast to the more typical vignettes between keeper and the kept available in both the literature on prison and in representations from popular cultural. This same Associate Warden shows up in other pieces of the film. His participation in the project, sanctioning of it, and assistance with unprecedented access for the film crew leaves him openly implicated by association in the film's critique of mass incarceration in the States, a significant political risk he was willing to take. I describe this unique situation here as part of a broader argument that extraordinary things can happen in prison. Of course, the widespread human rights violations and the more mundane horrors of life behind bars do not disappear, for me, in some rosy glow behind a handful of local, agentic interactions. But these interactions are important and

instructive for teachers inside, even when they do not appear to be harbingers of widespread revolution. Associate Wardens do not sit down to heartfelt, dialectical conversations with inmates on their first day, but Associate Wardens who start as custody staff and have the chance to build relationships with practitioners and gain respect for incarcerated teachers over an extended period of time *might* at some point take the political risk. It is this historical context for the scene in the film that informs how the specific act of conversation came to pass. The Associate Warden from *At Night I Fly* had a sustained, professional connection to the AIC program that spanned some ten plus years before the film was made. Significant relational ground was covered before he allowed himself to be filmed sitting down and listening to two men in blue shirts say they did not agree with his position on a topic.

The general structure of the AIC program—sponsorship from inside and outside the institution—and the specific chemistry of AIC at New Folsom allowed for varied and sustained opportunities for incarcerated students to explore a range of artistic disciplines, disrupting prison rules against inmate sovereignty/self-sufficiency. Both the program and its participants operated inside the prison with a relatively high degree of autonomy. As the program built credibility inside the institution, access to quality teaching and materials continued to grow. What emerged was a delicately maintained space for rich interaction and learning where incarcerated participants took on significant roles as both teachers and administrators, working with folks from outside the prison in unprecedented collaboration. The program qualities of inmate choice, participatory management, and community contact all appear on Duguid’s list of defining characteristics of Opportunity Model programs. Highlighting these characteristics does not imply that the program was

without fault. The individual experiences of AIC, for both students and teachers, varied in the same ways that all classroom experiences vary. If an empirical representation was even possible, I imagine that the individual value of the AIC experience would be represented as a messy scatter plot. What is of consequence here is the fact that the AIC room at New Folsom operated for seventeen years without major incident (Carlson 2007). In the AIC program at New Folsom, incarcerated students were able to operate, to an extent, in ways of their own choosing because they followed the rules that affected the program's basic existence. Because the program was without incident, it became a safe space for experimentation with some of the other equally defining mores of the institution—namely the rules that govern conversations across race and power.

In a second example from the film, a racially mixed group of inmates is having a heated and honest conversation about race politics on the yard. Conversations about race, and conversations across race, are difficult to broker at New Folsom where sustained racial violence dictates much of the day-to-day operations of the place. For example, inmates gang-affiliated as *Northern Mexican* cannot have any shared space with inmates affiliated as *Southern Mexican*. Gang protocol requires Northerns and Southerns to instigate violence whenever and wherever they cross paths (with the exception of the Visiting Room). Therefore, Northerns and Southerns attend class on alternating days creating some disjointedness for program attendees (one week one groups gets Monday, Wednesday, Friday and then the next week they can only participate on Tuesday and Thursday). But it is not only the Northern-Southern conflict that disrupts connections across gang-affiliation and race. Recently, all Black inmates, even those who are not affiliated, were locked down for almost a year in response to a gang-related incident.

And all Whites who have chosen to live peaceably with other races in C-Facility (where the AIC classroom was/is) risk retaliatory violence from other White inmates should they ever be moved to another yard or another institution. So, when the racially mixed group of inmates in *At Night I Fly* talk about yard politics, and whether or not they are willing to break protocol and acknowledge classmates on the yard, the implications of such an act are as serious as the heated context of the conversation suggests. However, as evidenced in the film, unprecedented things, like heated conversations about race that do not end in violence, can and do happen when the opportunity is right.

Sponsoring Something Other Than Transformation

My experience of AIC as it was *dying*—or more accurately morphing into an unfunded version of itself that relies on inmate teachers, volunteers, and some reallocated funds from mental health programs—frames how I understand the possibilities and paradoxes of the prison classroom. I understand that my starting point for entering the conversation about prison literacy sponsorship specifically, and prison programming more broadly, intersects directly with the *end* of the largest institutional arts program, to date, in the United States. This beginning/ending created a particular moment of witness to what is possible when significant resources are focused on a community with the intention of providing opportunities that do not guarantee transformation and cannot clearly account for the range of authorial purposes of program participants. What AIC can account for are the types of opportunities it created. AIC Artist Facilitators represented/justified programs primarily through numeric reports that catalogued the

types of opportunities offered and the rates of attendance. William Cleveland (1994) offers a summarized example of one such report:

During the 1991-92 program year, over 700 Arts-In-Corrections faculty artists provided more than 100,000 hours of instruction to 8,000 inmate participants. Through these classes, inmates received instruction in painting, dance, ensemble jazz, graphic design, video arts, computer animation, paper-making, improvisational theater, poetry, clay sculpture, and 136 other creative disciplines. During the same time period, 361 performances by inmates and outside professional music, dance, and theater groups were provided to an audience of more than 20,000 inmates and staff. The year also produced 22 publications of poetry and prose and 43 public art projects created by ArtWork crews for California State Correctional Institutions and surrounding communities. (61)

Scholars may find numeric lists impersonal, bureaucratically stiff, and/or problematic for a host of reasons to which I am sympathetic. Nonetheless, there is something important for me in the AIC record from 1991-92. Nowhere in its ten lines are there any specific demonstrations of transformation. I imagine lives were changed in 1991. I imagine this because I have heard incarcerated writers talk about how their work is important to them. When they talk about the value of their writing they talk about transformation—between themselves and their families, their cellies, their yard politics, their own demons. Their writing *does* have value and that value is often transformative. But that does not mean that transformation should be represented in the data sheets of program sponsors, either in the charts and graphs or in the shaded quotes in the margins. Because, where

transformation is counted, it has been commodified. And where it has been commodified, it carries a colonial possibility (*read* probability).

Conclusion

As I will discuss in Chapter 4, thinking about representations of classroom value that do not privilege student texts chafes against closely held notions of meaning for many composition scholars. However, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, the particular context of the prison classroom, and the myriad authorial purposes therein, call for a careful (re)consideration of what it is we think we know about the prison classroom and how we can reasonably demonstrate it. As with other contemporary crises, the issue of what to do with the over two million people behind bars in the United States is not served by a mastery agenda. What may be more helpful are intentionally reciprocal relationships and a purposeful disbanding of the ethics and rhetorics of solving. Between committed composition teachers and a practice that ethically supports their intention lay important epistemological and structural barriers to be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Said another way, prison literacy sponsorship across the political spectrum still finds stifling roadblocks in the colonial working of the academy, both in how we decide what counts and how we go about studying and justifying it.

Whenever and wherever we write about prison programs we will be writing into and out of paradox. I do not expect that I will ever find the right words with which to describe both what I witness when I teach inside and what I want to see on the scholarly horizon. But I would like my words, and my teaching practice, to carry a relational ideology and a relational ethic. Sorting out how to envision and carry out university

sponsored projects that privilege inmate choice, program flexibility, and an insistence that authorial purposes cannot be measured in any way worth our efforts, leads straight into the murkiness of a Derridean theory of writing, and what that means for “meaning,” as taken up the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DERRIDA GOES TO PRISON: THEORY, MEANING, AND THE COLONIAL IMPULSE IN COMPOSITION

*Inside the inside that writing is supposed to be
the outside of, there is nothing but more writing.
-- Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology*

*The problem of meaning deepens at every turn.
The longer we delve into its difficulties, the more complex it appears.
-- Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key*

Raúl Sánchez (2005) provocatively suggests that, despite a substantial body of scholarship in composition since the 1966 Dartmouth conference, we have yet to develop a theory of writing. Instead, we have busied ourselves in a long-standing meta-theoretical conversation with Philosophy's *discourse of knowledge*, drawing in theorists from other disciplines either for theoretical support or as straw men against which to position ourselves. I would like to take up his bold claim; I think Sánchez's description of the composition landscape and the way he situates the general modes and tone of the discipline as closer than we may like to Philosophy and Literature, offers a timely critique. Furthermore, such a critique is particularly useful as a lens through which to look at Composition's relationship with out of school writing locations.

As a volunteer writing teacher at a maximum-security prison I am not ready to foreclose all possibility of Composition's involvement in community places of text-making. But I do see that looking again at Sánchez's critique and the theoretical possibilities of the grammatology to which his critique points informs the essential

questions of *what* and *for whom* which are foundational to ethical and productive work with out of school writing locations. A theory of writing that expressly articulates the uncloseable openness of the writing act is not at odds with an understanding of the epistemic possibilities of writing or writing's potential as a means of speaking back to power. Rather, a theory of writing's uncloseable openness challenges the current colonial practice of trafficking in the texts of the writers with whom we work and reorients our gaze from individual texts, viewed as closed manuscripts carrying made-meanings, to the broader discussion of the uses of writing by out of school communities. Dylan Rodríguez (2006) addresses the potential exploitation inherent in using texts created by incarcerated intellectuals:

Critical engagement with contemporary prison praxis represents a relation of appropriation and translation, structurally dominated by free world professional and nonprofessional intellectuals and activists whose necessarily exploitative use of these texts (for there is little material benefit and much potential punishment in store for their authors) is often endorsed and encouraged by their imprisoned counterparts. The living figure and political specter of the imprisoned political intellectual represents a crisis of meaning for the 'methodology' of the nonimprisoned scholar. (37-38)

I would add that Rodríguez's concern can and should be applied to all incarcerated writers, even those who do not identify as political prisoners or radical intellectuals. The dangers of appropriation remain, regardless of whether or not activist identifications are made. In taking up Rodríguez's concern, I turn to the conversation in and around meaning as it is defined and acted upon in Composition.

In this chapter, I will describe a professional meta-logic that conflates the epistemic function of writing with an assumed material value. This conflation perpetuates a literacy myth that is particularly problematic, and often times colonial, in work with off-campus communities of text making. I will point to a few historical snapshots from the discipline that highlight the way composition scholars continue to frame their theories within the discourse of knowledge inherited from Philosophy. I will then use Derrida's Grammatology, as understood and described by Sharon Crowley and Jasper Neel, to complicate Composition's relationship with Philosophy, suggesting that this complication calls into question the way scholars use student texts to justify their work. Last, I will look at the implications of this critique as it specifically plays out in Composition's work with community places of text-making.

Fixity, Epistemic Function, and Material Value: A Professional Meta-logic

This chapter is a remembering, a looking again in a new moment at ideas we have already discussed. It seems to me that, rather than a new theory of writing, what serves is a momentary rupture, a suspending of momentum, a returning to marginal comments that are still speaking with the intention of finding again questions that need to be asked about the *what* and *for whom* of writing. In this chapter, therefore, I attempt to invoke the memory of the conversation in and around Grammatology, which according to its own theoretical position, cannot be concluded. Derrida's Grammatology as introduced to Composition by Sharon Crowley and Jasper Neel, questions the foundational permanence of a Platonic, logocentric discourse. As a theoretical lens, grammatology attempts to dismantle logos and its linear methodology by suggesting that there is not something else

beyond the veil of language to which logic can ultimately trace its root. Derrida, crudely summarized, describes the landscape of writing as inherently unstable. Instability in the Derridean theory of writing is at odds with a fundamental assumption of our discipline. A Derridean theory of grammatology challenges the assumption that a writer can, with some guarantee, say something, albeit something mediated, contextualized, and conscribed by the ideological. This assumed fixity of the word also presumes the preservation of authorial intention. Such a logic asserts that writing retains, despite mediating factors, a fundamental stability and material value for the writer. This logic creeps up even in the most deconstructive of methodologies and finds its fullest and boldest forms in the literacy myth of the promise of a better life through writing—a myth we still see marketed to students in explicit and implicit ways.

We find that below the surface of composition pedagogy writ large lies a deep-seated assumption that the writing act carries a fundamentally stable material value. And that material value, or the assumption of that material value, is often conflated with the epistemic function of writing. Neel, making use of Geoffrey Hartman, uses the term *logocentric discourse* to describe the discourse that Derrida critiques. However, I find the term *logocentric discourse* is too closely associated with the Aristotelian to describe the uninterrogated professional assumption, or meta-logic, I want to discuss here. The term *logocentric* suggests a recognition that logic is what is at the center. Logocentric discourses intend to use logic. In the conflation between material value and epistemic function that I will take up here, I do not see that the “logic” of the conflation is intentional. I suggest, instead, that the term *logo-assumptive discourse* more closely describes the assumed fixity of the word that Derrida finds so problematic while keeping

at the fore the connection between the sedimented logic and its related assumption. And it is this logo-assumptive discourse that stands between Composition and Sánchez's call for a theory of writing. In other words, as long as writing is linked to a logo-assumptive discourse that presumes a conflated relationship between writing's epistemic function and material value it will always be beholden to the *something else* to which Sánchez refers.

I have committed myself here to invoking the memory of a messy and unnerving theory for the purpose of suggesting that the way we talk about writing's epistemological function and material value—conflated in literacy myth—has dangerous implications, particularly in our off-campus work. Especially in places of community text-making, I see that we have not yet been able to get out of the business of marketing a literacy myth. By both large and small gestures, in our theory and our practice, we continue to suggest strong and direct connection between literacy and betterment. And even when we cannot guarantee a particular material outcome, we logically assume that writing offers some form of agency. And it often does. However, sometimes it does not. What I am suggesting, or asking us to remember, is that our relationship to a logo-assumptive literacy myth blinds us to our own assumptions about the ways writing can and should be used, both by our students and by us.

Composition scholars regularly endeavor to frame their research projects within reflexively critical and intellectually robust methodologies. Therefore, this chapter is not a critique of motives or ethical intention. Nonetheless, the conflation of literacy myth with a logo-assumptive discourse is easy enough to see, often on the preliminary pages of our texts. For example, Linda Flower's (2008) monograph, *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, begins with this sentence: "The call to social, political,

and cultural engagement has exerted a magnetic influence on the emerging field of rhetoric and composition.” (1). She refers to a long list of scholars (Shor & Pari, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1987; Deans, 2000; Weisser, 2002; Cushman, 1999; Roberts-Miller, 2004; Hauser & Grim, 2004) in suggesting that “transformative experiment[s]” are showing up across the field that link scholars to sites of local action and put them in relationship with “students and citizens, public intellectuals and ordinary people” (2). Flower suggests that “what these experiments seek is a way to conduct a clear-eyed, historically grounded, intellectually rigorous *critique* of others and ourselves and at the same time to imagine and act on a *vision of transformation*” (2).

Paula Mathieu (2005) writes the off-campus agenda directly into the title of her book, *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. She is cautious to distance herself from the promises of the literacy myth, suggesting that that tactical nature of projects inherently limits the claims we can make about them. Yet, in the same introduction, she defines her tactical orientation as one that leverages hope as an agentive middle-space between the inadequate present and the range of possible futures. This coupling of statements from Mathieu’s introduction highlight the mix of deconstructive pedagogy and logo-assumptive discourse that seems to yet carry the day in Composition. Near the end of *Tactics*, Mathieu quotes Lorie Goodman in suggesting the scholars must engage in an on-going, reflexive questioning of the *what* and *for whom* of our off-campus projects (93). The important questions of *what* and *for whom* lead back to Sánchez and his critique. They also lead to important questions about the logo-assumptive discourse and its corresponding colonial impulse whereby scholars traffic in student texts, displaying made-meanings as a justification for their professional value.

Sánchez's call for a theory of writing highlights the strong link between Composition's current theoretical and pedagogical themes and Philosophy's *discourse of knowledge*. This framing helps expose the underbelly of antiquated, colonial articulations of *what* and *for whom* which are, in every way, still with us. Victor Villanueva, writing in 1997, suggests that "we have come to accept that language is a way of knowing, a means—maybe even *the* means—for thought. That's why we watch for sexism in our language, for example. But we don't give the same kind of care to colonialism" (186). Fifteen years later Howard Tinberg's 2013 C's call for presentations is still describing the Composition community as assisting and reaching out, words that *can* describe dialectical partnerships, but have also historically been used as rhetorical wrapping for colonial action. As a discipline, of course, we intend to be conscientious—and even critically conscious—of the ways we use language. Nonetheless, it is difficult to interrogate our own language use, the action it inspires, and the potential for well-intentioned abuse of those we presume to teach. Looking again at our discipline's historical relationship with the *discourse of knowledge* as manifested in our logo-assumptive discourse allows us to entertain, at least for a moment, the possibility that our connection to a platonic notion of knowledge continues to limit the ways we theorize writing. Sánchez argues:

We firmly believe, despite our postmodern claims, in the presence of *something else* beyond the veil of language, and we have described it as being fundamentally apart from our language use, and we believe it to be theory's task to define and explain this noumenal realm. Consequently, our inquiries into writing are devoted to articulating the deep divide between the *cogito* and the world (10).

Sánchez claims that a devotion to the space between interior thought and exterior word still underlies our theory-making and pedagogy. I add that such a construct of the relationship between meaning and word continues to present as a colonial paradigm whereby we look for, and use for our own purposes, meaning in the texts of the writers with whom we work. This focus on discrete acts of meaning-making distracts and insulates us from a recursive discourse regarding our theories of writing. Working in and around the Derridean theory of Grammatology highlights the ways that Composition continues to champion a logo-assumptive discourse even as it employs a deconstructive pedagogy. Grammatology calls into question the professional meta-logic that assumes a material value in writing and works continually to demonstrate that material value by a presumptive display of made-meanings in the texts of the writers we work with.

The tension between a persistent logo-assumptive discourse and the deconstructive pedagogy to which we still adhere can be evidenced by looking back briefly at a few of the historical threads in the composition conversation. These threads string together a rough history of the way that writing's epistemic function and material value have been, and continue to be, conflated in a literacy myth. This myth is particularly complicated in the community places of text-making from which the discipline continues to accept or construct invitations. Specifically, this myth affords opportunities for scholars and teachers to use student texts to support incomplete and problematic theories of writing. Despite our good intentions, when and where the use of student text is closely tied to a scholar's own professional advancement such use carries a distinct colonial possibility. Yet, the practice continues because it is fused at the root to a

logo-assumptive discourse, inherited from Philosophy, that claims a particular fixity in text that Derrida suggests is not there.

A Few Historical Snapshots of Composition in Pursuit of Philosophy's *Something*

Else

Sánchez's critique of the Composition community is not new. What sets him apart is his call for a theory of writing that distances itself in the short run from the epistemic *something else* which we have implicitly ascribed to writing as its fundamental function, and whose clear articulation we continue to seek. As Sánchez points out, composition takes up, as its existential crisis, the question of meaning-making. Epistemic questions have, until rhetoric's recent reawakening, been the realm of philosophy. In joining the conversation, composition has not unseated Philosophy. Rather, it has talked back using philosophy's own tools and structures. Sánchez therefore argues that Composition's history is a long line of attempts to add to Philosophy's discourse or invert the existing relationship between philosophy and writing. Such additions or inversions do not disrupt the tug-of-war between Plato's Socrates and the sophists.

In 1981, Ann Berthoff published *The Making of Meaning: metaphors, models and maxims for writing teachers*. She offers a methodology for teaching writing based on the concept of *forming*. A more in-depth discussion of forming will come later, but for now I want to briefly discuss her claim for the purposes of historicizing Berthoff's moment in the composition/philosophy discussion. Berthoff offers her construction of meaning-making as a challenge to the highly structured, positivist notions of language as "a muffin tin or a code to be dialed or plugged in." She also intends to speak back to popular

articulations of language “as a set of behaviors” (28). This speaking back builds on the famously antagonistic, on-going argument between Berthoff and Janice Lauer in the early 70’s (Lauer 1972, Berthoff, 1972). Continuing to use the disputed terms, Berthoff suggests in *The Making of Meaning*, that we look more closely at the “heuristic powers of language itself” to “think *with* as well as *about*” language and the way we use it. In the text, Berthoff had this to say about meaning-making:

Meanings don’t just happen: we make them; we find and form them. In that sense, all writing courses are creative writing courses. Learning to write is learning to do deliberately and methodically with words on the page what we do all the time with language. Meanings don’t come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed” (69-70)

It is easy to recognize the positivism that Berthoff challenges. In 1981, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes proffer a “Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” inviting behavioral scientists further into the composition conversation. And even process pedagogies like those offered by Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, which made overt attempts to step back from positivistic notions of writing, saw the old ways creeping back in.

In 1984, Berthoff asks “Is Teaching Still Possible?” The article continues her speaking back to the use of empirical studies and objective analysis, arguing that a clear conception of language as a means of making meaning, versus a medium of communication, “preclude[s] a dependence on empirical research to find out what is happening in our classrooms, to see what writers do when they compose” (*Cross-Talk* 331). For Berthoff, situating meaning-making at the center of our inquiry protects

discussions of the classroom for meddling social scientists. But this situating also unstitches Composition's connection to philosophy as a neo-Aristotelian tool for simply articulating found meanings. Positioning the writing act as fundamentally epistemic opens the door for scholars to further work out the theories of how we come to know in and through writing.

Following Berthoff's construction of writing-as-generation, James Berlin (1982) becomes the spokesperson for what would come to be called the social-epistemic—a theory on which to base arguments about the ways “writer, reality, audience and language are conceived.” Berlin suggests that all meanings are socially-constructed, an articulation he sets up in conflict with what he terms Expressivist pedagogies (with Peter Elbow as Patron Saint). According to Berlin, Expressivist pedagogy privileges meaning-making at the level of the Subject, which he argues is essentially impossible. He suggests, in clear terms, that “what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated” is an essentially social process (*Cross-Talk* 256).

The ensuing conversation in Composition begins to discuss and incorporate the social-epistemic, even while rhetorical theorists are still working to loosen ties to the neo-Aristotelian notion that thought precedes language. For example, in 1986, Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins publish *Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology*, suggesting that “we cannot understand, let alone ‘cope’ with, the discourse that surrounds us unless we attend first to the philosophical questions subsumed within theories of truth” (40). Similarly, some sixteen years after Berlin's introduction of the social-epistemic, Michael Leff (1998) still bothers to suggest four particular senses in which we can construe rhetoric as epistemic. Both pieces argue that

“how we come to know” is through primarily rhetorical processes. In sum, for composition scholars, rhetoric was socially epistemic before epistemology was clearly articulated as being inherently rhetorical. Pedagogical discussions of the social-epistemic grew along side their theoretical underpinnings, the byproduct of which was the admittance into the disciplinary discourse loosely-moored pedagogical arguments posing as theory. Richard Fulkerson, writing in 2005, describes the disciplinary landscape this way: “virtually no one in contemporary composition theory assumes any epistemology other than a vague interactionist constructivism...all ‘truth’ is rhetorical, dialectically constructed, and provisional” (662).

Berlin sped Composition into a conversation about socially-constructed epistemology. He also muddied the waters when he tied his socially-epistemic rhetoric to a critical pedagogy for citizenship. Thus, Composition picked up the critical pedagogy conversation happening in Education (Giroux 2001; Freire 2000; hooks 1994; Delpit 2006) and began publishing (often) polarized pedagogical constructs of the classroom as a contested space, i.e. contact zone, safe house, borderland, community, etc. (Pratt 1991; Canagarajah 1997; Anzaldúa 2007; Harris 1996). Thus, the politics, that Berlin argued were already there, became part of the explicit conversation about what we see happening when writers write, specifically in college classrooms.

Even Berlin’s critics acknowledge that the making of meaning is socially situated, socially imposed. Susan Miller’s essay at the end of Berlin’s posthumously published *Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures* (1996) is critical of the means by which Berlin works toward empowering and enlightening citizen rhetors; yet she does not distance herself from the ends on which Berlin sets his gaze, namely an adherence to democratic values.

In her own words: “If we teach the masses in the name of democratic virtue, we must actually privilege a dose of vulgar composition . . . in full awareness that safe purposes and already socialized results are already waiting to choose us” (210).

Miller and others accuse Berlin of bringing back literary analysis, creating classrooms where students are aware but passive (*The Function of Theory* 49). Service learning pedagogy picks up the call for more movement, more action, more getting hands dirty in the spirit of democratization. By the time Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick published *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (2001), service learning had its own chapter, in which Ellen Cushman invokes a historical invitation for “modern rhetoric and composition scholars [to] be agents of social change outside the university” (138). Service learning in the composition classroom, according to Laura Julier, not only allows scholars and students to make their meanings “count,” it also claims to offer “first-hand experience [that] would at best subvert and at the very least complicate the often-pat constructions and commonplaces upon which so many first-year college students relied” (*A Guide To Composition Pedagogies* 132). Either way, meaning-making, with an eye toward political action, was at the heart of the enterprise.

There is plenty of disciplinary history that has not been discussed here. But I think the snapshots collected do support Sánchez’s claim that Composition has been building its house around generally agreed upon assumptions which have been so well sedimented, using Gramsci’s term, so as to escape an on-going, recursive theoretical inquiry. Saying that we have not been recursive is not the same as saying we have been sitting on our proverbial heels. There is a robust body of scholarship in Composition that richly informs our theoretical and pedagogical work. What I understand Sánchez to be

saying is that there may be something out of view, in the sedimented layers of our discipline—something that is worth digging for. Specifically, Sánchez suggests that the scholarship of our discipline has moved from constructions of writing-as-generation to writing-as-representation, both of which he argues, “adhere to the concept of *meaning*, thus they are equally essentialist” (93). According to Sánchez, both constructions continue to make use of theories of reading that were brought along when Composition moved down the block from big brother Literature. Evidence of our continued use of close reading is everywhere. Most of the arguments we make (including this one) are made through our use of individualized texts. Suresh Canagarajah (2006) offers an example of the close-reading genre in his attempt to demystify and legitimize how multilingual students shuttle between languages by looking at texts generated by a single professor. And his piece was published in one of our flagship journals because thinking about broad concepts by way of close reading of individual texts is still, in large part, how we do our business.

Sánchez says, and I would agree, that our constant search for the epistemic *something else* in texts inhibits our ability to see and theorize about all that is at work in acts of text-making, or to use Berthoff’s term, text-forming. This can be particularly dangerous as composition continues to move off-campus into community places of text-making. But before I offer a critique of off-campus work, I want to attempt to articulate more clearly what Sánchez proposes, or at least (re)describe the theory of Grammatology on which his argument is built.

A Closer Reading: Grammatology and the Stubborn Exteriority of Writing

In a section of his text, titled “Derrida, Writing and Theories of Agency,” Sánchez makes attempts to untangle, but not untie, the writing act from its potentially epistemic process and product. Using a Derridean theory of agency, he asks that “rather than associate writing with the discourse of knowledge, composition theorists might instead theorize writing as an activity that produces sentences or statements, some of which come to be identified, after their production, as knowledge” (31). He continues:

Writing so theorized would not be an epistemic phenomenon. It would not necessarily be understood as a means to record, discover or produce – via cognitive, social, or even sociocognitive operations – anything other than more of itself. Writing so theorized would be neither a conduit nor a generator of intelligible things, abstract concepts, or knowledge as such. It would be much more complex, paradigmatic, and comprehensive than any merely epistemic notion could explain. (31)

Understanding the seemingly contrary nature of this articulation, he backs up to acknowledge that his use of Derrida’s theory of writing does affirm three main tenets of Composition’s pervasive construction. First, he points to Janet Emig’s idea of “writing as a mode of learning.” Second, he looks to the way Berthoff describes writing as something more than a “strictly linear and utterly unimaginative process.” And lastly, he highlights the construction of writing as a “means by which a valued process, *knowing*, and a valued product, *knowledge*, come about” (34-35). Sánchez argues that a Derridean theory does not strip writing of its epistemic function. Rather it suggests that more may be going on than we can describe with theories that describe writing in strictly epistemological terms. Sánchez highlights the aspect of Derrida’s grammatological

approach that works to account for the totality of what makes writing possible (7). He suggests that a grammatological approach to writing “proposes that writing itself underlies all the conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, and even rhetorical activities habitually brought to bear on writing.” He proposes further that “concepts in which composition theorists regularly traffic—*knowledge, ideology, culture*, and also *rhetoric* and *the subject*—are best approached not as concepts at all but as examples of, enactments of, writing” (7).

Crowley and Neel fill in Sánchez’s description of grammatology in really helpful ways. Using Crowley and Neel, I offer this overly simplified (re)membering of grammatology as a springboard for the critique of Composition’s off-campus work in the following section. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida writes in and around a theory of writing. Gayatri Spivak suggests that Derrida asks “us to change certain habits of mind” (*Of Grammatology* xviii). A grammatological understanding of writing is fundamentally deconstructive. In *A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction* (1989), Crowley attempts to summarize Deconstruction, and begins by quoting Derrida regarding his intention in using the term. Derrida: “I tried to work out . . . what was in no way meant to be a system but rather a sort of strategic device, opening onto its own abyss, an unclosed, unclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing” (Crowley 1). Thus, Deconstruction is a device for recognizing and theorizing the uncloseable openness of human communication. And Derrida’s Grammatology is an articulation of how such an uncloseable openness operates in written text. Crowley points out that “classical grammar and logic conspired with metaphysics to create a neatly closed circle” (3). In this familiar construction, consciousness is on the

impermeable inside of the circle and language is understood as secondary, outside; writing provides a mimetic or derivative service for the interior consciousness, acting as a scribe taking dictation. Derrida challenges this inside/outside binary, suggesting that language is the only means for thought, and that the hierarchical relationship between thought and word was set up to protect the preeminence of the Platonic mind. Crowley: “In order to retain the myth of primacy of mind, metaphysics has to look through language, not at it. It has to assume that language is transparent, rather than opaque. Further, it must assume that language has no originary or creative powers of its own” (5). For Derrida, everything is always on the outside. There is no interior space reserved for sacred, pure thought. All consciousness is born in and through language. Language and consciousness co-mingle in writing, which by definition assumes a perforce exteriority so that “we will never be able to account for writing by looking for some ‘interiority’ that exists above or beyond or in back of it” (Crowley 33).

Neel suggests that almost all of Derrida’s work “attempts to reveal how Western metaphysical discourse constitutes itself,” exploring “the process by which written texts emerge.” Neel further points out that although Derrida deals almost entirely in abstraction, his “analyses attempt to explain how a given text came into existence and how it continues to operate” (110). And for Derrida, the coming into existence and the continuation of writing are absolutely related. All writing is essentially marginal comments on previous writing, defined only by its indefinability; its meaning is always situated, with an inexhaustible number of interpretations available. Since writing cannot be controlled by its author, its coming into being and its opposing erasure happen

simultaneously and continue as long as the writing is circulated and further written upon.

Neel describes this process:

Any author who has experienced the agony of watching a reader (no matter how friendly) read knows the violence of this process of extraction. The author, sitting and watching helplessly, feels the text slip away, take on unintended even unimaginable meanings; feels, in fact, betrayed. And just as the text gets ‘extracted’ by the reader—at first usually by a friendly, well-known reader, but in future by nearly anyone—the text also finds itself grafted onto other texts: the texts whose form or method it borrows; the texts with which it differs; the whole milieu of written texts upon which it depends to be recognizable as itself.

Moreover, other texts come along immediately and graft onto this one, changing it with every new grafting. (114)

Therefore, in a deconstructed notion of writing, there can be no reduction of the text to its essential meaning, and no way to dig beneath the writing to the speaking or thinking that authenticates it (119). Neel, summarizing from *Grammatology*: “Writing always leads to more writing: to displacement, substitution, gradual forgetting, and gradual distancing from the origin” (119).

Coming to terms with a concept of writing as “stubbornly” exterior moves the conversation about the “nature of writing” onto the unstable and ever-shifting ground where it is discussed and theorized only by its uses. Crowley argues that the discussion of writing use depends on writing’s “availability to the community that is served and defined by it.” She adds that this deconstructive attitude asks writing pedagogy to “focus its attention away from individual authors and toward the language currently in use in the

community served by the pedagogy” (33). Crowley’s suggests that despite overt moves away from New Criticism in recent decades we still imbue student texts with a closeability that allows us to inspect and comment on the “author’s coherent and determinable intention” (27). But, as Crowley points out, a grammatological construction of writing precludes the possibility of ‘expository writing’ (43). Working within a grammatological frame, exposition of our student texts is not actually possible or helpful in furthering a theory of writing. What could be helpful, Crowley suggests, is a looking at the *what* and *for whom* of writing—its use in a particular community that is “served and defined by it.”

Somewhat similar to Crowley discussion of writing’s use, Sánchez works toward an articulation of *writing as activity*. In his articulation Sánchez keeps terms like *knowledge* and *knowing*, but asks that we employ them as “variously privileged and changing assortments of honorifics” instead of “states of being [or] metaphysical achievements.” Sánchez suggests that this move allows writing to “become at once the generative matrix” that we currently see it to be, as well as “the human practice by which we do what we do” (31). Sánchez: “Under such a terminological reorganization, we might still want to say that writing can produce ‘something else,’ perhaps something like knowledge. But this would be a tactical, rhetorical decision rather than an implicitly philosophical or metaphysical gesture” (32).

Sánchez’s articulation of *writing as activity* calls back to Berthoff’s notion of forming. Both use action language in an attempt to say something about the writing act and the writing subject. Berthoff: “For all the talk about ‘process,’ there is virtually no institutional understanding of the kind of process composing is” (61). She settles on a

notion of *forming* closely linked to human imagination. Forming “depends on abstraction, symbolization, selection, ‘purposing’ . . . it is the mind in action” (4-5). Sánchez talks of enactments, human practices. Both imply, if not insist, that the difficulty in getting at theoretical descriptions of the enactment/forming of writing is not grounds for giving up the search. Berthoff accuses the discipline of being “impatient” (63). Sánchez’s critique can be seen as suggesting that this impatience has allowed a deep, uninvestigated sedimentation in the discourse. And I would add that this sedimentation is especially dangerous in the context of Composition’s public work. Even if the *something more* that Sánchez is after cannot be described, I think the search for it makes room for an important critique of the ways composition scholars are using texts to describe, theorize, and justify our off-campus work in community places of text-making. Specifically, taking a momentary step back—or at least a thoughtful pause—in our pursuit of the authors and artifacts of meaning-making can allow for a return to the questions of *what* and *for whom* which are often so damning, especially off-campus.

Composition’s Involvement in Community Places of Text-Making

A growing body of composition scholars have been making attempts to describe, theorize, and justify the work which currently finds itself under the discursive umbrella of *The Public Turn in Composition*. In *Tactics of Hope*, Mathieu calls for a tactical orientation to that work, one that distances itself from the “*strategic logics* of the university” in favor of a “rhetorically responsive engagement” whose characteristics she goes on to list (xiv). Mathieu argues that such an orientation “needs to be grounded in hope, not cast in naïve or passive terms, but hope as a critical, active, dialectical

engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures” (xv). Using Sánchez, I cannot help but see the glaring epistemic *something else* that, for Mathieu, stands between the *Okay Now* and the *Better Later*.

In Composition’s public turn, as articulated by Mathieu, scholars are called to the streets to *find* or *see* or *make* the thing that will make Things better. Of course they plan to do it inclusively. Mathieu is clear to state that other voices will need to be folded in. But at ground level the enterprise still smacks of something vaguely colonial. And I think it is allowed to—in fact it cannot help but be anything other than colonial—as long as the work is founded on a logo-assumptive professional meta-logic that ties the discourse of knowledge to writing’s primarily epistemic function. In part, this is because the discourse of knowledge as we inherited it from philosophy is fundamentally constructed as a deficit model: meaning is missing either because it has not been discovered or created. This construction-from-deficit functions as a terministic screen through which we view the writing process, the writing Subject, and even writing communities. A hyper-focus on demonstrating made-meanings distracts us from interrogating the broader landscape.

In the case of Composition’s public turn, this means that the communities in which we are working with or without a proper invitation must be commodified into smaller meaning-making agents. And we, in order to continue our work, require the coin of the realm (i.e. articulations of meaning) as payment for our services. Because we are still so closely tied to our roots in literary analysis, we can extract these payments via text, as Flower does in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* (2008). In the Flower monograph, texts made by community members as well as stories

of teens staring down cops and holding the microphone at public forums, are offered as artifacts of made-meanings that begin to fill in some of the space between *Now* and the *Better Later* which inspires Mathieu's hope. As long as theories of writing are primarily concerned with writing's epistemic function, these artifacts and literacy narratives will have to be mined (*I use the word consciously, in reference to its colonial implications*) from the communities in which we work to prove that we, the "assistants" from Tinberg's 2013 call, are justified in extending our reach.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, there *are* literacy scholars such as Kirk Branch, Deborah Brandt, and Jeffrey Grabill who speak to the political economic tangle of agency and institutions and who are less comfortable with their own place in Composition's public turn. Branch especially spends a significant portion of his text, *Eyes on the Ought to Be*, questioning whether power can really be shared and whether marginalized people can really be heard just because university stakeholders want it to be so and show up with Freirian lesson plans. In *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt refers to literacy as a "situated commodity." In *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*, Grabill similarly situates the value of literacy inside constructed and mutually reinforcing community-institution relationships (117). These articulations challenge Flower's characterization of the community literacy site as "opportunistic and experimental, using and depending on institutions but not really becoming one in the enduring sense of the term" (26). Literacy scholars like Branch, Brandt, and Grabill are not the only ones in the field calling for a critically honest, materially located descriptions of the landscape. Villanueva (1997) suggests the Composition community has much work left to do in

interrogating its colonial underpinnings, going so far as to say that the conversation about equity has not really begun.

This issue of the institutionally embedded nature of Composition's public turn must give us serious pause as we think about the types of meaning-making we encourage, and subsequently mine, via our use of student texts for presentations and publications. In Chapter 2, I discussed the genre of salvation narratives. In the context of this chapter, I see that salvation narratives are often the intended and/or unintended byproduct of prison writing that aims for—and sometimes explicitly requires—personal transformation. Often the subject matter or goal of a writing course requires that writers find/create new or different meanings. For writers in personal circumstances as layered and complicated as incarceration in the U.S., those new or different meanings often involve personal evaluation of their individual criminal acts. Returning again to an example from Chapter 2, Eve Ensler's (2003) documentary, *What I Want My Words To Do To You*, aims unabashedly at showcasing the evolutionary, reflective process of incarcerated women as they “confront the lives they've ruined, the families left behind and their own lives as they might have been” (http://www.pbs.org/pov/whatiwant/film_description.php). The film ends up mired in the individual confessional statements of the incarcerated writers, and Ensler's own voice in the (re)writing of each woman's criminal act is easy enough to recognize. Ensler insists, in therapeutic fashion, that the inmates write through and about their crimes and read aloud from these texts. The film shows broken women weeping as they talk about the terrible things they have done. The writing activities showcased in the documentary are intended to empower their writing Subjects, but require a perforce confessional

performance which, for me, raises all the usual questions of agency which are inherent in colonial situations of unequal power.

Even prison writing programs that eschew statements of confession and/or salvation find themselves in pedagogically muddy water. Many programs that function as points of contact between the academy and the prison have clearly stated goals that include the personal transformation of program enrollees. One such example of a program with a clearly established mission of transformation is the The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, officially launched by Lori Pompa at Temple University in 1997. Inside-Out is dedicated, by its own admission, to stopping the cyclical and brutalizing effects of incarceration in the United States by establishing a structured dialogue between “people on both sides of prison walls” which encourages participants to “discover new ways of thinking about ourselves, our society, and the systems that keep us all imprisoned” (*Challenging* 253). Pompa suggests a pedagogy of transformation which “leverage[s] work within one institution—the university—in order to pursue change within another—the prison” (255). The program has proven to be sustainable and replicable, with over 7,500 inside and outside students having taken part across the United States. I mention Inside-Out because it is a clear example of a program that demonstrates its “success” by the presentation of individual made-meanings. And, to be clear, I do not challenge the authenticity of these demonstrated meanings. Rather, I suggest that Inside-Out is one of many possible examples of programs that rely on the demonstration of made-meaning to justify both their pedagogical and market value. This is a dangerous and potentially colonial position. What happens when/if there is no available demonstration of individual transformation? By nature of the mission, students

must be transformed. There is no alternative, no mechanism for purposeful critique. Consider these two adjacent comments from Pompa's text. An Inside student reports "I've emerged from the Inside-Out experience empowered with an unshakable belief in the human capacity to evolve to a higher state of social consciousness." Pompa follows, "The Inside-Out model of transformative pedagogy assumes that learning-with-the-whole-self lead to these kinds of epiphanies, thus supporting nothing less than the pursuit of 'a higher state of social consciousness'" (264). These paired comments encapsulate what Crowley calls "the inaugural gesture of metaphysics: inside/out" (11). Students are transformed along a vertical plane (in keeping with Plato's metaphysics). Their texts and interactions with each other move them from a lesser to a higher state of being. And, as I mentioned earlier, I do not question the authenticity of the remarks. But I do see that they are fundamentally problematic in that they describe classrooms where writing must demonstrate proof of individual movement along a philosophical plane. In such classrooms, writing is also used to justify the program on the grounds of these salvation narratives. For programs like Inside-Out, the focus remains on the individual and his or her change process, rather than on the collective use of writing by unconventionally constructed communities of writers.

Moving back outside the prison classroom, there *are* scholars that have looked at the uses of writing in community. As an example, Anne Ruggles Gere (1994) attempts to highlight the communal uses of writing in her article, "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." The article, which asks us to look more broadly at the way out of school writing is used, still cannot escape the need to suggest that "prose performance develops in participants the perception that writing can effect

changes in their lives” (*Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook* 277). I do not disagree with the assertion, but once again see in it the essentialized epistemic function of writing so well sedimented in the professional logic of composition. Where Gere’s comments begin to point to a study of writing use in community, she still cannot escape breaking such uses into individual transformative units.

Fast-forwarding to 2012, we see that composition scholars are clearly looking to the U.S. prison as a site for community literacy projects as well as a target for theoretical critique. There were seventeen items in the 2012 C’s program that referred to, or claimed to deal with, aspects of prison writing and even more identified with the sub-discipline of community literacy. This move should prompt a closer look at the substance of Sánchez’s claim that our go-to theories of writing may in fact really be theories of reading for the epistemic. A pedagogy, for example, which finds value in pointing out the underlying ideological structures of society and presumes that the writing Subject’s highest goal is individual meaning-making, allows prison writing programs to function uncritically where they produce texts that demonstrate an incarcerated writer’s understanding of his or her own socially-constructed/complicated position. A satisfaction on the part of program proponents with evidence that Subjects are producing texts that exemplify individual meaning-making forecloses any critical examination of the wider enterprise. It also circumvents the discussion about the limited meanings available to incarcerated writers (villain, hero, confessor, victim, etc.). In this way, meanings made in prison classrooms are (pre)scribed—limited to individual statements within a narrow range of subject positions. Linda Brodkey (1989) calls this discursive hegemony. And she is not the first to point out the ways that language is used to limit discursive options.

Antonio Gramsci (1971) says much on the matter in *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*. Villanueva (1992) brings Gramsci into the composition conversation in “Hegemony: From An Organically Grown Intellectual,” deepening the articulation of the existing hegemonic landscape and calling back to Berthoff’s insistence on patience by way of Gramsci’s “protracted war of position.” In matters as important and fraught as Composition’s official(izing) work with community places of text-making, the long-view must inform our impatient impulse to make and trade meaning, even more so in places like prison.

Uncloseable Openings and Texts Forming but Never Formed

Before moving on to Chapter 5, it is important to acknowledge the leftist critique of deconstruction that considers it to be “politically bankrupt.” Crowley notes that deconstruction “contain[s] no theory of social change and offer[s] no program for altering the status quo” (*Teacher’s Guide* 21). Crowley quotes Terry Eagleton as one such Marxist critic: “[deconstruction] provides you with all the risks of a radical politics while cancelling the subject who might be summoned to become an agent of them” (*Teacher’s Introduction* 22). Although I understand Eagleton’s concern, I also see that the seemingly apolitical mechanism of deconstruction does not preclude its usefulness in significant, socially-oriented, politically-active work. Gramsci notes that we are never outside ideology, never outside the political. Therefore, in the same way that the openness of grammatology cannot foreclose the political, the political does not necessarily need to be expressly invited to be present in a grammatological view of writing activity.

In the context of the work of both Derrida and Gramsci, setting up deconstruction in a binary with a political theory of writing is unnecessary and arbitrary. The subject who Eagleton worries disappears under a deconstructive lens does not lose his power to act in admitting that the text he authored was already moving away from him and simultaneously disappearing even as he wrote it. The question is not whether the subject remains, but rather whether or not he ever existed in the text in the ways we have assumed. And thinking again about the ways we have assumed subjects remain in their texts brings us back around to the critique of Composition's public turn. Off-campus work, which traffics in the texts of community-based writers, carries an inherently colonial possibility that is fundamentally at odds with its social justice aspirations. To the extent that the meta-logic of the discipline requires that scholars traffic in the texts of out of school writers as proof of made-meanings, the danger of colonial appropriation, or at least misuse, will continue to be present.

I am not ready to foreclose all discussion about Composition's involvement in the community places of text-making described by Branch as morally-ambiguous (216). But I do claim that part of our getting clear on the *what* and *for whom* which Branch also sees as imperative, might require looking again at Sánchez's critique of our relationship with the discourse of knowledge and the wider conversation and theoretical possibilities of the grammatology to which Sánchez's critique points. A theory of writing that expressly articulates the uncloseable openness of the writing act is not at odds with an understanding of the epistemic possibilities of writing, or writing's potential as a means of speaking back to power. Rather, a theory of writing's uncloseable openness might free scholars from the need to traffic so heavily in the texts of the writers with whom they

work. It might reorient their gaze from individual texts, viewed as closed manuscripts carrying made-meanings, to the broader discussion of the uses of writing by out of school communities.

Viewing writing as *forming*, as an activity of uncloseable openness, calls for new ways of thinking about how scholars might participate in out of school writing events and activities and loosens the ties between the discipline and its logo-assumptive literacy myth. A theory of writing as *forming* understands that writing is generated, using specific rhetorical tools, to meet the demands of particular and ever-shifting kairotic moments. A grammatological view of writing sees the occasion for writing as having always already evolved before, in, and after the first word of text. This constant and simultaneous process of coming into being and erasure continue as long as the writing is circulated and further written upon. Derrida refers to writing as the constant process of “extraction, graft, extension” (*Positions* 71). The metaphors of *extraction*, *graft*, and *extension* describe how *writing as forming* works. Writing as act of *forming* (extraction, graft, extension) in constant motion, no longer requires, and in fact cannot make use of, discrete examples of made-meaning. And scholars working to justify their place in out of school writing communities cannot use these discrete texts as evidence of whatever it is that requires evidencing. The text is no longer the linchpin. The community itself can become the focus of the theory. Of course, moving the theoretical focus from the individual writing Subject to the community of writers does not in itself guarantee that the sponsor-scholar has eschewed coloniality, but I do see that a theory of writing as *forming*—as uncloseable texts—brings the essential questions of *what* and *for whom* to the fore in the ways that it challenges the use of individual texts. And, an on-going,

dialectical questioning of *what* and *for whom* can point toward a more critically-conscious participation with out of school writing communities.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLONIALITY AND ACADEMIC INQUIRY: THOUGHTS ON A “FAILED”

STUDY OF TWO INCARCERATED TEACHING ARTISTS

*The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death,
and Levi-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy.
Even if this injustice disturbs him, the facts remain unchanged.
This story is ours as much as his. In this one respect . . .
the intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people.*
-- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of the Everyday*

It is painfully difficult for life to become an object of science.
-- Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies*

*The first thing you have to understand in here is
that you never understand anything in here.*
--Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life if My Sun Dance*

Bruno Latour (1993) insists we have never been modern and I think he is right. But the “un-success” of the Western project to modernize has nonetheless contaminated and altered the structures that govern how we *think* and *do* with specific consequence for the prison writing classroom. One such consequence is a lingering coloniality that moves through our never-quite-modern networks disguised in the robes of empiricism. The veiled tangleness-ness of modernity and coloniality works to maintain unequal power relationships between the Subject and Object as this chapter will demonstrate. As a preliminary move toward a more open, relational model for my teaching and research practices, I offer here the story of my first attempt at empirical research with incarcerated

writers. It is woven together with theory that attends to the interplay between modernity and coloniality. It is a story of a *failed* project—stillborn, yet still richly instructive and speaking into and out of the conversation about what counts as research and how we go about valuing and justifying Composition’s work off campus.

The previous chapters have worked to situate prison literacy sponsorship and begin making a case for relational program models that allow for a wide range of authorial purposes. In this chapter, I offer a close-up view of my own grappling with the morally-ambiguous academic bureau (Branch 2007). I relate three stories from inside the prison as springboards for a conversation about the relationship between myself as scholar and deputy-stakeholder in the academy, and the incarcerated writer-teachers whose work I attempted to support through university-sanctioned study. The roles of second-generation teacher plying my craft in the American prison and doctoral student at a research institution often feel disparate, worlds apart, really. Yet there are also similarities and plenty of overlap. In these roles, I move between foreboding edifices, each requiring particular identification papers. In both roles I am beholden to administrative apparatuses that feel impersonal if not adversarial. The tension between these locations finds its most acute form in my own embodied self, hovering over carefully crafted words at one end of a long mahogany table on the fourth floor of the Administration building. This is where I have met, on multiple occasions, with my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Because academic writing does not permit the element of surprise, I offer this partial conclusion up front: The IRB is not the sinister adversary of the virtuous scholar. The very real tension between the scholar, her ethical intent, and her community project finds its locus in her consent to colonial

structures of academic inquiry and ways of knowing that require demonstrable proofs and ownable data bits. Seeing *colonialism* and *consent* as keywords in a conversation about my own research is uncomfortable. But I would be remiss—if not self-blinding—to see myself as the uncomplicated victim of a system in which I also serve as deputy.

Many scholars have lent their voices to the problematic tension between the researcher and the researched. But I undertake the enterprise anyway for two reasons. First, I need to do this work for myself as someone who intends to continue working in the morally-ambiguous space between the university and the prison. And second, I take seriously Linda Tuhiwai Smith's observation on the first page of *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012). She suggests "the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism" cannot be relegated to the past (1). Smith quotes J. R. MacKenzie (1990) in suggesting that colonialism in the West must be understood as more than economic, political, or military history. Colonialism is also a pervasive ideology that has permeated "cultural, intellectual, and technical expressions" that are still with us (23). Of course, we wish it were not so. Such wishing had led scholars like Alastair Pennycook (2010) to suggest that talk of contingent positions, local histories, constructed subjects, and enmeshed power/knowledge relationships is proof enough that the academy has sufficiently adjusted its epistemological stances to the colonial critique (128). Pennycook is right to have noticed a change in our discourse. However, my primary concern here is not with discourse, but with the interplay between modernistic institutional structures and transformational rhetorics, and the lingering coloniality that is protected and nurtured in the space such interplay creates.

In contrast to Pennycock, Smith suggests that the conversation about how colonialism still operates—particularly as an ideological base for academic research—has not been concluded and may not be concluded in her lifetime. She thus joins a body of scholars who suggest a deep patience and a long-view in the struggle against 500 years of ideological sedimentation. She tells a story of a “nineteenth-century prophecy by a Maori leader [who] predicted that the struggle of Maori people against colonialism would go on forever and therefore the need to resist will be without end” (198). Boaventura de Sousa Santos also sees that the “official” end of colonial rule has not meant the end of colonial structures and ideologies: “The modern world system is not just capitalist; it is also colonialist in nature. The implication of this is that the end of colonialism has not meant the end of colonial relations; the latter go on producing themselves as racist disqualifications of the other” (Dalea and Robertson 159). It is from this long-view—Gramsci’s protracted war of position—that I understand my own experiences with the IRB at my institution as an important, albeit localized, site of ideological struggle with implications for the ways we talk about, research, and make sense of what goes on in out of school writing communities, and prison writing classrooms in particular.

In this chapter, I use my most recent notice from the IRB at my university to frame three sets of texts, observations, stories, and scholarly references. I pair the bureau-scientific discourse of my institution with my own stories from the field of transforming people I know into subjects of academic study. This juxtaposition highlights the way that the methods of academic inquiry to which we still consent are often fundamentally and frustratingly at odds with the humanizing, democratizing values we composition scholars often evoke, especially in our work with out of school writing

communities. This set of stories is preceded by a broad look at the connectedness of modernity and coloniality in academic inquiry and a discussion of how such a connectedness plays out in composition.

I. Part and Parcel: Coloniality and Modernity in Academic Inquiry

As I have already noted, many literacy scholars (Branch 2007; Brandt 2001; Mathieu 2005; Grabill 2001) write about the messy business between the academy and the community. Yet, it seems to me that there is still not yet enough being said about the ways that we scholars consent to, and validate, a particular structure of academic inquiry which requires an often colonial objectification of people. The critique of modern academic research designs, for me, finds both its impetus and objection in the ways academic inquiries maintain the link between coloniality and modernity. Victor Villanueva (1992, 1993, 1997, 1999, 2011) has persistently articulated a critique of colonialism writ large and in the particular structures of Composition as a discipline. But we scholars have been less willing, I think, to challenge the persistently *modern* academic methodologies sanctioned by our intellectual institutions and be clear about how those modern methodologies keep alive a colonial sensibility.

In order to more fully articulate the connection between modernity and coloniality, I turn to pieces of the definition of modernism outlined by Jane Flax. In “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” Flax (1987) sums up the tenets of modernism as part of her critique of it. She highlights the modernist assertion of the “stable, coherent self” which is able, by way of reason and “science” (aka. philosophy), to arrive at “objective, reliable, and universal foundations for knowledge”

(624). She points out that in a modernist frame, knowledge can be neutral because science is neutral. Flax sums up the connection between science, knowledge and neutrality: “Science, as the exemplar of the right use of reason, is also the paradigm for all true knowledge. Science is neutral in its methods and contents but socially beneficial in its results. Through its process of discovery we can utilize the "laws of nature" for the benefit of society” (625). It is precisely such descriptors of the modernist paradigm—objective, reliable, universal, neutral, and socially beneficial—that bring Latour to his important question about whether or not modernism ever really did exist or ever really could. He suggests that the particular scientific advances of the last century call into question the stability of the paradigm by which they came to be:

when we find ourselves invaded by frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on, when our daily newspapers display all these monsters on page after page, and when none of these chimera can be properly on the object side or the subject side, or even in between, something has to be done. (50)

Broadly, Latour questions the distinctions between *subject* and *object*—the key building blocks of a modernistic paradigm. He points out that a cursory read of the daily newspaper is evidence enough that we are not able to draw clean lines between things and keep constituent parts in their proper silos. My own story, my own *failed* study as outlined in this chapter, is yet another example of how subject-object relations do not always fit neatly into their pre-constructed categories. Even though Latour’s astute observations suggest a networked messiness that challenge a modernist world, they do

not account for the ways that our attempts at modernism linger in the interplay between the structures and rhetorics that came to be over the course of the last two centuries. Modernism's demand for an observable, quantifiable, manipulatable object of study paves the way for its direct and lingering ties to coloniality, particularly in academic inquiry. My story particularly highlights the process by which significant rhetorical substitutions are made so that terms like *development* and *transformation* subsume practices that privilege the researcher and further de-humanize folks already at the margins.

Walter D. Mignolo suggests that coloniality comes part and parcel with modernity. We cannot have one without the other. More specifically, he suggests that the rhetoric of the latter both mystifies and justifies the logic of the former. Mignolo: "The rhetoric of modernity is a rhetoric of salvation"—by "conversion" in the theo-politics of knowledge in days gone by and by "development" in the ego-politics of knowledge where philosophical Man continues his reign of Reason (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* xxiv). Modernity's rhetoric of salvation by development both covers and keeps alive the logic of coloniality, or "the structure of management and control that emerged out of the transformation of the economy in the Atlantic, and the jump in knowledge that took place both in the internal history of Europe and in between Europe and its colonies" (10).

In the *Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Mignolo (1995) sets out to "explore new ways of thinking about what we know," an assertion he sets up in contrast to the accumulation of "new knowledge under old ways of thinking" (xv). He attempts to "break up the monolithic notion of the subaltern" and to suggest alternative discursive practices. Both of these moves support his overarching goal of de-linking Western

epistemology from a modernist structure of academic inquiry that carries a deeply sedimented coloniality (5). Like Flax, he sees that modernism presumes a neutrality in academic inquiry that is impossible. He calls for a demystification of the “politics of intellectual inquiry” and, using Johannes Fabian, a “denial of the denial of coevalness” (258). However, the essential coevalness of things that he evokes does not make it into his own suggestions for dealing with the problematic modernist structures of academic inquiry. Mignolo calls for a reorientation, a moving of vantage points from the center to the margins: “instead of looking at marginal societies from the perspective of academic centers, [we should] look at cultural and political centers from the academic margins” (312). Here Mignolo appears unable to escape the dualistic thinking that he intends to push back against, and his monograph therefore garners legitimate critique (Domingues 2009).

In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Mignolo (2011) works to rearticulate his argument in a more postmodern frame. By redefining the terms, Mignolo moves closer to his goal of seeing academic inquiry de-linked from a modernist frame. Instead of suggesting alternative modernities, Mignolo acknowledges that “the first decolonial step in delinking from coloniality” is a search for “alternatives to modernity” (xxviii). Talk of “alternatives” to coloniality in academic inquiry is replaced by a call for decolonial “options.” Mignolo’s adjustment of the terms is significant. An alternative, by definition, is dualistic; it responds to, or is at least jointed to an opposite. The term *option*, on the other hand, suggests a context of varying and distinct possibilities that are not necessarily oriented around their counterparts. In suggesting a conversation about options, Mignolo wiggles out from under the dualism that worked against his argument in

Renaissance while still focusing on the original project of exposing the subsumed link between persistently modernist frames of academic inquiry and the logic of coloniality with which they comes part and parcel.

Through the two monographs, Mignolo makes the case that modernity and coloniality are inextricably linked. He suggests, in sum, that in order to move away from coloniality in academic inquiry, scholars will also need to move away from modernity. This is a move that is difficult to make in the bureau-scientific structure of the Western academy and in the self-proclaimed postmodern space of Composition and Rhetoric scholarship where the structures of our academic inquiries have stayed closer to the modernist center than our rhetoric would suggest. And it is precisely this disconnect between rhetoric and structure that I intend to explore through the following discussion of my own research methodology.

In order to fully set the stage for an analysis of my own *failed* study, I must return to Mignolo's suggestion that modernity adopted the rhetoric of salvation, exchanging a theological discourse of conversion for one of progress and development. "Secularism displaced God as the guarantor of knowledge, placing Man and Reason in God's stead, and centralizing the Ego" (15). With Reasoning Man at the center, academic inquiry becomes a scientific relationship between the knower and the known (62). The ego-politics of knowledge, by its very structure, presume a coloniality wherein Reasoning Man uses his academic tools to bring order and development to his world, thus establishing his power over it. Modernist frames assume that Reasoning Man can and should change his world. This rhetoric of development suggests a frame for academic inquiry where critique is followed by the suggestion of alternatives. This structure is

nearly impossible to eschew. Even Flax, attempting to suggest a feminist, postmodern agenda settles back into the rutted tracks laid down by scholars before her. She organizes her suggestions for the field into a tidy list, the fourth point of which suggests transformation—a term from modernity’s playbook, rich with colonial implication. Here is the list in Flax’s own words:

“We need to (1) articulate feminist viewpoints of/within the social worlds in which we live; (2) think about how we are affected by these worlds; (3) consider the ways in which how we think about them may be implicated in existing power/knowledge relationships; and (4) imagine ways in which these worlds ought to/can be transformed” (641).

Being clear about modernity’s rhetoric of development is really important, especially in the context of prison writing programs. To the extent that academic study and sponsorship of prison writing programs is linked to a rhetoric of progress, demonstrations of inmate transformation through writing will need to be produced. And the production and acquisition of such demonstrable bits is always in danger of establishing particularly colonial power relations between the *knower* and the *known*.

II. In the Space Between a Disciplinary Rhetoric and a Colonial Practice

The following thread of scholarly snapshots from the conversation about modernity and coloniality specifically call attention to the ways that a disciplinary rhetoric of development and transformation masks/carries a colonial logic. The connection is worth highlighting since rhetorics of transformation are especially ubiquitous in prison writing programs where the political and material conditions of

writers are so nearly totalized. In the specific context of Composition's prison writing projects, we see the mixing of a dangerous cocktail between the palpable need for change in the prison system and the pastoral sensibility in composition as Richard Miller (1998) has described it. As the following example shows, despite clear intentions to the contrary, scholars in the field continue to propose and carry-out modernistic studies which require an overtly colonial posture of the knower in relationship to the known. As I have already pointed out, the colonial sneaks back in via the specific ways that the success of projects is almost always tied to narratives of transformation. These narratives are explicitly or implicitly required of the incarcerated writers in exchange for sponsorship. My intention in implicating my colleagues along with myself is to demonstrate that, although my own stories as a scholar-sponsor in a network of free and incarcerated writing teachers at a maximum security prison represent a very narrow slice of the prison literacy experience, my struggle with, and eventually consent to, colonial structures of academic inquiry are not unique or exceptional.

Recently, I sat around the table at a national conference, talking with other teachers who work in or write about the U.S. prison. One scholar called for a closer attention to the ethical complications of teaching in prison and publishing on that work. In response, a participant suggested that a monograph she was working on might be harmful to the inmates with whom she had shared experience, but cited the IRB as the sole functionary standing between her and her ability to have respectful, reciprocal relationships with the incarcerated writers about whom she planned to publish. In the exchange, I saw clearly the way that modernism's rhetoric of salvation by development authorized and simultaneously subsumed a particular coloniality between the knower and

the known. This particular writer was willing to put incarcerated people in physical jeopardy in the service of a text that she determined needed publishing. Her choice privileged the text—and its imagined power to disrupt and/or transform the prison—over the lives of the real people. This calculation was made palatable by a projection of blame onto the IRB who prevented her from having further contact with the *objects* of her study. Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz (2013) speak to the ways activist ideology gets distorted by the neoliberal naturalization in the discourse of academic institutions:

Part of the subjectivities of scholars has been produced by discourses that may seem ‘natural’ to them, yet ultimately work against scholarly and political goals of antistatization. Scholars who feel like victims of neoliberal hegemony may actually be working as its co-creators through the form and content of their academic arguments, their teaching, and their pursuit of recognition and reward.

(7)

Tomlinson and Lipsitz’s analysis is made manifest in the above story of the monograph writer and her seemingly adversarial relationship to the IRB. In writing a book that might hurt people who have no say in its writing, the author misunderstands allegiances in her work. And worse, by consenting to a study design that forecloses relational accountability, I argue that this teacher implicates herself in the worst kind of ethical grievance.

At that same conference, the year before, in her Chair’s Address, “Stories Take Place: A Performance in One Act,” Malea Powell used Mignolo to claim that the way we *think* and *do* in composition still needs to be delinked from a sedimented, “imperial design” (394). Powell’s attention to the dangers in the disciplinary discourse is not new.

In “Maybe a Colony: And Still Another Critique of the Comp Community,” Villanueva (1997) suggests that the Composition community is not postcolonial and that there is a real danger in adopting the term, in attempting to put new wine into old wine skins. His concern is over assimilationist teaching and an underlying racism. My concern is with the colonial structure of academic inquiry. Both threads tie back to assumptions in the discipline and the ways that the roles of the *knower* and the *known* continue to get meted out in the same old ways. In his closing remarks, Villanueva is generous with his colleagues: “I say matters of integrity and parity must be realized rather than desired or aimed for because I believe that, for the most part, the desire already exists. It’s just that the way has not been found” (189). Almost fifteen years later, in “Rhetoric, Racism, and the Remaking of Knowledge in Composition,” Villanueva (2011) continues to point out the disciplinary disconnection between intention and practice. He suggests specifically that the things we believe about ourselves—beliefs that resonate with structural ideologies—blind us to the ways that we do the things we intend not to do: “This is the nature of structural racism, when believing oneself not a bigot allows one to ignore the bigotry that nevertheless obtains” (123).

Regarding the methodological structures of academic inquiry, Villanueva brings back Elliot Mishler’s argument (made in 1979) that “the scientific methods of the natural sciences cannot apply to education or to the social sciences” (128). Villanueva uses Mishler as part of a broader critique of the ways composition has been blinded to ways of knowing that challenge “the myth that there could be an objective discourse and an objective method” (131). Mishler’s argument might be extreme. I am not ready to foreclose the possibility of any empirical research in Composition, but I do see in

Mishler, Villanueva, and Elliot Eisner (1981) an important scholarly critique of the presumed objectivity on which many composition projects are built. Of course, there have been composition scholars that have written texts that work around this presumed objectivity and instead proffer ways of knowing that cannot be empirically justified. Keith Gilyard's *Voices of The Self*, written in 1991, is one such example. Yet, in the text Gilyard goes to great lengths to justify his method. Some twenty years later, I see that academic research is held together by a modernistic linchpin. And I see that the wholesale agreement to the terms of such a structure obfuscate the ways that modernistic mechanisms of study carry a colonial sensibility.

Eisner and Mishler each articulate the disconnection between empirical methodologies and postmodern projects, even if not in those terms. Villanueva and Gilyard make the conversation more explicitly political. Eber Hampton (1995), writing as president of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, says it this way:

Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual, academic research is a goddamn lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. Humans—feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans—do research. When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to people around us. (“Memory Comes Before Knowledge: Research May Improve if Researchers Remember Their Motives” 52)

Hampton suggests a real danger in the pretense of objectivity. He adds his comments on research methodologies to the long and well-documented history of hubris and abuse that a modernistic objectivity enacted among indigenous communities in the States and

abroad. In doing this, Hampton moves the whole conversation about modernity and coloniality in academic inquiry to an urgent, complicated, political space. And it is on similarly urgent, complicated, and political ground that prison writing programs currently function.

Prison writing programs, even ones that work hard to eschew the political in their day-to-day operations, are inherently situated inside a undeniably political calculus. This situating makes the employment of a disciplinary rhetoric of development and transformation complicated at best. And yet, the rhetoric of development and transformation—deeply sedimented in the discipline—is extremely hard to work around. As I have mentioned, Linda Flower (2008) writes a transformative agenda right into the introduction to her text and calls forth the company of other scholars whose work also aims at transformation through literacy (Shor & Pari, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1987; Deans, 2000; Weisser, 2002; Cushman, 1999; Roberts-Miller, 2004; Hauser & Grim, 2004). Examples of the rhetoric of transformation in prison writing more specifically are ubiquitous, both in the work of incarcerated writers and program sponsors (Jacobi 2011; Jacobi and Becker 2012; Halperin et al. 2012; Coe 2012; Brewster 2010, Billington 2011; Hartman 2009; Masters 2010; Tannenbaum and Jackson 2010; Shailor 2010). Lori Pompa (2002, 2011), whose Inside-Out program was discussed in Chapter 4, makes her purposes as a prison program sponsor clear: “My mission, really, with my life, is to take people inside so that they’ll be as disturbed as I was 20 years ago and then go and make change” (www.temple.edu). Similarly, the homepage for the Inside-Out Center runs a banner with the organization’s tagline: “Social Change through Transformative Education” (insideoutcenter.org).

In contrast, The Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), run out of the University of Michigan's English Department by William Alexander (2010) has a more collaborative mission statement: "The mission [of PCAP is] to collaborate with incarcerated adults, incarcerated youth, urban youth and the formerly incarcerated to strengthen our community through creative expression" (www.lsa.umich.edu/pcap). PCAP's description of its mission is a good example of the type of discourse that resonates with the indigenous methodologies to be discussed in the following chapter. Orienting a program around dialectical relationship building in community is very different from orienting a program around colonial opportunities to observe and enact. In fairness, Pompa's program does bring incarcerated students into a dialectical space with outside students. But the rhetoric around the project continues to reify modernistic roles between the *knower* and the *known*—roles that, by design, leave the unexamined locus of control and means of power in the hands of the researcher.

In the following section, and the discussion in chapter 6, I suggest that the space between the researcher and the researched is a relational one regardless of whether or not we choose to see it that way. Paying attention to the structural affordances of the relationships we create, maintain, and terminate is an important part of understanding how to enact decolonial methodologies. And part of that process is an honest reckoning of the ways we consent to academic structures that work against our disciplinary rhetoric and good intentions. Such a reckoning can then be coupled with localized, intentional moves that chip away at the colonial relationship between the knower and the known. In my own work, part of that move is a closer look at, and reckoning of, the ways I have

attempted to work within the existing system. What follows is a threaded accounting of those results.

III. The IRB, The Intellectual Bureaucrat, and the Logic of Coloniality

According to its website, the mission of the IRB at my institution is to “protect the rights and welfare of human subjects to ensure that all are treated physically, psychologically and socially in such a way as to minimize embarrassment and stress, and to avoid harm or other negative effects in compliance with the federal, state and university regulations” (<http://www.irb.wsu.edu/about.asp>). The expressed intention of the IRB is the protection of humans, but implicit in that protection is the view of humans as objects of study. Of course, IRB approval is required for any academic work in the U.S. prison. I understand and appreciate the need for oversight in high-stakes contexts where the folks who have the most to lose lack the material power to contest their inhumane and unethical treatment. I also understand the appropriateness of the IRB as gatekeeper of academic research, serving the bureau in the maintenance of the agreed upon terms of what counts as research, how one goes about collecting it, and who holds intellectual property rights. However, the central questions of what counts, how you collect it, and who owns it presume a perforce posture of ownership and a structuring of projects through a mechanistic gaze that gathers, sorts, and analyzes data bits. Mechanized thinking and data ownership makes enough sense for a study of organic apples or recycled building materials. It makes less sense for the dynamic, humanizing relationships that Composition scholars are attempting to forge with out of school writing communities.

This is not to say that the IRB is the sinister adversary of the virtuous scholar. The folks at the IRB board at my institution are actually very nice people from whom I sense a genuine interest in my work. Nevertheless, the IRB board exists to protect the university from the very real legal jeopardy that exists where scholars make other human beings their object of study. As Eric Cummins (1994) has pointed out, the U.S. prison has a storied history of abuse under the guise of rehabilitation. And even where abuse is too strong a term, we scholars working in the prison risk a thinly veiled colonialism where we construct classrooms driven by pre-articulated outcomes on which we report our progress as part of our annual reviews and tenure-related projects. The ethical conflict, then, is not between the scholar and the IRB, but between the scholar and her own choice to subject other human beings to the mechanistic, and potentially colonial, gaze which modern academic study requires. The editing, amending, and reframing inherent in the IRB process is not conspiratorial, but it nonetheless moves projects, by its mission, away from organic, dynamic, humanizing spaces and postures.

I appreciate the pragmatic way Richard Miller (1998) treats the tension between the scholar, her ethical intention, and the academy to which she has aligned herself. Using Bourdieu's "rational utopianism," Miller insists that intellectuals need to fall out of love with the "alluring image of themselves as free-thinking individuals whose mental work escapes the logic of the marketplace" (28). Here Miller acknowledges the very real political economy in which scholars function as deputies and stakeholders. That political economy need not preclude scholars from making significant contributions in areas of study that are important to them. But the logic of the marketplace, and the ways that such a logic frames academic projects, must be acknowledged and accounted for as a

significant factor in every aspect of academic work. In response to his own critique of the relationship between scholar and academic systems, Miller suggests a purposeful clear-headedness with a tactical intention to see real change happen. Miller argues for a combination of real talk about how scholars function in the system and an eye toward tactical moves inside that system. This *utopic realism* can begin to circumvent the paralyzing binary between the bureaucrat and the activist. Despite the fact that we are inclined to eschew the linking of terms, scholars at public institutions function as bureaucrats. It is this unresolvable and often seemingly impossible tension between the bureaucrat and scholar-activist that I hope to inhabit, but not resolve, in the following stories.

Text-Observation-Story-Scholar: Three Threads on a *Failed Study*

Using the text of my most recent notice from the IRB as a platform for story telling exposes the artificiality and fundamental disconnection between the construct of my study and the work I was intending to do within that construct. Like Grabill I wanted to “focus on ‘community,’ yet I found I couldn’t completely distance myself from institutions” (2). The reality of my position as deputy and stakeholder in the academy is evident in the full text of my last notice from the IRB:

“This notice is to let you know that the human subject project titled "Arts in Corrections Ethnography" (IRB #12147) was last approved on 1/26/2012 and the IRB approval has expired on 1/25/2013. The study has become inactive. Data collection and participant recruitment must be suspended. Any further data collection from human research participants will require reactivation and/or

resubmission of the full application. This study deactivation does not affect your ability to process, code, analyze, or summarize the data that has been collected from human research participants prior to the expiration date of 1/25/2013.”

Implicit in the termination of my study is the fact that I agreed to the original terms. Before 1/26/2012, when my study was finally approved, I met repeatedly with the IRB in a long process of editing, amending, and reframing of the original proposal. In that process, I never questioned whether or not I would give my consent to the final form. I knew, through IRB lore, that the process would be tedious, tiring, and bureaucratically cumbersome. Focused on navigating the institutional terrain, I set my mind to the task without any thought as to whether or not the study could lose enough of its original shape as to warrant a preemptive cancelation. And, in my mind, the original shape of the study was so closely tied to my fundamental good intention as a scholar-artist/scholar-activist that I did not pause long enough to closely examine the possibility that the original shape of the study might be flawed. The particularly modern (i.e. colonial) structure of the study protocol to which I finally consented, and attempted to implement, was at odds with the original intent of the project. The disconnection between scholarly intent and protocol eventually made the study untenable. In what follows, I take the IRB study termination notice in three parts. Each section of the IRB text is followed by an observation, a story, and a connection to scholarship that speaks directly to the related observation.

Thread #1: An (In)Active Study

IRB Text #1: “This notice is to let you know that the human subject project titled "Arts in Corrections Ethnography" (IRB #12147) was last approved on 1/26/2012 and the IRB approval has expired on 1/25/2013. The study has become inactive.”

Observation: I am now in possession of an inactive study of an active teaching practice.

In 2009, when I began working as a volunteer guest writing teacher at New Folsom, I was a guest teacher in the classrooms of Jackson and Williams, the two incarcerated teaching artists introduced in Chapter 2. Both Jackson and Williams are serving life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) sentences. They were also both really good teachers who were teaching in an unbelievably restrictive environment. Their non-credit bearing classes had long waiting lists despite the fact that joining such writing groups is complicated by prison yard politics, particularly the politics of race. At New Folsom, by joining Creative Arts Program (CAP) classes, writers disrupt unwritten, yet strictly enforced, codes of racial segregation and choose to write and read aloud across racial lines and gang affiliations. In the act of writing and reading aloud in community, writers also challenge the dehumanizing structures of incarceration which ever work to constrain images of inmates to the corporeal—color-coded, numerically organized bodies.

I realized quickly that these two incarcerated teachers had much to add to the conversation about writing pedagogy. The compelling nature of their work and the layered affordances of the classroom space they had helped create inspired me to pursue a doctorate. I had hoped to support what they were doing and help bring the conversation I

was having with these two teachers into the public discourse about teaching. In 2010, when I started a doctoral program, I became a representative (for better or worse) of my university and the conversation I had been attempting to facilitate between people inside and outside the prison suddenly required the permission of my institution. I had hoped to film Jackson and Williams talking about their experience as teachers and include such film in conference discussions on pedagogy. I did not want to speak for these teachers and hoped that the filming project would allow them, in a limited way, to speak for themselves [*NB: a dissertation on naivety and appropriation could be written here, but I leave the language as it is, as a reflection of my thinking at that point*]. My relationship with Jackson and Williams preceded my work at the university by over two years. At the point that I began my IRB application I did not see Jackson and Williams as objects of study. Instead I saw them as teaching colleagues with exceedingly limited agency. But the IRB process required that I view these colleagues as subjects and outline the way I intended to study them. In the end, I gave up on filming and scaled the project back to the simple permission to continue having the conversation that had begun over two years before I became a deputy of my academic institution.

Ian Hunter (1994) asserts that administration and discipline by the bureau is a “permanent and inescapable feature” of school, at least in the West. Richard Miller (1998) adds that scholars in the academy find themselves in bureaucratic situations based on “intertwined and mutually exclusive lines of reasoning.” From the start, my project was based on intertwined and mutually exclusive logics—I wanted Jackson and Williams to enter the scholarly discourse about teaching writing. But the scholarly discourse that I thought needed their voices required a perforce constraining of them as objects of study,

to whom I would need to describe the risks of participation. Furthermore, my IRB application required that I submit the questions I would be asking my subjects. I generated a list of vague questions that I sent in along with the following statement, which although I am the author, makes no sense to me whatsoever:

“The following discussion items have been identified as the intended focus of the Creative Arts Program ethnographic work. It is understood that these themes will be introduced, but that participants will have the freedom to respond in ways that appropriately widen that context. However, the ethnographic work will continually be constrained to dialogue that meets the conditions outlined in the IRB in that risks will be commensurate with those acceptable to non-prison volunteers (language from Addendum 3).”

I don't know how it could be humanly possible to constrain dialogue in ways that ensures risks to incarcerated people resemble risks to people outside the prison. And even outside the prison, the risks to human subjects in conversation cannot entirely be known and it is hubris for scholars like myself to guess after and/or promise safety in the exchanging of words. In this claim, I hear Scott Momaday (1997): “We have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words” (169). And it is this word-as-relational-and-generative-context, ripe with risk and possibility, which brings us to Thread #2.

Thread #2: A Shifting Context

IRB Text #2: “Data collection and participant recruitment must be suspended. Any further data collection from human research participants will require reactivation and/or resubmission of the full application.”

Observation: My university-sanctioned study made less sense and lost its fundamental logic as the prison context changed.

In 2012, the California Department of Corrections began “reevaluating points” for all life without parole inmates (note: in the context of prison points, higher points correspond to higher levels of restriction and observation). The former system had set a numeric floor on the assessment of points for life without parole (LWOP) inmates that guaranteed that LWOPs could not work themselves, through good behavior, down to Level Three institutions. In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that overcrowding in the California prison system constituted a violation of the Eighth Amendment’s ban on cruel and unusual punishment. In response, the State decided to reevaluate the point structure that determines the movement of inmates between individual institutions in California’s four-tiered prison system. One major piece of that restructuring was the lowering of the floor on LWOP points. This process forced Jackson and Williams to leave the maximum-security prison where they held the paid clerking posts that allowed them to run the Creative Arts Program and teach writing and music classes. They had been doing that work for prison wages some fifteen and thirteen years respectively. I did not resubmit my 2011 IRB application because I had already gone inside to say good-bye to these two men who were being forced to leave work that was important to them and to the people

who attended their classes. The situation was distressing for both teaching artists but particularly for Williams, who is white and therefore in serious danger of disciplinary violence from other white inmates at his next prison because of his choice to live and teach on a yard with a “soft white line”—prison speak for places where white inmates have chosen to live peaceably with non-white inmates. One of the questions on the IRB “Continuing Review” form asked me to “describe any additional risks or benefits observed during the course of the study.” Although the risks to Williams in the move to Level 3 have nothing to do with my study, I could not stomach asking a man who was worried about his bodily safety in an unwelcome move to a new institution to look over and sign an abstract consent form outlining the risks of participation in our on-going conversation.

My choice not to ask Jackson and Williams to sign new consent forms calls back to Miller’s “intertwined and mutually exclusive lines” of reasoning. It also resonates with Bruno Latour’s (1996) understanding of technological projects as always moving in and out of states of reality. My project was moving from *thing* to *text*, but was disrupted by the conflict between the move that I needed to make to keep it *alive* and my unwillingness to make that move inside the high stakes context in which the *object* of my study was already being traumatized by the institution which defines his corporeal existence. Latour says it this way: “Every context is composed of individuals who do or do not decide to connect the fate of a project with the fate of the small or large [goals] they represent” (137). In this case, my goal to see Jackson and Williams become part of the teacherly discourse was exclusively at odds with my goal of humanizing, as often as possible, my interactions with incarcerated writers.

Thread #3: A Word on the Move

IRB Text #3: “This study deactivation does not affect your ability to process, code, analyze, or summarize the data that has been collected from human research participants prior to the expiration date of 1/25/2013.”

Observation: The “Processing-Coding-Analyzing-Summarizing” of events between 1/26/12 and 1/25/2013 only makes sense when folded into the processing, coding, analyzing, and summarizing of events on either end of the authorized timeframe.

Mary Bosworth (1999) brings the work of Cohen and Taylor (1972) on the “chronological lie” to her own study of agency and power in women’s prisons. The *chronological lie* is a methodological misrepresentation of the research calendar which allows researchers to imagine that their questions emerged systematically from a tightly framed theory, that their research began and ended on schedule, and that they were able to take that clean and closed data set back to their offices to “ponder and amend the theory that fathered it” (Downes and Rock 1988). The *chronological lie* is evident in the way my relationship with Jackson and Williams just could not fit into the authorized timeframe of my study.

Through all of 2012, Jackson and Williams waited for their “reevaluation of points” and its attending and unwelcome move to a new institution. During that time they were still teaching and so our conversation continued. In February of 2013, after my study was terminated, I participated in events surrounding the U.S. premiere, at the New

York Museum of Modern Art, of *At Night I Fly*, Michel Wenzer's award-winning documentary filmed at New Folsom. Both Jackson and Williams are featured in the film, and in the film both teachers speak to pieces of the conversation we had been having. When I visited the prison in April 2013, both Jackson and Williams were still at New Folsom and we were able to talk about their responses to my own reaction to the film. But our conversation about the film is outside the chronological parameters of my study and therefore cannot be added to the scholarly discourse even though I saw the film some 3,000 miles from the prison and even though they are featured in it.

The fact that meanings come into being in the messiness between geography, text, and time lead me to theories of writing that can account for such messiness without a perforce dismissal or attempt to force a sensibility that is not there. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Deconstruction is a device for recognizing and theorizing the uncloseable openness of human communication. A Derridean theory of writing suggests that writing is part of this larger human communication act, an act that cannot be concluded as long as there is circulation of text (in this case the New York film showing). Meaning in text is always on the move—caught up in an on-going, simultaneous processes of coming into being and erasure. Jasper Neel (1988) summarizes the constant movement in the Derridean theory this way: “Writing always leads to more writing: to displacement, substitution, gradual forgetting, and gradual distancing from the origin” (119). Derrida himself suggests that all writing is but marginal comments on previous writing, defined only by its indefinability; its meaning always situated, with an inexhaustible number of interpretations available.

Through a Derridean lens, I cannot make sense of, or see a way to establish, strict parameters between the before, during, and after of my research study. Even if I had an accurate accounting of every word Jackson and Williams said to me between 1/26/12 and 1/25/13, I could not make sense of those texts without relying on what came before and what has continued since. I intend to respect the professional and ethical parameters to which I have consented as deputy of my institution. Thus, I find myself at an impasse. In Latourian terms, this impasse is more of an incubation—a pause from movement in the network, a reflexive consideration, a seeking out of decolonial options—with which to understand the relationship between people, environments, and systems. This pause in my own story leads back into the conversation about the relationship between rhetorics of transformation and coloniality in research designs.

In Sum

What I initially understood as the ethical conflict between the scholar and the IRB is really the space between the scholar and her own grappling with whether or not to subject other human beings to the sedimented structures of coloniality, made manifest in the accepted designs of academic inquiry. Grabill suggests that there is something important in making institutional systems visible—that this heightened visibility helps us see spaces and opportunities in which to enact alternative institutional designs. For me, a first step in realizing alternative institutional designs, or decolonial options to use Mignolo's terms, is a realistic accounting of the scholar's role as deputy and bureaucrat in the academy. Allowing myself to be uncomfortably stretched by an accounting of the way I have consented to the colonial structures of multiple bureaucratic institutions has

prompted me to question the sanctioned methodologies of my home discipline and join the body of scholars who suggest that the rules by which we work are not likely to bend their way out of the colonial matrix of power.

What is needed, then, are decolonial options—options for constructing academic inquiries that challenge modernistic conceptions of researcher and subject. Hampton suggests that “memory comes before knowledge,” that before we can ask worthwhile research questions we have to remember why it is that we are curious in the first place (48). And, I would add, remembering why we ask the questions we ask requires that we know *what* we are intending to do and *for whom*—or *with whom*—we are intending to do it. In the threaded stories of my *failed* study offered here the memory of both the *what* and the *for whom* ended up killing the project. And, perhaps more important, the process of conducting the autopsy created new memories, albeit painful ones, of how my own best intentions ran ahead of me, down rutted tracks, away from the community with whom I had intended relationship. Like Latour’s *Aramis*, my study moved in and out of states of being—from text to almost-thing and back to text. In the end, I could not privilege the study over my preexisting relationship with my *subjects*. I see that such a confession is worth writing down, worth adding to the work of scholars who are calling for decolonial options in research methodologies. This experience, both the enactment of a *failed* study and the autopsy of it, leads me to see that we need decolonial options for the ways we talk about and make sense of what goes on in the writing communities linked to the university by formal and informal acts of sponsorship. We need decolonial options because as sponsors and researcher of such communities, both in title and

practice, composition scholars are implicated in how coloniality continues to manifest therein.

CHAPTER SIX

ECOSOCIAL SYSTEMS, ACCOUNTABLE RELATIONSHIPS, AND DECOLONIAL OPTIONS IN THE STUDY OF PRISON WRITING PROGRAMS

*The enemy of the incarcerated also lurks in us,
not only when we come abusively – to study the criminal mind,
to enhance our resumes, to get a grade, to be cool, to feel good
about ourselves – but also when we are careless,
immature, disrespectful, unprofessional, treating our
enemy with hostility, our friends with disregard.
So much is at stake that we must merge the two languages.
We must be constantly alert at the same time that we are
at our most relaxed and creative.*

--William Alexander, *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother?*

*The antimoderns, like the postmoderns, have accepted
their adversaries' playing field. Another field—much broader, much
less polemic—has opened up before us: the field of
nonmodern worlds. It is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China
and as little known.*

--Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

Everything comes down to the ear you are able to hear me with.

-- Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies*

In calling for decolonial options I want to adopt a long-view—Gramsci's protracted war of position. I want to bring a deep patience to the road made by walking (Horton and Freire 1990). I see that patience is needed because whenever and wherever we are talking about coloniality, we are talking about 500 years of ideological sedimentation. I want this patience to situate the ways I understand relationality and relational accountability both to the community of writers at New Folsom and the community of scholars whose work informs my own. William Cleveland (2003), speaking directly to teaching artists in his chapter from *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*,

asks practitioners to “steel [themselves] to thinking ‘small, slow, less’ (Crane-Williams 34). I see that his suggestion has import for scholar-sponsors of prison literacy as well. But small, slow, and less is a difficult move in the face of such compelling and complicated injustice, sorrow, and horror. So we are inclined to speed of all kinds—speed away from the prison to shake off what we witness there and speed toward anything and everything that seems like it might mediate or end the suffering that defines prison. But working with speed implies trajectory, and teleological rhetorics are closely related to rhetorics of transformation. Usually, when we are in a hurry, we are in a hurry to see things change. This is not to say that things should not change. But it is to say that words like *change*, *transformation*, and *speed* have a sordid history in the context of national and global histories of colonization.

In *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*, Eli Goldblatt (2007) describes what “small, slow, less” might look like: “Community-engaged projects should arise from the needs and aspirations of the partners with whom we work. The key to developing new ideas is to listen closely to what people in the neighborhoods, centers, and schools say they need or want and then develop ideas with the staff and volunteers from those sites.” Goldblatt goes on to acknowledge that literacy sponsors from the university do have valuable “knowledge and experience” that they can offer, but that offering—that talk and action—must be in balance with listening (197). Yet there is good chance, I would add, that for those of us who are used to standing in the front of the room, a real balance between listening and talking does not *feel* balanced at all. So we must practice privileging the act of listening as described by Krista Ratcliffe

(2005), and value its rhetorical function and power in the same way that we do the act of speaking/writing.

In *Voices of the Self*, Keith Gilyard (1991) quotes Clifford Geertz, evoking a posture of listening and a postmodern sensibility that replaces the notion of *answer* with something closer to Mignolo's *options*. Geertz:

The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said. (quoted in Gilyard 14)

I appreciate the way this quote from Geertz eschews the pursuit of answers and works to include multiple voices in the record. What follows is my attempt to look at, and through, my own teaching practice at New Folsom for the ways I have, and have not, listened. In the context of that remembering, I then suggest one possible methodology for bringing rhetorical listening into community literacy work.

In this chapter, I use an ecosocial theory of human interaction as a starting point for listening to, and through, the network of actors at New Folsom. Scholarship on Indigenous methodologies draws the broader ecosocial theory down to a more specific discussion of research methodology. Particularly, contributions by scholars on Indigenous methodologies address the important issue of *relationality* and *relational accountability* in academic inquiry. For me, these interrelated concepts bring to the fore the fundamental context of all research. Research has always been done in relationship. Twentieth century anthropologists indeed had relationships with the groups of people they studied, even if those relationships were not acknowledged or respected. So it is that

a postmodern critique of the relationship between the *knower* and the *known* challenges the modernist conception of neutral observation so that contemporary scholars no longer claim a detached and scientific point of view. However, as I described in Chapter 5, real power relations in academic inquiry have not ventured far from antiquated subject-object classifications.

Section I connects Jay Lemke's ecosocial theory to a Derridean theory of writing and Ann Bertoff's notion of composition as *forming*. Connecting ecosocial and Derridean theory to Berthoff's pedagogy helps make the case for a study of the prison writing classroom that privileges relationships, authorial purposes, and space over discrete texts. Section II looks at indigenous methodologies, primarily through the work of Shawn Wilson and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Using Smith's research paradigm, I look at the ways that relationality and relational accountability play out in my teaching experience at New Folsom. In lieu of a conclusion, Section III introduces the work of Steve Biko as a closing word on the roles of insiders and outsiders in relational paradigms.

I. Considering the Community: Lemke's Patch, Bertoff's Writer, and Derrida's Text

For me, a preliminary step in challenging a modernist conception of the relationship between the researcher and the researched is the adoption of a more organic model for describing the interworkings of the prison writing classrooms of which I have been a part. What follows is a cursory summary of ecosocial theory as articulated by Lemke (1995) overlaid with specific observations from New Folsom that make use of an ecosocial perspective. As articulated in Chapter 5, the editing, amending, and reframing

of organic, dynamic, humanizing projects into mechanized, colonial, ownable data bits has inspired me to look for frames that do not require focusing an academic gaze on individual writers (or in my case, teachers). To that end, Lemke's notion of human communities as "systems of *doings*, of social and cultural activities or practices, rather than systems of *doers*" makes good sense to me (93). Using Lemke, I can think and write about Jackson and Williams' classrooms as *patches*, or ecosocial systems, where people interact with their social and material environments (94). Thinking of their classrooms as *patches* makes room for a complicated, layered, and organic understanding of the ways the incarcerated writers I know use writing. The *patch* as a construct challenges "the notion of 'the human individual' as a primary or privileged unit of analysis for any theory of human systems" (93). Lemke suggests that if scholars want to understand:

how human communities come to be organized as they are, or the role which discursive systems of meaning play in our communities, if we want to build theories of social dynamics or of textual politics, we need a perspective in which the notion of the human individual can be accounted for as a complex construction, not taken as the starting point for analysis. The notion of human subject, human agent, human mind, human cognition all presuppose and privilege a notion that must be thoroughly deconstructed and analyzed if we are to make any progress at all. (93)

Lemke's notion of the patch unseats the individual as the privileged unit of analysis. It also forms a theoretical space in which scholars from inside and outside the Composition circle find common ground.

Lemke's ecosocial theory overlaps with Bruno Latour's articulation of Actor Network Theory (1996). Both describe how humans fit into systems or matrices made up of both human and non-human actors, all of whom function with varying significance in complicated networks. Lemke's theory is slightly more representative of what I see happening in the prison writing classroom at New Folsom in that it attends more closely to the self-organizing, contingent nature of the interaction between human and non-human actors as they work to survive inside the material processes of a "complex, hierarchically organized, developing and evolving ecosystem" (118). Prison bureaucracy does not make sense, but it nonetheless is hierarchically organized, with constantly evolving/devolving systems for managing incarcerated people. Thus, each *patch*—each writing community—"changes constantly, driving itself toward new patterns of self-organizing by its very efforts to maintain the old ones" (130).

In many ways the *patch* also describes the social and material location of Derrida's unfinished writing act. And it also resonates with Ann Berthoff's notion of *forming*, where meaning arises from unfinished, active, dialectical processes. Berthoff writes, "Meanings don't come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed" (70). And for Berthoff, the process of forming requires an organic analogy that speaks back to Platonic notions of linearity and trajectory (105). Berthoff suggests the following "fundamental truths about forming—that you don't begin at the beginning, that intention and structure are dialectically related, that the search for limits is itself heuristic, that form emerges from chaos, that you say in order to discover what you mean, that you invent in order to understand" (103-104). Although Berthoff's comments are about the

individual writer, they describe an organic process that calls back to the unfinished and unfinishable in the Derridean theory of text. Berthoff's writer and Derrida's text find a welcome home in Lemke's *patch*, or mini-ecosystem.

All three theorists speak to a view of the writing act that privileges action and movement. When I, as scholar, attend to writing action—to Lemke's systems of doing, rather than systems of doers—I am able to draw my scholarly gaze away from individual writers and their discrete texts. In the terms being set here, the individual writer and individual text lose their particular scholarly value. Derrida suggests that all writing is but marginal comments on other writing and Berthoff proposes that meanings are always in the making. I, then, as a scholar interested in the health, preservation, and sovereignty of out of school writing communities might serve them better were I to look for ways to describe them as systems of doing, places of action, locations where writing performs a multitude of personal, social, and relational purposes. And a study of the mini-ecosocial system, I expect, does not require that I extract individual inmate texts as demonstrable proofs of the value of writing in the local community. An ecosocial position, then, addresses the concerns about individual texts that were raised in the previous chapters. Thinking about Jackson and Williams' classrooms as mini-ecosocial systems challenges both the structure and methodology of my original study. According to Derrida, the filmed texts of two incarcerated teaching artists that I had planned to create would never have been able to function as demonstrable proofs in the ways that I had assumed they would.

However, moving away from text-extraction-as-proof presents its own set of ethical problems. Where individual writers do not enter the discourse via their own

voices, there is the possibility of erasure and a remixed appropriation that privileges the scholar's interpretation of events. However, the Derridean theory of writing, as described above, dismantles the notion of the discrete, knowable, demonstrable text. By extension, the ability of a writer's word to hold together outside its localized, rhetorical context is also challenged. Since the word cannot hold together outside its moment, and is already being erased and simultaneously written on as it enters the discourse, its extracted use by the scholar cannot make sense in the way that we want it to. This seems especially true to me in the context of prison writing, as I attempt to describe with the following example.

I regularly sit in prison classrooms where a writer will connect emotionally with his audience, causing beautiful ruptures in the typical prison postures of distance and protective emotional closure. In the classrooms where I am a guest, there is a reciprocal exchanging of texts that happens between group members. Words-on-the-page form a type of local currency, a gift-economy of sorts. And I have found that the word-gifts that I have been given do not hold their power in the ways I would expect them to once outside the prison walls. When I have tried to share these word-gifts with friends outside the prison, I find that almost everything is lost in the rhetorical distance between the classroom where the word was born and the space in which I have tried to share it. This phenomenon, I think, is more a reflection of the *terministic screens* (to use Burke's term) which encapsulates the U.S. prison and makes it almost impossible for people outside to engage in relaxed, open postures of listening to the words of incarcerated writers. It is less about the quality and power of the texts being generated by incarcerated writers and more about the ideological atmosphere around the listener. In this chapter, I will not

attempt to speak to why this profound disconnection exists, or how it has come to be, but I share my experience with the disconnection between inside writer and outside audience as a means of reaffirming the Derridean theory of text described above. If the text cannot hold together in the way I want, so that I can use it as proof in an academic study of the prison classroom, then it seems that I should look for other ways to leverage my position inside the academy and lend my support to the work of incarcerated writers and teachers.

Moving away from data collection on individual writers and their texts puts some welcome distance between mechanizing institutional procedures and the otherwise organic processes and projects that are often edited, amended, and reframed by the IRB until they no longer make sense. Thinking of the prison classroom as a patch takes the focus off of the individual *other* as the object of study. It offers real possibility for framing academic inquiries that begin with what Judy Atkinson (2001) describes as a “[a] deep listening and hearing with more than the ears” (Wilson, 59). In quoting Atkinson, I understand that I risk bringing back to the table the important critique of the anthropological observer and the troubling history of ethnographic research. In response, I would like to point out that Atkinson suggests this deep listening and hearing as the sixth item in a list of guiding principles for conducting research with aboriginal people. And, significantly, the first item on her list is the overt approval of both the study and the methods by the community being studied. Furthermore, between overt permission and deep listening, Atkinson outlines other important precursors to reciprocal and respectful research. Having thus framed the practice of deep listening and hearing inside a holistic, reciprocal model, I want to return briefly to one particular affordance of “listening with more than the ears” as a ideological root of academic inquiry. The notion of listening

presumes a speaking on the part of the community being researched, with speaking here understood as a dynamic dialectic between community members. And an attention to community members brings me back to Lemke's patch. Where a "listening with more than the ears" to the community is privileged over individual writers/individual texts, the matter of relationality and relational accountability between scholar/sponsors and prison writing classroom comes to the fore.

Returning to my own story, both Jackson and Williams were forced to leave New Folsom under a statewide reevaluation of inmate points. As I discussed in Chapter 5, my project was stillborn before it ever began, in part because I did not take into consideration my relationship to the whole group of writers with whom I was working. Jackson and Williams are compelling teachers, and the time I was spending with them was deeply affecting my own pedagogy, both in the prison and on campus. In a well-intentioned move to share what I was experiencing with the broader Composition community I attempted to set up a study whereby I could export Jackson and Williams via video. In the end, the project was ethically untenable, and while I was floundering with it, both teachers were forced to pack their boxes and leave their teaching posts. But the community of writers at New Folsom remains. That community, understood as a *patch*, organically does what it must do to stay alive. While I was focused on exporting my teaching colleagues, I missed the opportunity to ask the community important questions. In anticipation of losing Jackson, Williams, and other long-time CAP teachers, I could have asked the community of writers questions about: how the community functions, how it uses writing for personal, local, and extra-institutional purposes, what it thought it might need in the traumatic transition it was about to make, and how I might marshal

resources that would make that transition less disruptive. With my focus on individual texts, I was distracted from the broader work of fostering respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relationships with the *entire* community of writers. To be clear, framing the prison classroom as a *patch* does not directly translate to respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relationships between the scholar and the writing community. But I do see that *prison classroom as patch* offers a potentially decolonial frame—or decolonial option in Mignolo’s terms. It allows the scholar to move away from a practice of extracting text-as-data. And, in the short run, frames that eschew artifact extraction from marginalized writing communities are welcome indeed.

II. Indigenous Methodologies as Frames for the Study of Ecosocial Systems

I would like to take a closer look at the terms *respect*, *responsibility*, and *reciprocity* as defined by scholars who advocate for and describe Indigenous methodologies (Wilson 2008; Hampton 1995; Smith 2012; Mihesuah and Wilson 2004; Powell 2012). Scholarship on Indigenous methodologies, although not directly addressing the prison context, richly informs the construction of research projects that study the living, breathing humans who make up prison writing communities. Particularly Shawn Wilson’s construction of an Indigenous methodology raises essential question about *relationality* and *relational accountability* that speak directly to the study of prison writing. Questions of *relationality* and *relational accountability* inform academic inquiry at its core and challenge the central questions of what counts as research, how you collect it, who owns it, and how it is evaluated and distributed.

In my experience, a modernist structure of academic inquiry in its present form—particularly how it defines the power relationship between *knower* and *known*—is at odds with the dynamic, humanizing relationships that composition scholars are attempting to forge with out of school writing communities. Yet, as outlined in Chapter 5, this is not to say that the IRB, as functionary of the university, is the sinister adversary of the virtuous scholar. As a scholar-sponsor, I am responsible for my own consent to the structure of academic inquiry sanctioned by my institution. My introduction to Indigenous methodologies came after I had already attempted to conduct my *failed* study. Therefore, the connection of Indigenous research methodologies to my own work comes, much like my comments in Chapter 5, in the form of an autopsy.

The seeking out of decolonial options in academic research methodologies led me initially to the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Shawn Wilson (2008). Before I discuss their work here, I offer this quick word on position: I am a middle-class White woman in her 22nd year of formal schooling. I understand that I come to Indigenous methodologies as a listener and an outsider. I worry about appropriation and reifying the very things I intend to disrupt. I worry about these things for good reason. I have read the back and forth between Audre Lorde and Mary Daly and observed the ways that whiteness worked there like wax in the ears (De Veaux 2004; Daly 2006). So I worry about the dangers of listening with waxy ears. I worry about misunderstanding. I worry about passing along misunderstood messages, like the game of Telephone I enjoyed as a kid. I worry about appropriation—about saying something important and timely, but without giving credit to those from whom I heard it. But I also know that the academic systems in which I operate lose their logic and start to rattle, scrape, and throw sparks

where I have attempted to use them as frames for my relationships with the writers at New Folsom. So, I turn to scholars who articulate Indigenous methodologies because I see that the discussion around Indigenous methodologies brings the principles of ecosocial theory, particularly Lemke's notion of the *patch*, directly to the issue of research design.

Both Smith and Wilson distinguish between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and make clear that their primary intended audiences are Indigenous scholars who already understand and speak from positions informed by Indigenous ideologies. They suggest methodological models of academic study that are rooted in deep cultural practices of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity—cultural practices they expect Indigenous scholars already understand. Although I do not claim personal knowledge of these cultural practices, I see how they speak to, and resonate with, my own disconnection to traditional models of academic inquiry. I also find that Smith, Wilson, and other scholars speak directly to the ideological colonialism of academic inquiry that I find so problematic, with important comments on decolonial options in academic design (Maracle 1990; Hampton 1995; Atkinson 2001; Weber-Pillwax 1999, Mihesuah and Wilson 2004).

In *Research Is Ceremony*, Wilson's work fills in some of the space opened up by Mignolo's rejection of modernity's playbook. In the text, Wilson threads story and citation in the development of an Indigenous methodology for academic research. He suggests "research is about unanswered questions, but is also reveals our unquestioned answers" (6). His text is a response to the "unquestioned answers" of modernity's research model—a model with a long global history of disrespect and damage. Wilson

calls for *respect*, *responsibility*, and *reciprocity* in academic research. In Wilson's work I see that these three tenets-in-action are less about good intentions and more about a deeply reflective understanding of the research process—a process in which we consider our own particular relationships to the research questions we ask.

Wilson explains that all research projects have an ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. He suggests a circular paradigm for thinking about how these four components of a research project function in relation to each other. Each component addresses a particular question: Ontology asks, “What is real?” Epistemology asks, “How do I know what is real?” Axiology asks, “What is it ethical to do in order to gain this knowledge, and what will this knowledge be used for?” And Methodology asks, “How do I find out more about this reality?” (34). Wilson explains that the “shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is *relationality*”—the understanding that relationships do not merely structure reality, but rather *are* reality. And the “shared aspects of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is *accountability to relationships*.” He goes on to suggest that research topics, data collection methods, data analysis protocols, and presentation of data should be informed by these “shared aspects of relationality and relational accountability” (7). Having articulated the relationality and relational accountability of an Indigenous research methodology, Wilson suggests that “research is a ceremony” whose purpose is the strengthening of relationships and/or the bridging of distance (11). I appreciate Wilson's rhetorical move to eschews a discourse of salvation by development. The first purposes is the strengthening of relationships that already exist. The language here lacks trajectory. There is no intended movement away from the existing relationship. The second purpose, the bridging of distance, does the

same subtle, yet rhetorically significant, work of suggesting that what is needed is already available. Bridging distance speaks to a coming together of known things. Even though the language suggests movement, it is movement *between* and movement *toward*, not movement away from the center.

Research as a means to relationship and connection is distinctly different than the dominant view of research as a means to measurable knowledge (Smith 44). Smith suggests that where knowledge of the world is “reduced to issues of measurement, the focus of understanding becomes more concerned with procedural problems.” Procedural problems call for the development of “operational definitions of phenomena which are reliable and valid” (44). And the byproduct of this close attention to concepts like reliability, validity, procedural problems, and operational definitions, has been the creation of a bureau-scientific discourse. My termination notice from the IRB is a good example of such discourse. It replaces my study title with a 5-digit number and refers to the study as a “human subject project.” Jackson and Williams are labeled “human research participants” with whom “data collection and participant recruitment” has been “suspended.”

I do not want to confuse my critique of a bureau-scientific discourse that frames research projects of living, breathing people with a broad and sloppy anti-scientism. I do not want to step into the attack/counter-attack that Downes and Rock describe between “charges of ‘positivism’” and “obscurity or self-indulgence” (69). Like Mignolo, I see that decolonizing knowledge is not a rejection of “Western epistemic contributions to the world. On the contrary, it implies appropriating such contributions in order to then de-chain from their imperial designs” (82). Looking for decolonial options is a purposeful

legitimizing of “ways of knowing and sensing (feeling) that do not conform to the epistemology and aesthesis of the zero point”—ways of knowing that have otherwise been reinscribed as “myth, legend, folklore, local knowledge, and the like (80). Of course there is a place in the academy for a discourse of reliability, validity, procedure, and operations. And of course studies of living, breathing people should be clear, well-organized, and ethically accountable. But what is apparent in the way bureau-scientific discourse is employed in the study of humans is a lingering colonial ideology that privileges quantifiable knowledge over holistic, interpersonal relationships.

In its current ideological form, bureau-scientific discourse cannot make sense of, let alone find a way to discuss, the relationality and relational accountability in which Wilson situates an Indigenous methodology. So I return to Mignolo’s call for decolonial options. Rather than looking for alternatives that reinscribe power relations using the same modernistic structures of inquiry which require a perforce subjugation of people and things into ownable data bits, I look for options less tethered to modernism and its attendant coloniality (to the extent, of course, that such a thing is possible). In what follows I use Wilson’s discussion of relationality and relational accountability as guideposts for thinking about what a decolonized methodology of a prison writing program might look like.

Relationality

To review, Wilson suggests that relationality is the understanding that relationships do not merely shape reality, but are themselves reality. This understanding of relationship-as-reality informs the questions of what is real and how we know that it is

real (Wilson 7). It also calls back to Lemke's articulation of ecosocial theory in that relationality describes the fundamental connectedness between all the actors (human and non-human) in any ecosocial system. Relationality is particularly complicated in the prison context where bureaucratic and material structures purposefully work to reduce the number of connections between human actors since prison systems are organized to work against and minimize the fundamental relationality that nonetheless exists. Using Lemke, I can see that the ecosocial systems at play in the prison are in a constant state of organic movement working to reconnect/preserve human connections inside a near-totalizing institution whose primary mandate is fundamental human disconnection. As an example, a federal mandate for mental health services sanctions some of the classes in which I participate. So the institution, which works for 23 hours a day to isolate this group of inmates, also requires them to choose from a menu of recreational therapy groups, of which writing is an offering. Thus incarcerated writers come and use the time to connect socially through the writing and reading of their own work. Using an ecosocial frame, I can see that a study of such a classroom space should attend to the complicated way that relationality is fundamental in that space, and in many ways determines the type and quality of writing that is generated.

I offer the following story to highlight the fundamental relationality between human and non-human actors in the prison writing classroom. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I began my work at New Folsom about the same time that Carlson was transferred from Education to Mental Health, changing his title from Artist Facilitator to Recreational Therapist. The AIC room in C-Facility that Carlson left was large enough to arrange a few folding banquet tables in the center where 15-20 writers could work

elbow to elbow. The walls were lined with lockers full of musical equipment, books, and charcoal works-in-progress. I had taught a few times in that room and enjoyed the rich interaction between writers that happened therein. In contrast, the designated classroom in the mental health area was significantly more sterile. The room had five round, immovable stainless steel tables lining the perimeter with round stainless steel stools bolted to the floor around each table. A large picture window faced the corridor where a group of custody staff observed the class. There was no daylight, no way to tell time. The concrete floor and concrete walls, painted peachy-grey, created an echo that made reading aloud nearly impossible. The class was difficult to run. The participants were not combative, but I felt that I was not able to establish much connection, either between myself and the participants, or between the class members. I assumed that the overwhelming flat affect in the group was a function of the psychotropic drugs that I knew many participants were taking. After class I went home, scaled back my expectations for what would be possible in the group, and changed my lesson plans accordingly. If I had been conducting an ethnographic study of the classroom space I would have likely focused my comments on the inability of individual actors to connect to each other and highlighted their mental illness in explaining the extreme human disconnection that I experienced that day.

After class Carlson began working to secure an unused staff meeting room for his classes. This new space still did not have outside light but it was free from the maddening echo of the other classroom and the only window through which custody staff would observe was an eight inch slit of glass in the door. The moveable tables were faux-wood grain Formica with matching, padded chairs. Carlson arranged them in a U-

shape. On my next visit to the prison, I took my seat at one end of the U, and watched class members enter the room for the very first time. The new space had an almost immediate effect on their body language. They began to talk to each other and to me. The class went well, and there was a noticeable difference in the energy both for the writing task and for socialization. Midway through the two-hour class, an officer came in and announced that the room was needed for staff purposes. We packed up and moved back to the original classroom space. The transition back to the constraints of stainless steel and echo drained the energy from the group despite my best efforts to mediate the change in the material environment. Being forced to move rooms mid-class was a really helpful lesson for me as a teacher inside the prison. I understood in that juxtaposition of spaces how affected relationality is by the multifarious aspects of the ecosocial system.

Relationality in the prison context is furthermore complicated by purposefully constraining regulations that dictate the depth and quality of relationship between inmates and all institutional staff. The California Department of Corrections has strict rules about overfamiliarity between staff and inmates to which volunteers, like myself, must also adhere. This means I am explicitly forbidden from having any contact with inmates or their families outside of class. As Tannenbaum (2000) points out in *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching at San Quentin*, the concept of overfamiliarity is complicated in any rich learning space. Like the constraining structures of the IRB, the official CDCR prohibitions against overfamiliarity are neither conspiratorial nor outrageous. In my experience, I have found that teachers *can* foster deeply meaningful relationships in the classroom that still meet the standards of the institution and do not jeopardize the classroom by bringing it under the scrutiny of administrative hyper-observation.

Teachers, who patiently learn the rules and follow them, over time may even find allies in the prison bureaucracy that can help them sustain and expand their program. That has been the case at New Folsom. Carlson attributes both his longevity inside and his rich history of orchestrating collaborative projects between incarcerated artists and the outside community to his close attention to the rules. This attention has built a workable, trust-based relationship between AIC/CAP and the institution. Such a trust has allowed the program to persist in evolving form through the sweeping budgetary cuts that have wiped out every other program of its kind in the state. Returning to Wilson's circle paradigm, an attention to relationality in the prison classroom demands a close attention to the affordances of the professional relationship between teachers and students as well as the relationship between teacher, program, and institution. To the extent that any of these relational threads are neglected or over-taxed, the circle loses its integral form.

I want to return my attention to the material space and the role it plays in the relationality among actors in the ecosocial system and consider a second aspect of the relationship between teacher and material classroom. Not only are teachers responsible for attending to how the material environment affects the quality of work and interaction therein, they are also responsible to the ways that their actions do or do not preserve and enhance the space itself. In the context of the highly contingent prison classroom, I see the relationship between teacher and material space as equally important to any of the human relationships that happen therein. From an ecosocial perspective, the classroom space is a significant part of what fosters rich relationships between incarcerated writers, and between incarcerated writers and teachers. This is especially important in places like

prison where the rules of overfamiliarity set up a binary between a privileging of human relationships and a sustaining of the spaces where deep human relationships come to be.

As I discussed earlier, both Jackson and Williams had to leave New Folsom. Per the rules against overfamiliarity, I cannot have any further contact with these teaching artists. Should I choose to visit them at their new institutions, I forfeit my own teaching post. Both Jackson and Williams have worked very hard, at great personal risk, to establish a classroom at New Folsom that operates with a unique degree of autonomy and addresses a complicated web of real human needs inside a system with a near-total dehumanizing calculus. Such a classroom space/environment requires a constant and active sustaining. I see my relationships with Jackson and Williams tangled with my relationship with the space they have helped build. This tangling is heart-wrenching as I think about what it means moving forward without them, and my own privileging of my relationship with the classroom over my relationships with these two incarcerated teaching colleagues (Plemons 2013b).

In the book he co-authored with Tannenbaum, Jackson talks about *realness*. His definition of realness calls back to Wilson's articulation of relationships as reality. But making sense of our relationships, and accounting honestly for the ways that those relationships rub and sometimes blister in contact with other relationships is fraught, if not impossible. Whether or not we can see a way through making sense of our web of relations, our complicity in those relationships is, in Derrida's words, "irreducible" (*Of Spirit* 39-40). This irreducibility in complicity is taken up by Mark Sanders (2002) in *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. Sanders defines a basic human foldedness which he then uses to historicize and critique the role of the intellectual in Apartheid.

Sander's argument resonates with Wilson's understanding of relationship as reality. It also offers a chilling view of the role of the intellectual in both support and protest of Apartheid. Quoting Derrida, Sanders suggests that the intellectual is always complicit—the only real choice being one between “terrifying contaminations” (10).

In his treatise on such “terrifying contaminations,” Sanders charts the way that the foldedness between black and white intellectuals “was not without an oppressive element.” Although some cross-racial friendships did develop, “the most striking images of self and other from the 1950s and early 1960s (and the ones Black Consciousness would take up) are of an oppressive existential intimacy” (96). Sanders notes that during the 1950s and 1960s it became imperative that White liberals be stripped of their credentials as “self-appointed advocates” speaking on behalf of disenchanted and legitimately angry black South Africans (167).

The well-meaning White liberal intellectual in Sanders' history struggles to see the ways that the ideological root of racism validated a *speaking for* which was fundamentally at odds with the emancipation they claimed to support. Here Sanders offers a particularly instructive image for the intellectual structuring a study in the U.S. prison, one that calls back to Wilson's notion of relationality. Wilson's questions of what is real, and how we know it as such, offer an ideological litmus of sorts for assessing relationality in academic inquiry. The issue is less about privileging relationships over the acquisition of data and more about the fundamental power structure in the relationship between researcher and researched. For me, the relationality of a study is called into question when the people being researched have no avenue through which to speak for themselves. In the case of my study, Jackson has peer-reviewed articles I can

find at my university library. Both Jackson and Williams have essays in *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough*, an edited collection on the issue of Life Without Parole sentencing (Hartman 2013). The fact that these teacher-authors are published does not guarantee that my relationship with them is relationally sound. But it does mean that I, as researcher, am interacting with writers who also speak for themselves in the public discourse.

Situating relationality at the root of academic inquiry fundamentally disrupts key assumptions in bureau-scientific discourse. Understanding the relationship between human and non-human actors as organic, enmeshed, and circular leads me to a rejection of the false linearity of my original study. In the context I described above there are no directly causal relationships or isolatable binaries. All actors—human and non-human—are related, implicated. With relationality as the ideological root of my inquiry, I must attend to my own complicity, both in the study and in the micro and macro conditions in which the study takes place. Returning to Wilson’s language, where research adopts an indigenous methodology, it looks for ways to strengthen relationships and bridge distances. Both of these actions—*strengthening* and *bridging*—suggest a close attention to the specific, internal needs of the community. Where my original study had intended to export the knowledge of two talented incarcerated teachers, a relationally-framed future study of the same classroom would start with direct questions for the community about how my sponsorship and participation could serve the its sovereign health and goals.

Relational Accountability

Wilson's second guiding principle is relational accountability. Relational accountability informs the ethical parameters of research activity, particularly in the asking of questions about what scholars do to gain knowledge and what/how that knowledge is used (Wilson 7). Relational accountability also frames questions of methodology, or how we go about finding out more about the realities that spark academic inquiry. Questions of relational accountability between university researchers and incarcerated writers are particularly complicated by the "rules" of engagement set out both by the academy and the prison. Modernistic structures of study presume unequal power and work against the notion of reciprocal accountability. The prison likewise constrains reciprocal accountability, specifically through the rules against overfamiliarity, and more generally in the myriad ways that inmates are continually confined, second-classed, and dehumanized in the workings of the institution.

It is very difficult for a researcher to observe the dehumanizing conditions of prison and still be able to see and hear incarcerated writers as they want to be seen and heard. From my first day inside, Jackson and Williams continually reminded me that the role of "missionary" that many writing teachers slip into is fundamentally unhelpful and a serious breach of relational accountability in the way that it reifies unequal power relations between outside teachers or researchers and incarcerated writers. All attempts to rescue, heal, or fix ultimately ascribe to the outside person a power that is not theirs and reinvigorate modernity's rhetoric of salvation by development.

In processing what relational accountability means, particularly in the colonial matrix of power, I come to see a handful of ways I am implicated in my own critique. Two particular stories capture the ways that my teaching practice inside has worked

against my own teacherly good intentions. The first story describes my first day teaching inside. I knew I needed to establish my ethos by bringing some of my own work to read. I had never taught inside a prison and really questioned whether or not the things I was writing about at the time—mostly personal essays on sorting out what it meant for me to be a parent—would connect with the writing group. In the end, I had nothing else to bring and read from the body of work I had. But I was very, very tempted to fabricate or liberally stretch my own stories to an unrecognizable place that I imagined would make me more relatable to a group of incarcerated men between the ages of 18-65. In the tension, between the *realness* I could offer and the false self I was tempted to construct, were stereotypes about prison, gender, race, fatherhood, and who knows what else. My wondering about whether or not my writing would connect with a prison audience presumed a very low opinion—and I would say even subscribed a subhuman status—to the group of writers with whom I would be meeting. Despite every intention to the contrary, the fabrications I was considering implicitly devalued the humanness in the writers I planned to work with by assuming they would not be able to connect with the humanness I had written into my own texts—a dangerous and damaging assumption.

In the second story from my own teaching experience, I realized over time that I was personally put-off by one particular writer who I felt disrespected the nonfiction narrative space of the class I was teaching with pieces that were outrageously fictive. In talking with Williams about my frustration, I came to see that I was personalizing this writer's choice not to write from the details of his own life, details he may have had good reason to leave buried. Williams shared with me a similar frustration early in his teaching experience but said he came to realize that relational accountability in the

classroom space had to balance a respect for assigned tasks with the a deep and patient seeing that everything had to be welcomed. As far as I can tell the writer in question did eventually write from his own experience, and when he did there was part of me that was sorry that I had disrespected his use of fiction as part of his writing process on the way to non-fiction narrative. This story reminds me that where I have allowed feelings of personal affront, I have privileged my own plans for the classroom over a relational accountability to the writers therein.

In the context of my experience at New Folsom, an attention to relational accountability generates a different set of questions than the ones I had originally proposed. When I reflect on the ways that I as a teacher had been tempted to blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction in my own writing and the ways that I had struggled with allowing fiction as part of a non-fiction writing process, I see again how discrete texts from such a classroom might lose their usefulness to both the academy and the prison writing community. In the context of these stories, what becomes more useful is a reflective attention to my own assumptions and the way that those assumptions worked against my teacherly intention, both with the general group of writers and my incarcerated teaching colleagues. In *Memory Comes Before Knowledge*, Eber Hampton (1995) notes the destructive outcome of white educators' hyperfocus on the education of First Nations kids. He suggests, as part of his critique of that history, that the question of *why* is best directed first to the self: "I began to say, OK, when I start asking *why* about somebody else's behavior, I should ask *why* about my own" (50). In Hampton's comments I see an important aspect of any blueprint for relational accountability—namely a purposeful attention to the issue of why it is that I want to ask the questions I

want to ask. Am I volunteering at the prison to change people's lives? Or to see them become more political? Or to notch my teaching belt with some novel experience? Are my behavioral motivations altruistic? And even if they are, are the questions I am asking arising from a deep listening to the community?

My original study had intended to describe and support two incarcerated writing teachers and, by extension, their classrooms. I had intended to generate filmed text of Jackson and Williams talking about their teaching experiences. I can see now that the question I was trying to ask was, "How can Jackson and Williams enter the composition discourse?" I can *also* see now that the film I wanted to make would have become a discrete, context-less text-as-artifact that I would have likely relied on to make my own statements about prison writing classrooms. When described that way, the relational accountability between my *subjects* and I wobbles and begins to come apart in the very construction of the original question.

Working out from a place of relational accountability, in a future study I would likely ask different generative questions well ahead of an IRB application. Wilson, quoting Cora Weber-Pillwax (1999), includes such a list of questions in his text:

- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic I am studying and myself as researcher (on multiple levels)?
- How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?
- How can I relate respectfully to the other participants involved in this research so that together we can form a stronger relationship with the idea that we will share?

- What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?
- Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to the other participants, to the topic, and to all of my relations?
- What I am contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth, and learning that is taking place reciprocal? (Wilson 77)

If I were able to go back and begin again, an attention to the relational accountability evidenced in the questions above would lead me to ask Jackson and Williams about what they wanted or needed as teachers. It would also lead me to ask them what kind of study would help them with their work. Returning to the earlier discussion around ecosocial systems, the methodology that would emerge would likely attempt to describe or account for the ways the writing community at New Folsom affects other aspects of prison life, i.e. yard politics, staff relationships, etc. Such a methodology would also attempt to account specifically for both human and non-human actors in and around the classroom space.

Toward Decolonial Options: Ecosocial Paradigms and Relational Methodologies

A modernist template requires that the closing words of this chapter draw some sort of conclusion and suggest a correlating plan of action. I offer neither, choosing instead to end with a set of quotes from Steve Biko that I think speak to what is broadly at stake when intellectuals insert themselves into important social-historical moments and mistake ideological camaraderie for real relational accountability. In his posthumously published collection of essays, *I WRITE WHAT I LIKE* (1978), Biko, the South African

anti-apartheid activist who died in police custody in 1977, addresses the issue of relationality and relational accountability in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle, and speaks directly to the role of the intellectual therein.

In his monograph on the complicity of South African intellectuals in apartheid, Sanders quotes heavily from Biko's text, particularly the places where Biko was openly critical of the ways that well-meaning White liberals injected themselves into the movement without a reflective consideration of their race and class positions. Biko:

We are concerned with that curious bunch of nonconformists who explain their participation in negative terms: that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names—liberals, leftists, etc. There are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism and the country's "inhumanity to the black man."

These are the people who claim that they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and therefore should be jointly involved in the black man's struggle for a place under the sun. 20

Biko's criticism of unreflective joiner-inners is clear enough. What is interesting to me is his comments which closely follow such a critique. On the very next page of his text, Biko suggests that mutual respect is foundational to any lasting anti-apartheid effort: "Once the various groups within a given community have asserted themselves to the point that mutual respect has to be shown then you have the ingredients for a true and meaningful integration" (Biko 21). The mutual respect that Biko describes, built on various groups asserting themselves within the community, resonates with the relational accountability in Wilson's methodology. Accountable relationships are relationships of equal, even if apposing, action where members have the ability to speak, listen, and move

in ways of their own choosing. Where outsiders presume insider positions, the possibility of mutual respect and productive relationship is lost.

This is not to say that intellectuals should withdraw their support from the myriad social-historical issues at hand. Composition as a discipline has rightly understood that a public turn needs to be made. Both the theory of the discipline and the political economic context of writing in the 21st century demand such a turn. And surely mass incarceration in the United States as a social issue, and the glut of educational programs inside the prison as a material one, fall under the scope of what composition scholars should be thinking, writing, and researching about. What I see though, in this necessary move, is a real and immediate need to look at the ways that modernistic research methodologies carry a colonial sensibility that works against an overarching disciplinary rhetoric.

In the space of these pages I have attempted to discuss what I see as one of many decolonial options moving forward in my own practice of teaching and conducting research. Thinking about out of school writing communities as ecosocial systems helps describe the terrain in appropriately organic, messy, and evolving terms. Likewise, looking for methodologies that are relational at the root offers an ideological and structural option that is potentially de-colonial, if not at least less-colonial. Relationality and relational accountability require a closely tended respect for all actors in the network. And, as Biko points out, forged mutual respect is a key ingredient in accountable relationships.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: THREE MORE LOOKS AT AIC

*There is no one formula for scholarly and political work:
no one-size-fits-all solution exists for the problems people face.*
--Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, *American Studies as Accompaniment*

The act of weaving my story as a scholar-sponsor of prison writing together with a critique of how we *think* and *do* in Composition has brought me to two interrelated fears. I worry that readers may be tempted to throw out the proverbial baby, to stop working in places like prisons where our complicity in the lives of writers and our leanings toward coloniality implicate us in the worst kinds of injustices—double violence against already marginalized men and women. I also worry that the nonmodern world of teaching and research as I have described it here, a world that Latour says we already live in, will seem fanciful, far-flung, not close enough to center to be of consequence. In short, I am equally worried about readers who run off and do something rash and readers who do nothing at all.

All arguments made to this point suggest that when and where we inscribe beginnings and endings—in communities, in academic studies, and even in texts—we presume a modernistic conceptions of the containability of things. In the spirit of things unfinished, this chapter eschews any definitive conclusion. Instead it is a call for relationality and relational accountability at the center of our theory and pedagogy. As has been demonstrated, prison writing programs, like most community writing programs, are contingent, complicated, and decidedly local. Therefore, I do not propose a one-size-fits-all solution to the concerns I have raised. But I do suggest that we look closely at the

way that coloniality functions in our epistemology and in the structures of study to which we consent. And, as an active response to such a sedimented coloniality, I suggest we create and/or join projects that operate from a relational base and eschew or revise ones that do not. To that end, I offer a look at the broader conversation about relationality as it is forming in and across disciplines as well as three final snapshots of AIC. These last three looks at AIC—two glances backwards and one, through the curtain, into a potential future—help me imagine what might be possible when relationality is at the center of flexible and organic program designs.

In the end, I hope this text suggests a way of looking at out of school writing communities that recognizes and respects that such communities are in a constant state of motion—that the only thing stable about out of school writing communities, especially communities in prison, is their instability. And I hope this text makes a compelling case for relationships that foster *participation* and *options*. In offering *participation* and *options* as conceptual guideposts, I join a conversation that is forming across disciplines that recognizes that responsible, responsive, decolonial work often carries a quality of joining in movements and activities that already exist.

I. Relationality in the Emerging Conversation

In their polemic on the state of American Studies, Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2013) call for more responsible and responsive scholarship: “Centrally important to the success of our scholarly endeavors is knowing the work we want our work to do, taking responsibility for the world we are creating through our endeavors, for the ways of being in the world that we are modeling and promoting” (9). To elaborate on their call, they

suggest the metaphor of accompaniment. For Tomlinson and Lipsitz, the metaphor of accompaniment describes two specific types of action—joining travelers on the road and joining in the making of music. Tomlinson and Lipsitz suggest that the metaphor of accompaniment allows us to “reinforce each other’s dignity.” They also suggest “accompaniment recognizes the inescapably and quintessentially social nature of scholarship and citizenship” (10). In Tomlinson and Lipsitz I find an important resonance, both in the ways they call for responsibility and in the ways that suggest that responsible work often times is really about joining. In sounding the call for *joining*, Tomlinson and Lipsitz echo the clearest message I heard from both Jackson and Williams. Both incarcerated teaching artists communicated to me, in different ways, the importance of just showing up. As I understood Jackson and Williams, the *just* in *just show up* refers to a purposeful leaving behind of research agendas, quick-fix solutions, and generic Band-Aids for easing the horror and devastation of life at a Level Four institution. In this context, *just show up* is a strategic alternative to *show up in order to* (fill in the blank)—fix, save, change, etc. It describes a reflectively critical pedagogy that pays attention to hegemonic structures, power dynamics, and fluid contexts. It also eschews rhetorics of transformation that presume an incompleteness, a brokenness, a not-yet-enough-ness on the part of students. Thus situated, “Just Show Up” sounds a lot like accompaniment.

Variations on the theme of accompaniment are showing up in composition scholarship as well. In their edited collection, *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service Learning and the University*, Jessica Restaino and Laurie JC Cella (2013) bring together scholarly voices who describe relationality in

university-sponsored projects. In her piece from the collection, Paula Mathieu suggests that there is still not enough research being done that really “explores how well community organizations are actually being served by university partnerships” (24). Likewise, in their contribution Paul Feigenbaum, Sharayna Douglas, and Maria Lovett suggest that we should “strive to put people and relationships before institutional interests” and then go on to problematize the way institutional interests make the privileging of people and relationships unsustainable (34). Lorelei Blackburn and Ellen Cushman suggest that relationships be studied as “central products” of community literacy work.

In most of the community literacy scholarship that we have looked at, the product has been presumed to be of primary importance . . . the emphasis within the culture of community literacy is on the products that students create and on the products that community members need. And this makes perfect sense, because the products are one of the primary learning outcomes for outreach and engagement. However, because we argue that relationships are part of the product, we feel that a shift in focus is needed to enable consideration of not only how we produce end products/outcomes, but, more import, the relationships that we build along the way. (162)

Blackburn and Cushman’s attention to the relationships that surround textual products is important. However, their situating of community relationships as alternative products is problematically colonial—a perpetuation of a modernist paradigm. Instead of being critical of Blackburn and Cushman, I see that their use of capitalistic language exemplifies the struggle to ascribe and assess the value of community relationships in a

way that respect communities as well as benefit the sponsor-scholar whose institutional allegiances require a modernistic accounting of their professional endeavors.

Despite its problematically capitalistic language, Blackburn and Cushman's piece highlights one of the key problems with privileging texts in the (e)valuation of community writing: "Rhet/Comp scholars usually consider writing as the product of engagement initiatives. However, when we focus on writing as the product, then, after the writing is finished, no further interaction between the community, students, professors, or university is needed" (175). Blackburn and Cushman's observation specifically describes the problematic way the university is often at the center of both the *what* and *for whom* of many of our research projects.

II. Enacting Relational Methodologies: Looking Back at AIC

During the program's tenure, incarcerated artists and AIC faculty created many interesting projects. Of course, not every project associated with Arts in Corrections can be described as relational or decolonial. However, the following section highlights a few AIC projects where relationality was built into both the vision and implementation of the projects. Both with ArtsWork and *At Night I Fly*, project creators carefully considered the needs of the overlapping networked communities where the projects were happening and dialectically responded to local authorial purposes.

ArtsWork

Not long after its inception, incarcerated artists and AIC faculty began imagining and enacting collaborative projects with communities inside and outside the prison. In

many cases, the impetus for the projects was expressed interest on the part of incarcerated artists to participate in meaningful ways with the arts community outside the prison.

These organic, individual projects eventually led, in the mid 1980s, to the establishment of ArtsWork, “an innovative statewide prison-based public art program” (Cleveland 1994). Cleveland notes “as a result, members of more than 100 communities throughout the state have experienced prisons and the people who live and work in them as highly visible community contributors.” Cleveland offers the following examples of ArtsWork projects:

- Inmate artists, organized as a permanent mural crew at the California Institution for Women, prepared backdrop scenery for a theatrical production by the Exceptional Children’s Foundation, a Los Angeles-based program for children with developmental disabilities.
- An inmate production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, was presented to an audience of more than 600 non-inmate persons at San Quentin Prison. Donated proceeds benefited Bay area victims’ rights organizations.
- The combined efforts of muralists from the California Institution for Men and the California Institution for Women produced a series of permanent murals for the senior center at Angeles Plaza in downtown Los Angeles.
- A joint community mural project instituted at the California Training Facility at Soledad produced 10 outdoor murals for the cities of Oceanside, Monterey, and Gonzales. (60-61)

ArtsWork projects connected incarcerated artists with other incarcerated artists as well as with specific communities outside the prison. I think it is significant that many projects

focused on supporting children and the elderly. Although I cannot say for sure, based on my own experience teaching inside I imagine that cross-generational connections were made in response to expressed interest on the part of the participating artists.

In the case of *Waiting For Godot*, the public audiences were bused into the prison, creating unprecedented community access to both the physical interior of San Quentin and the quality of artistic work happening therein. Jackson writes extensively about his experiences performing in *Godot* in his co-authored memoir. He highlights the way that the *Godot* production literally opened up San Quentin to folks who would not have had interest or access otherwise:

During the later stages of rehearsal, nearly every day someone from Beckett's world showed up to give advice and to see how the play progressed. Theater groups from San Francisco and elsewhere in the Bay Area stopped by; drama students from Stanford, Cal, and San Francisco State came in. Theater folk and directors from France, Sweden, and Austria came by. Some Swedish royalty also visited. Alice Smith, from San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, volunteered as our stage manager and acting coach. (*By Heart* 104)

At one point during the lead-up to *Godot*, the director, Jan Jonson, gave Samuel Beckett a chapbook of Jackson's poems. Jackson writes about how significant it was for him to know that Beckett had read his work (105). With both the ArtsWork mural projects and the *Godot* production, relationality is in the details of the relationships that formed and the small yet significant gestures, like Jonson's connecting of Jackson and Beckett. It is also represented in the longitudinal look at how relationships were sustained once the projects ended. As evidenced by their joint memoir, Jackson and Tannenbaum (the

poetry teacher who first encouraged Jackson to audition) are still in contact. Jonson has also returned to visit Jackson, as has his daughter.

At Night I Fly

Michel Wenzel's film *At Night I Fly*, discussed in Chapter 5, showcased the AIC program at New Folsom. Before the film premiered in the U.S. at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, Wenzel returned to New Folsom to watch the film with the AIC/CAP participants. After the showing, he met with a few of the men who featured prominently in the film to talk with them about their reaction. It was an emotional encounter. One participant in the debriefing pointed out that other film crews, including one from National Geographic, come to the prison but no one had ever come back. It seems really important that the first people in the U.S. to see *At Night I Fly* were the incarcerated men who read their poems in the film. Wenzel's commitment to returning to New Folsom to watch the film with Jackson, Williams, and others, calls back to Shawn Wilson's articulation of relationality and relational accountability. It also resonates with what community literacy scholars like Blackburn and Cushman are aiming for—relationships that outlive projects. A discussion of relationships that outlive projects leads me to the discussion of where AIC may be headed.

III. Envisioning Relational Methodologies: Looking Forward at New Folsom

As I discussed in Chapter 1, AIC officially died in 2003. The remaining artist facilitators around the state who had taken posts in the Bridging Education program were given pink slips in 2009. Carlson then moved to Mental Health Services and starting

using the two words to describe art programs that he had spent all of his AIC years disavowing—*therapy* and *recreation*. Those two significant rhetorical concessions were made strategically. The federal mandate for mental health services requires both activities for men receiving mental health supervision. Since this remixed version of AIC/CAP responds to the mandate, AIC/CAP receives nominal funds from Mental Health Services that are cobbled together with some monies from the Inmate Welfare Fund, private donations, and hundreds of volunteer hours. Shaping AIC so that it fit inside a rhetoric of mental health—art as therapy and art as recreation—literally bought the remixed version of AIC/CAP some crucial time while the political dust of AIC’s demise settled.

Meanwhile, Carlson has championed the AIC program in both political and public circles. He was on a panel that presented to the California Legislative Joint Committee on The Arts, a state senate committee chaired by Senator Curren Price. He also secured an audience with the California Inspector General three times, twice as a public commenter and once as an invited speaker on the agenda. In an effort to get before public audiences, Carlson has traveled, mostly at his own expense, to *At Night I Fly* screenings in Connecticut, New York, California, and Canada, in order to conduct question and answer sessions following the screenings. Additionally, since 2003 Carlson and his wife have housed and fed most of the volunteers who he has brought to the prison and organized house concerts for the musicians to offset the personal expenses they accrue as volunteers. For Carlson, the work of keeping the skeleton of AIC/CAP together has been exhausting and personal. His actions typify Paula Mathieu’s (2013) description of community work:

I now realize how hard, and perhaps inevitably unsustainable, tactical, hopeful community work can be. Committing oneself to starting a project also means inevitably facing an ending, sometimes a painful one. Tactical work requires—or at least signs us up for—a continual act of reinvention, of starting from scratch, going back to square one and having the courage to face the possibility of work not happening, but hoping and working so it will. And sometimes things come full circle. (18)

In the case of AIC/CAP, it seems, for the moment, like there is a reasonable possibility that the program, or at least its remix, might be coming (back) to life.

The September 15, 2013 Biannual Report of the California Rehabilitation Oversight Board (C-ROB), chaired by the California Inspector General, strongly suggested that AIC be (re)instituted at a statewide level: “The board reviewed the Arts in Corrections pilot program and is pleased with the initial results. The department should continue working toward developing a dedicated Arts in Corrections program, to be administered statewide.” The C-ROB report details collaboration between The California Arts Council (CAC), California Lawyers for the Arts (CLA), and the William James Association, with CLA bringing in grant monies from the California Arts Council, National Endowment for the Arts, and the Andy Warhol, Gerbode, and San Francisco Foundations. The proposed AIC program is based on pilot studies conducted in 2012 at San Quentin State Prison, Folsom State Prison, Salinas Valley State Prison, and the Correctional Treatment Facility. Based on the success of the pilot studies, C-ROB is recommending that the State of California allocate \$1.214 million dollars over the next

two years to develop AIC programs at nine institutions (“California Rehabilitation Oversight Board” 28).

The details of the C-ROB report speak to the importance of relationality in both overt and implicit ways. The recommendations are based on collaborative efforts between a host of named private and public entities. And behind the named collaborators is the obscured work of folks like Carlson who have creatively worked to keep relational channels open during the decade since AIC/CAP’s official *death*. And Carlson is not the only unseen contributor to AIC’s possible (re)birth. Many of the actors who have been working in, or on behalf of, AIC have been introduced in the preceding pages—Spoon Jackson, Marty Williams, Michel Wenzler, Judith Tannenbaum, and Larry Brewster to name a few. They are joined by untold others not named here—incarcerated writers who have been brave enough to cry in class and incarcerated writers who work to have their work published in local and national publications, mothers who serve on the Inmate Family counsel, wives who have come to hear their incarcerated husbands’ poetry read at Barnes and Noble by volunteers from the Sacramento Poetry Society, and grown children who have testified at the senate hearings. And then there are the non-human actors—rooms with arrangeable tables and chairs, lined paper, memos authorizing the use of pencils, memos authorizing visiting teachers, and memos authorizing concerts on the yard. Whatever AIC/CAP may become, it will be because of closely tended relationships in a complex web of actors.

IV. A Call for More Joiners

The momentum in Composition and related disciplines to center relationality must be predicated by a close and careful look at how a lingering coloniality, made manifest in modernistic epistemologies and structures of study, works ever and always to constrain and (re)construct relational projects. Framing Composition's work off-campus with the essential self-reflective questions of *what* and *with/for whom* have begun to open up space for a more critical attention to our own complicity in the communities with or on whose behalf we have attempted projects. As an expansion of these essential questions I have attempted to add my own story of confusing good intention with relational work.

Tomlinson and Lipsitz suggest that we think about what we do as *joining*. I appreciate their metaphor, but also see that opportunities exist to *literally* join work that is already happening. And I see that although *joining* does not inoculate us from colonial postures, it nonetheless offers a basic structure where the sponsor-scholar is not the essential hub of the activity or its gatekeeper. As has been demonstrated, what made AIC such a successful program during its thirty-year tenure was its foundational understanding that “rather than introducing a cultural community in prison, [Artist Facilitators] were joining one” (Cleveland 59). Making opportunities the primary goal of the program permitted AIC to act with some level of sovereignty and flexible invention at each institution—some institutions built up programs that privileged writing, others focused on visual or performing arts, still others, like New Folsom over the last twenty years, followed the interest of both incarcerated participants and outside community members in building a strong music program. In each case, AIC programs organically followed the strongest relational threads to build contingent programs that met a host of articulated needs and desires. In this way, even though its programs spanned more than

just writing programs, AIC offers offers scholar-sponsors an instructive history of what opportunities and options might look like in Composition's off-campus work.

What the history of AIC, and my own critique in the previous pages, do not suggest are specific ways for sponsor-scholars to meet the demands of their individual structures of professional advancement. This is not an oversight. Of course scholar-sponsors employed by academic institutions have quotas and pressures to publish. Nonetheless, these unavoidable structural demands to which we consent cannot be drivers in the creation or sustentation of community projects because, as Blackburn and Cushman point out, in such instances the end of the project signals the end of the relationship between the university and the community. And, I would add, situations where project termination is concomitant with a severing of relational ties carry a distinct and dangerous colonial possibility.

Eli Goldblatt (2007) suggests two important questions that relate to the story I have told here. In thinking about the relationship between the university and the neighborhood he asks, "Is there a way that neighborhood centers themselves could pursue an agenda that universities would respond to on terms dictated by the neighborhoods?" and "Could a different model of research and outreach support a community-based agenda?" In response to his own question, Goldblatt suggests that what we need is a "theory of action devised for neighborhoods rather than for higher education." Goldblatt goes on to call for a theory that "see[s] individual learners as whole people" and a methodology that helps "university partners [be] sensitive to the entire mission of local agencies, not just researchers studying subjects in sites or educators supervising students in field placements" (123). Goldblatt's important questions are informed by a clear

understanding that he is a community member in the community where he attempting to enact and support projects. Hence the title of the monograph: *Because We Live Here*.

In the context of my work at New Folsom, a second and equally significant remix of Goldblatt's title informs the work. The choices I make as a sponsor scholar must remember, "I do *not* live here." At the end of the day, I submit my manila colored visitor card to the officer at the main gate, sign out, put my driver's license back in my wallet and dig in my purse for my car keys as I wait for a break in the stream of vehicles carrying second watch custody staff away from the prison to wherever they go. Sometimes I cry when I am driving away. Other times I turn up the music and roll the windows down. But however I go, I always leave. And that inevitable leaving must fundamentally inform what I do when I am inside. To the extent that I write myself into the center of the story at New Folsom or make the writers therein my teaching subjects, I do colonial work that cannot possibly serve the community. And, as Williams reminds me often, the community does not need serving in the ways that outsiders imagine it anyway. The community needs joiners—as many as are willing to add their bit, in the moment, to the work already underway.

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