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When prisoners dare to become scholars: prison education as resistance

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ABSTRACT

As an introduction to this special issue on prison education, this article seeks to radically reframe how academic literature addresses and understands the carceral classroom. The primary lens through which prison education is evaluated is as a means of reducing recidivism. In this rhetorical autoethnography, we write back against that assertion, arguing that prison education is far more than a tool for crime reduction. Using a series of autoethnographic glimpses, we offer a view inside the classroom behind bars and demonstrate that prison education is a means of resistance. By choosing to attend classes, prisoners defy gendered norms of hegemonic masculinity in order to resist the societal norm that prisoner lives do not matter.

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“Mr. Key, one of our students died this weekend.”

I barely heard him say that over the shuffle of inmates moving in and out of classrooms. Amidst the clank of metal chairs against the floor, books and folders being dropped on desks, and general chatter between friends who only cross paths in the education wing, I almost missed this comment. He didn’t come up to my desk to tell me. He said it so casually from his seat that it was like he was telling me the score of a football game.

I smirked. Prisoners tend to have something of a sick sense of humor. It helps them deal with the reality of incarceration. Over my years teaching in the prison classroom, they’d told me all kinds of things to try to get a rise out of me. I wasn’t going to fall for it. Not this time.

“That’s not funny,” I said, scoffing without even looking up. “That’s really not an okay thing to joke about.”

“I’m not joking,” he said back, the casual tone gone from his voice and replaced with a cold seriousness. “He really died.”

I looked up to see if there was any hint on his face that this was a ruse, but my eyes didn’t go to him. They focused not on a person, but on a chair. By this time, the rest of my students had made it into the classroom. Since speech is a required course for their associate’s degree and I was the only one who taught the class, every chair should have been full. Today, that wasn’t true.

I stared for a moment that felt like an hour at the empty chair. Last week, a student sat there and, along with the rest of the class, struggled to make it through an exercise in which he had to speak for one minute without saying “um.” Today, he was gone. Not absent, but gone. Today, he was never coming back.

In prison classes, your students are assigned to be in that location for the time of the class. The prison does not tolerate dismissing class early once you’re there except under extraordinary circumstances. Learning of the death of one of my students was not extraordinary. Whether or not we wanted to, we were there for the next three hours.

We spent the next hour talking about our missing classmate. There were no grief counselors. No ceremonies wherein the student body was able to gather, to commemorate, to mourn. There was only us, in our classroom, talking together. We talked about the circumstances of how he died. We talked about his life. We talked about what it meant to die in prison. At one point, one of my students noted that he would never get his degree. “What’s the point of all this,” he asked, “if any one of us could end up like him?”

In this rhetorical autoethnography, we attempt to grapple with the meaning of teaching and learning within prison. Or, as my student put it, what’s the point? From Key’s experiences in the classroom, our argument emerges that education functions as a means of resistance to hegemonic masculinity, even to the point of neglecting survival, in order to achieve individual worth.

Our method, like Key’s students and ourselves, defies traditional definition. The method is, as we are, what Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira called

betweeners. Neither here nor there, but in-between. We are not insider–outsiders but betweeners inhabiting the blur surrounding these two identities. We are not the identities on either side of the hyphen ... but we live in the hyphen, we straddle the hyphen, we are the hyphen.¹

Michael Middleton et al. justified participatory rhetorical methods through a history of rhetorical practice.² They began with Edwin Black’s work on decentering the speaker, followed by Raymie E. McKerrow’s focus on the multitude of publics, and concluded with Michael Calvin McGee’s work on fragmentation to argue that rhetoric could and ought to be experienced *in situ* rather than on paper.³ Rhetorical practice examined *in situ*, however, dates much further back than 2015. In the sixth century B.C.E., the Greeks were already combining rhetoric and introspection. According to Nathan Crick, Anaximander was the first to introduce first-person writing into the rhetorical culture of Greece. Heraclitus further unified the first-person perspective to rhetoric when he stated, “I searched out myself” to explain how he came to realize his claims. Per Crick, this statement created “the possibility that there is some form of universal knowledge that can be acquired through self-investigation.”⁴

When autoethnography is paired with an understanding of rhetoric, the persuasive effects of discourse can be felt, rather than simply described. Middleton et al. argued that “rhetoric is not simply words on a page that the rhetorical critic examines to write up more words on a page Rhetoric encompasses the visual, aural, affective, aesthetic, tactile, visceral dimensions of meaning making.”⁵ This mirrors Diversi and Moreira’s claim that autoethnography’s value can rest in “bringing visceral and street knowledge to scholarly texts in undiluted forms, without the editorial process of postpositivistic methods of justification/interpretation; by inviting the reader to participate in the

making of scholarly ‘analysis’ through our open-endedness and messiness in representation.”⁶ By itself, “autoethnography can provide rich descriptions to highlight the similarities and differences across diverse cultural standpoints.”⁷

With that approach in mind, we set the stage for our project. One of the most often utilized justifications for education in prison is the reduction in recidivism. A recent study by the RAND Corporation, which led to President Barack Obama’s implementation of an experimental program to return Pell grant eligibility to prisoners, showed that prisoners earning degrees were significantly less likely to commit crime upon release.⁸ In the eyes of policy makers, then, my purpose as a prison educator is to reduce crime, while my students are there to train to become “productive” citizens upon release. If success is measured by a student being released and not committing crimes, then my student became a failure upon his death. What about the students who will not leave, either through untimely death or because of life sentences? Are they always already failures? Or does prison education mean something more than the prevention of future crimes?

The carceral literature is replete with analyses about prisons and prisoners. “Though these analyses offer important critiques of the prison industrial complex and the expansion of imprisonment, they fail to provide sufficient commentary on the lived experiences of inmates.”⁹ If we are going to answer my questions, we need to understand my students and me in this space as whole people. Messy, complex, contradictory bodies acted upon by sources of power, both within and without, as they reify and resist the power of their assigned racial and gendered identities. We need others—we need us to understand them as more than what we think they are. They are not only defined by their carceral state; they are also raced and gendered. This essay, through a series of biographical glimpses from Key’s experience teaching inside prison, attempts to work through the meaning of prison education and how his students “live in the hyphen” between the definitions imposed on us by ourselves and others.¹⁰ While the carceral system reduces students to their identification numbers, we want to explore the interplay of rhetorical constructions of race, gender, and power, mediated through the lens of Key’s experience, as they play out in the prison classroom.

Glimpse 1: getting inside

At most units, the education section is fairly close to the main picket. I think they designed this to keep outsiders, like me, from seeing the inner workings of the prison. This unit is decidedly different. At this one, education happens at the furthest corner of the prison.

To get there, you cross through the main picket and then walk to a T-intersection where a guard sits idly at their desk. You turn, start walking, and don’t stop until you’ve reached the edge of the building. The first thing you pass is the cafeteria, holding your nose at the scent of stale processed food that permeates the doorway. You duck around a line of men you swear could be your grandfather as they wait, most with canes, at the pill window for their day’s medications. On the other side of the hallway is the entrance to the chapel. They like to name them things like the “Chapel of the Prodigal Son,” a reminder that even the pious are still wretched. It’s supposed to be there to serve all kinds of religions, but this one, like most of them, has doors adorned with stained-glass crosses for door handles.

You pass by day rooms full of men crowded around ancient television sets, staring with glazed eyes at images of *Wheel of Fortune* or soap operas. They don’t notice as I walk by.

After that, you walk by the “dorms,” where inmates are housed in individual cubicles instead of traditional cells. Typically, there are any number of men waiting at the gates for the guard to decide to release them into the hallway. Finally, at the end of the hallway is the commissary, something of a prison general store where the men can purchase “luxuries” like potato chips and non-prison-issue toothpaste.

Outside the education wing, students sit and wait for their teachers to arrive before the guards will let them inside. On the other side of the metal doors, guards sit in the lobby of the air-conditioned library. In the hallway, the cool breeze of the other side is replaced with wave after wave of misty steam from the nearby laundry. The mildew smell of wet clothes is so thick you almost choke on your way in.

You head inside and downstairs to the floor with the classrooms. If you’re lucky, the guards have already unlocked your classroom and you can wait in there. If you’re not, you wait until one comes to let you in. One day, while I’m waiting, I decide to kill time by reading the posters hanging in the lobby. Most are announcements of classes and mandatory forms about preventing coercion and sexual abuse. One of them, however, stands out amongst the others.

It’s a hand clutching a rolled and crumpled paper I think the designer thought looked like a diploma. Above it is the word “acheivement.” The poster is clearly supposed to resemble the types of motivational posters you tend to see in grade school classrooms. Someone along the way decided the \$2–3 price tag for the real thing was much too steep and had a prisoner make one himself, complete with a mangled image and misspelled word. In some ways, this poster is rather indicative of how education is valued here.

Glimpse 2: complacent

On this day, like many others, I’ve just left shakedown. Much like going through airport security—you take off your shoes and belt and put all your belongings through a scanner. You walk through a metal detector, then get a thorough pat search from one of the gray-suited guards. At first, it’s invasive having a stranger’s hands all over you. In time, it becomes just part of the job.

Today, I’m not even thinking of the uncomfortable contact as I head past a line of offices. The warden, the chaplain, and numerous secretaries stay here. Despite the flat concrete floor, the rest of it might as well be a hallway in any business building in the country. The walls are lined with framed awards and certificates and interspersed with photos of employees and announcements about bake sales. I turn the corner and see the main picket in the distance.

The main picket is the central entrance to the prison. Its painted metal bars are where the office borders the prison. On my side, everything is wooden, painted, and polished. On the other, it’s a labyrinth of red brick and gray metal.

On this day, I happen to look above me as I head towards the gate. Something catches my eye. I don’t know if these signs have always been here and I never noticed or if they’re new. Hung with transparent fishing wire, these words seem to hover above all who pass through the gates: Competence, Commitment, Compliance, Complacency.

Somehow, I don’t think the last two espoused values are for the employees.

The system doesn't care if the prisoners are competent and they certainly give no regard to whether they achieve competence. What they do expect—what they demand at the end of a baton and a can of mace—is that prisoners comply without complaint. These qualities, of course, are the opposite of what makes a good student.

Glimpse 3: principal understanding

“Can I see you for a minute?”

This is the last thing I want to hear today. I've just arrived at a prison unit where my class was supposed to start a few minutes ago. Like many units, this one is located far away from civilization. You can only get there through a series of backroads so bad that cell-phone companies don't even pretend to try to offer service. Like many days, I'd left in what should have been enough time, only to get caught in construction, behind an 18-wheeler far too large to be on roads this curvy, or—like today—behind an elderly driver who was blissfully unconcerned with both the speed limit and that other people had places to be.

This woman isn't a guard, but if she'd been in a dark gray uniform, she could have easily passed for one. She looks at me with one side of her mouth tightened, something Paul Ekman identified as a universal expression of contempt.¹¹ Not sure I have an option to decline her “request,” I follow her into her office.

“I don't think we've met. I'm the principal here.”

For most of the existence of my college program, we were under the supervision of the prison high school program. We're not anymore, but we still share classrooms. Every so often, they like to remind us that this section of the building is theirs. I bite my lip and extend my hand in greeting. She looks down at it, then back up at me without doing anything.

“I understand you were late today. I know you called to let us know, but we can't have instructors showing up late.”

She glances at the clock. My eyes follow to notice that, like practically every clock at the prison, it's set to a different time than the others. The irony is not lost on me that her complaining to me about when I showed up is delaying my class much longer than if she'd just left well enough alone.

“We can't have *offenders* loitering in the hallway like this. It's your job to be here on time. After all, *security comes first*.”

Offenders, not students. Security, not rehabilitation, not education, comes first.

This person is an educator. Someone whose job it is to run a program helping these men earn their General Educational Development (GED) certifications. And even then, they're not students to her. They're security threats. Like I said, she could have passed for a guard.

Count time

Every so often, your class is interrupted by a guard. Sometimes, you're mid-lecture and can pause, while at other times, your students are the middle of an activity, an exam, or—even worse—a speech. Some of the more considerate guards wait until the student finishes speaking, but most don't. They just burst in and everything stops. Your students stand up from their desks and proceed to line up in the hallway to be counted. The prison

system does this periodically throughout the day to make sure everyone is where they are supposed to be. Some counts happen within their expected time window, others drag on for hours, but one thing remains true, no one is going anywhere until everyone is accounted for.

In these breaks, these ruptures between narratives, I will attempt to do the same. I am convinced that every person is both produced through and produces discourse. Bronwyn Davies said that people are “constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate.”¹² Michel Foucault said that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together,” but these both seem far too scientific an understanding for something so real.¹³ As Claudio Moreira put it: “Foucault cannot possibly know my pain better than I do.”¹⁴

We seek within the theorized visceral experiences of Key’s students and ourselves to locate the discourses that surround us and produce us, all the while being produced by us. The discourses flowing from the prison itself, through its guards, its signs, and its principals, are that my students are always already a threat, always already dangerous. Security, not the well-being of the men housed within the iron walls, is of paramount value to prison guards.¹⁵ In order to justify this seemingly inhumane policy, employees of the prison “resist the expectation that those doing work in prison are sadistic and cruel by emphasizing their moral superiority to prisoners.”¹⁶

Prisoners are stripped of their autonomy. They are required to appear when ordered, to demonstrate their complacency and compliance to authority, and even when they seek education, their mere presence is viewed as a threat. Their clothes, their belongings, even their ability to grow their hair is taken from them. The prison system, then, circulates a discourse that prisoners are threats in need of surveillance and control.

There is one thing, however, that cannot be taken from them: their agency, their will to control their own lives (even in small ways). Judith Butler said that “to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination.”¹⁷ bell hooks put it more succinctly, writing that to be marginalized is not the same as living within “a site of deprivation ... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”¹⁸

Count time is over now. The students have taken their seats. Let us proceed from the land of deprivation into the space of resistance.

Glimpse 4: liberal

Today is the first of the fall semester. My new students and I are waiting outside the classroom for the guard to unlock it. I scan the group for any familiar faces, someone who’d taken my class before and decided they wanted another one, and find only one. Between his silver hair and wrinkled face, he could easily pass for my grandfather. He’d been in one of my previous classes, but dropped it to focus on his other courses that semester with the promise he’d take mine the next time it came around.

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Key,” he says, hobbling towards me with the use of his wooden cane. “I’ve been waiting to take your class.”

I chuckle, knowing that I have a reputation for having one of the toughest courses in the curriculum. “We’ll see if you still feel that way at the end of the semester,” I reply.

“I should have never dropped your class to stay in Sociology.”

“Oh, you didn’t like that class? Was it that hard?”

“No, it wasn’t the work. It was that *woman*.”

The way he says *woman*, disdain dripping off the syllables, worries me. He doesn’t call her professor or even teacher. To him, she doesn’t have a name or a title: she’s just a woman.

He leans in like he’s telling me some damnable secret, bellowing in a loud whisper: “She’s a liberal.”

I look back at him with a smirk. Clearly, none of the prisoners who fascinate themselves by watching us pull into the parking lot had told him about my Bernie Sanders campaign sticker. “And what do you think I am?”

“Well, you’re at Texas A&M, so I know you’re okay.”

Glimpse 5: man up

In my classes, it’s not uncommon to see students of all races at the same table. I have no idea how these same people act once they leave the shelter of the classroom, but for those brief hours, they mostly treat each other as equals. To be fair, there is the occasional racist who tries to name his mock company something that abbreviates to SS or KKK, but the class on the whole tends to treat that as a joke.

Instead of focusing on what divides them, they find ways to unify themselves. While they are, of course, incarcerated, that doesn’t come up much at all. What does get mentioned is gender. It’s not uncommon for them to address the class as “Men” during a speech, something I think they’ve learned from attending religious services. Manhood, with all its masculine trappings, is ever present in my classroom like an extra student.

For the most part, this is benign. That is, until we start talking about tolerance.

Today, we’re talking about audience analysis for their upcoming persuasive speech. I explain that offending one’s audience alienates them and makes it much harder to change their minds, so they should avoid saying things that offend them. As I mention not saying things that are racist, heads nod along. When I mention sexism, there is notably less movement. And then we arrive at LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Aromantic).

“What’s that mean?” one student asks. He’s been in for a while and this term is a new one for him.

Before I can answer, another seemingly well-meaning student blurts out, “You know, faggots.”

I stop, taking a moment to gather my thoughts and cool my temper before addressing the hateful rhetoric. I guess I’m not as good as hiding my disgust as I thought, because the same student responds again.

“What? That’s what they are. Faggots.”

“Stop using that word,” I reply sharply. My normal light-hearted sarcastic tone is gone from my voice and other students take notice.

“Come on, Mr. Key. What kind of man wants to suck another dude’s dick?”

“Plenty,” I say back. The same students who looked up at my previous response now stare more intently. I can almost see the wheels turning in their heads. They’re starting to wonder if I’m gay. They start to murmur amongst themselves. Amidst the voices, I hear someone who says he’s sure he heard me mention a girlfriend.

“My point is,” I continue, “you never know what someone’s orientation is. And even if they’re not LGBTQIA themselves, they might have friends or relatives that are. Or they might just be offended, period.”

My example seems to calm the murmurs. They might have taken my example to mean that I have a gay friend, which justifies their continued comfort in the belief that I’m heterosexual.

Glimpse 6: smiling

Class is over, and I’ve just finished answering the lingering questions of the last student to stay behind after everyone else has left. I find a lot of them tend to do that for fear of being embarrassed by asking what they think is a stupid question in front of their peers. As I round the corner, I see a line of students in white crowding the hallway. Under most circumstances, I wait for them to leave instead of exercising my privilege as a member of the free world to cut in front of the line. Today, I need to rush out to make it to my next class.

Guards will often yell “make a hole!” at a crowd of these men, who’ve been trained to move to the side to let their supposed superiors through. To me, this is the kind of thing one might yell at animals, so I refuse to do it. Instead, I opt for “pardon me, fellas” or “excuse me, gentlemen” as I make my way through the crowd.

As I get to the bottom of the staircase, a solidly packed crowd blocks the exit. Before I can beg their pardon, I hear the reason they’re stopped. A male guard, a gruff man with a 1970s-style moustache, has decided today would be a good day to dress down one of the students. What offense merited this type of treatment? I lean in to hear more clearly.

“What are you doing smiling all the time?” the white guard barks at the black student. “Is there something funny about this to you?”

He was being screamed at. For. Smiling.

I can feel the temperature rise in my face as my skin goes flush in frustration. In the cartoon version of my life, steam is billowing out of my ears as the kettle whistle blows, signaling things are about to boil over. This guy isn’t even my student, but everything in me wants to defend him.

I bite down hard on my tongue. It’s the only way I can stop it from taking a life of its own and yelling back at the guard. Everything in me wants to say something, to defend the student. Smiling is not a crime, even if you’re wearing white in here.

I stay silent. Mouthing off to a guard is a quick way to getting kicked off the unit, to voiding my contract, to losing my ability to help my students make a better life.

I stand and stew, hoping the other students don’t view my silence as complicity. I move, trying to position myself within the guard’s eyeline. Surely if he sees me, he’ll stop.

He never looked up. If he saw me, he didn’t acknowledge it. I’m fairly certain he didn’t, since he almost closed the door with me standing there until the students yelled there was a teacher trying to get out. When I left, there was no look of shock, no hint of embarrassment, no indication that he cared that I’d seen what he’d done. As I walked past, I wondered to myself what parts of my soul I’d traded to do this job.

Count time

Within the marginalization of the carceral environment, prisoners develop different norms than the free world. “Prisoners develop their own rules and values to cope with

their time behind bars. The dominant ideology is that of survival at all cost.”¹⁹ A large part of the ideology of survival concerns establishing difference, specifically between prisoners and their captors, “by sharply distinguishing themselves from prison staff through a set of prescribed behaviors and attitudes.”²⁰ Prisoners maintain this separation, along with some semblance of autonomy, by “taking care of [their] own problems and never cooperating with the law.”²¹ Simultaneous to causing separation, the ideology of survival also makes possible solidarity between inmates as they focus on the bridges that unite them in their struggle against the oppressors. Two bridges worth examining here are race and gender.

While mediated depictions of prison might depict the carceral environment as a continual race war, the literature is decidedly mixed in terms of racial conflict. James B. Jacobs wrote: “Racial divisions are not the only cleavages that exist within the prisoner subculture, but in many contemporary prisons racial politics set the background against which all prisoner activities are played out.”²² More recent studies, however, are not as certain. In an analysis of the entire federal prisoner population, Scott D. Camp et al. did not find race to be a significant factor in prison misconduct or conflict. Beth M. Huebner found the opposite to be true, specifically in regards to black prisoners. Research has, however, found race to be a factor within security concerns, gang membership, and how prisoners adjust to the carceral environment.²³

Anna Curtis offered a possible reason as to why race is not as significant a factor within prison culture as might be assumed: the treatment of prisoners by guards. “Correctional officers respond to prisoners as if they possess a uniform gender identity that is dangerously masculine.”²⁴ Curtis was clear that she was not arguing that, despite its stated purposes, the prison does not treat inmates in a colorblind or race-neutral manner: “Rather, they are all treated as though they are members of a racial minority, regardless of their actual racial identity.”²⁵ The carceral environment, then, might be the one identifiable space where white men lose their racial privilege. For perhaps the first time in their lives, white men experience the same oppression from which black men cannot escape inside or outside of prison walls. This discursive deletion of race by correctional officers leaves male prisoners with only a single remaining bridge: gender.

With the discourses flowing from guards’ treatments of inmates effectively neutralizing race, prisoners retreat into masculinity as a form of solidarity and autonomy. When a man enters prison, he loses access to all the societal markers of hegemonic masculinity “through sexual deprivation, loss of autonomy and independence, submission to authority and lack of access to material goods/possessions.”²⁶ As early as 1958, Gresham M. Sykes called this process “figurative castration.”²⁷ More recently, Teresa A. Miller called it “a castrating and infantilising process.”²⁸ Jenny Phillips argued that “without the resources normally available for the enactment of manhood, men in prison are forced to reconstitute their identity and status using the limited available resources.”²⁹ In this space of contested masculinity and limited access to resources, many prisoners compensate through hypermasculine behaviors.

M. Nandi stated that since traditional masculine scripts are unavailable to male prisoners, they reconceptualize masculinity through adapted behaviors, many of which are extreme.³⁰ Hypermasculinity, then, “emphasizes a subset of the qualities of hegemonic masculinity: callous sexual attitudes, high levels of violence, and experiencing danger as exciting.”³¹ Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London were therefore correct when they claimed

that prisons “constitute a key institutional site for the expression and reproduction of masculinity [and] facilitate and accentuate enactments of hegemonic masculinity.”³²

The glimpses into Key’s classroom demonstrate his students’ strong commitment to hegemonic masculinity through their performance of hypermasculine behaviors. Hegemonic masculinity “accentuates male dominance, heterosexism, whiteness, violence, and competition and is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities.”³³ It also “includes a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth.”³⁴ The students’ use of homophobic slurs and derisive attitude towards liberals, particularly liberal women, are symptomatic of their attempts to preserve their masculinity. Queer males are a subordinated masculine group, one the students feel a need to establish their superiority towards. In addition, being perceived as liberal, and therefore promoting or at least tolerant of subordinate masculinity, is also anathema. In both cases, the students used external factors—the graduate school he attended and trying to find evidence to dispute his apparent queerness—to justify Key’s presence in the classroom.

Further, the prisoners are not perpetuating hegemonic masculinity by themselves. The guard mentioned earlier was yelling at an inmate for smiling. His display of happiness violated the masculine prohibition of the public display of emotions besides anger. As Curtis explains, correctional officers enforce hegemonic masculinity as much as, if not more than, the prisoners do themselves.³⁵

While the oppressed prisoners, through their enactment of hypermasculinity, become the oppressors themselves, their masculine performances also serve a liberatory purpose. As hooks notes, places of deprivation also open up spaces for resistance.³⁶ Yvonne Jewkes stated: “As a response to the label *prisoner*, with all its connotations of weakness, conformity, and the relinquishing of power, manliness becomes the primary means of adaptation and resistance.”³⁷ Prisoners instead form a “fratriarchy,” which is distinct from a patriarchy in that, rather than relying on the guidance of a singular figure, “the brothers stand in uneasy relationships with each other, engaged in sibling rivalry while trying to keep the power of the family of man as a whole intact.”³⁸ While perhaps misguided, male prisoners are therefore circulating their own counter-discourse, utilizing masculinity as a means to bond and resist the carceral structure, producing themselves as autonomous men.

That count took longer than the others, but it has finally concluded. It took some time to get everything accounted for. Let’s get back to class.

Glimpse 7: Minute to Win It

It’s the second day of class. As my students shuffle in, one of them walks up to the desk and hands me a slip of paper. By the look and feel, you’d probably think it was a receipt from some retail store. In this case, it’s a lay-in, the colloquial term used for papers inmates are issued every morning telling them the locations and times they’re required to appear that day.

“They put me in your class this week,” he says with a tone designed to indicate he’s not excited to be here. I look up to see a man likely ten years older than me, his skin dark like mahogany from countless hours working outside save for black tattoos scrawled over his hands, neck, and head. From the looks of it, he got them in here.

“Alrighty,” I respond. “Here’s a syllabus, pencil, and some paper. We’ll get you a book once they’re done checking everyone in. For now, though, you need to do Minute to Win It. Everyone else did it on the first day.”

I explain the rules. Minute to Win It is a speech exercise designed to make students aware of their speech disfluencies. To be successful, they have to speak extemporaneously for a single minute without using verbal fillers like “uh” or “um.” While a few make it through on the first time, most flounder and take turns repeating the activity until they’ve accomplished it.

“Doesn’t sound too hard,” he says with a smirk as he takes his position behind the podium.

“So today at work, I had to—um ...”

I slap my hand down on the desk, letting him know he hadn’t made it. The students, having tried and failed over and over at this same task a week before, erupt into laughter. As I open my mouth to tell them to quiet down, the loud bang of metal against concrete cuts their cacophony short.

The student has kicked a desk and sent it sailing into the wall. It reverberates from the impact before toppling over. I quickly glance over my shoulder. Thankfully, no guard heard this.

“Whoa!” I shout. “There’s no place for that in here.” The student, realizing his overreaction, gives me a shushed apology as he sets the desk back upright. He clearly expects some kind of punishment.

Instead, I look back at the rest of the class. “You’re all laughing now, but you weren’t last week.”

I turn back to the student. “Don’t let them fool you, some of them took a dozen times before they made it.”

There was no reason to write him up. That type of behavior is how they survive in here. They’d laughed at him, disrespected him, and he reacted. He’ll do better next time.

He returns to the podium.

“As I was saying ...”

Glimpse 8: no Fs

It’s one of my first semesters teaching in prison and I’ve introduced my new class to Minute to Win It. On the first day we do the exercise, I allot almost the entire three-hour class period to do it. With somewhere around 25 students, it typically takes that long to get them all through.

One of my students, a younger one who always has some sarcastic quip to contribute, is struggling more than others with this. At first, he’s not alone. Most students have finished, but there remains about half a dozen students working on their fifth or sixth try. Slowly, the number begins to shrink.

Six becomes five and I notice him starting to look around to see how many other students are left to complete the activity.

Four becomes three. The cocky swagger is gone from his demeanor and replaced with a wash of nervous anxiety. His voice shakes as he declares that this will be his last attempt before being successful. It isn’t.

We're down to two. The other person has been speaking for over half the time. I look around the room and excitement builds among his classmates. This exercise really serves to unify the class. They struggle together and when someone who's failed many times finally makes it, they erupt in cheers like their team just won the big game. As the seconds tick down, almost every student leans forward on the edge of their seat. All but my other student, whose face cringes further with every passing moment. I wonder if he is secretly hoping the speaker will fail, if only so he won't be the last one.

My thought is interrupted by the timer beeping. The speaker has done it and the beep is drowned out by applause. I'm almost sure that if there had been an orange cooler of Gatorade, they'd have dumped it on him. Faces light up and face towards the speaker, except for the student looking down at the floor like every kid who's been picked last for kickball.

As the speaker takes his seat and the applause fades, I look at my student. He's still looking at the floor and has made no effort to get up in front of the class. I call out to let him know it's his turn.

"I can't do this," he scoffs, flopping back in his seat with a sarcastic smirk to hide his shame. "Just give me a F."

His tone and demeanor tell me this isn't the first time he's said this. Most likely, it's worked every other time as a frustrated teacher gives up and moves on. But not today. Not in my class. "No can do," I retort. "I'm fresh out of F's to hand out today. You'll just have to get up and make an A."

Before he can respond, his fellow students—many of them strangers to him—join in a chorus of encouragement. Amidst the noise, I make out several variations of "Ain't no quitting here," "Give it another shot," and "We believe in you." One of the students stands up and bellows, in his best impression of Rob Schneider in *Waterboy*, "YOU CAN DO IT! YOU CAN DO IT ALL NIGHT LONG!"

I don't remember how many more times it took him. What I do remember is writing the letter "A" in my gradebook next to his name.

Glimpse 9: changing opinions

There's inevitably pushback every time I mention LGBTQIA tolerance. Every class, every semester, the students fight me when I talk about respecting the sexual orientations of others different from their own. This time, in this classroom, has been much worse.

I have one student who just can't let it go. Weeks have passed since the initial lesson, but in every class he comes up with a fresh stock of homophobic arguments. Most of them are just recycled versions of each other, all of them replicating his need to protect his masculine ideals.

On this day, I am tired of it. Before he can start in on his weekly tirade, I start the conversation in a decidedly different manner.

"You talk all the time about the X on your back, right?" I ask. He nods. "Can you remind me what this is?"

"When we get out, we're supposed to have paid our debt to society. Nobody treats us that way, though. No one wants to hire you, nobody rents a place to you except in bad parts of town."

I pause before responding. "So, what you're saying is, you think it's unfair the way you're treated? That nobody should be treated like that?"

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“So if you think it’s unfair for people to treat you that way, why are you okay when that happens to LGBTQIA people?”

Silence falls over the normally noisy classroom. A few other students chuckle at my rebuttal, but most look towards the student to see how he responds. The more time passes, the redder his face gets.

Finally, he scoffs out a retort. “Okay, so don’t discriminate against them, but I don’t want to see them kissing each other in public. I’ve got kids and they shouldn’t have to see that.”

“Okay, let’s work with that logic. What about racists? If they’re okay with interracial couples, but don’t want to see them in public because their kids could see it, is that okay too?”

The student looks around nervously as he becomes aware of the attention of close to a dozen black students. He doesn’t respond. I take the opportunity to move on through today’s lesson, expecting no more from him. About an hour in, he raises his hand. Trying with all my might to stop my eyes from rolling, I call on him.

“I just wanted to say ...” *Oh boy, he’s come up with a response.* “... that I’m changing my position. It’s none of my business if people are gay or not.”

This time, it’s me who is silent.

Count time

While some have argued that the purposes of prison and inmate education mirror each other in a colonialist attempt to civilize those outside the hegemonic power structure, we argue that education within prisons operates as a site of resistance.³⁹ Previous writings about education as resistance only view it in terms of attempts by teachers and students to subvert the educational structure or nationalistic pedagogies, but Key’s experiences in the prison classroom have led us to conclude that it functions as a rupture to challenge the ideology of hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁰

The masculine ideals of “a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth” are undermined by the classroom experience.⁴¹ Key’s students were not competitive; they supported each other in their endeavors to complete Minute to Win It. The one who kicked the desk realized his anger was misplaced and took steps to correct it. The learning environment required them to admit there are things they do not know. They could not simultaneously devalue women and learn from female faculty members. Finally, as the student demonstrated, their homophobic views were also challenged in their roles as students.

Masculinity is, at its core, performative.⁴² In that sense, whether or not they ascribe to masculine ideals, males are forced by hegemonic masculinity to put on a front of sorts. A male, then, “expresses himself, not so much in an inner competitive struggle for achievement, as through a collective toughness, a masculine ‘performance’ recognised and approved by his ‘mates.’”⁴³ Using Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical frame, masculinity is performed as part of “front-stage” behaviors, while the classroom, hidden from the surveillance of other non-student prisoners, offers a “back-stage” where students can be

themselves.⁴⁴ Hans Toch noted that many prisoners drop their masculine fronts when in the private company of university researchers.⁴⁵ We believe the classroom offers them a similar space.

For prisoners, resisting masculinity is not as simple a task as it is for their free-world counterparts. Masculinity, in addition to serving as a means of resistance, is a “survival strategy for prisoners, with a ‘masculine’ front providing legitimate social attire for coping with prison social life.”⁴⁶ Resisting masculinity, even in the back-stage confines of the prison classroom, means forsaking their primary means of survival. Masculinity provides them a way of being viewed as respectable by other inmates, as well as a method to both “conceal their vulnerabilities and avoid exploitation.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

With this burden in mind, We want to return to Key’s student’s question: What is the point of prison education? More to the point: If prison education is, itself, resistance, then what is its goal? What is so important to them that it is worth risking their own survival? When we started this essay two years ago, we did not have an answer to that. Midway through the project, Key received a letter from one of his students on his debate team after their victory over Texas A&M. We will let his words speak for themselves.

I want to formally say “Thank You!” Thank you from the bottom of my heart. My family and society has written me off. As a drug addict who turned to robbery to suicidal binge, I have worked hard for many years to retrain my brain, my thinking, my coping mechanism.

It took everything I had to maintain composure on that stage when we won. I almost lost total control emotionally we had accomplished something so difficult, something that seemed impossible to most. But you not only believed, but knew we could win. The feelings of worth, value, confidence are immeasurable. You gave that to me. I felt like a human, a person that actually *mattered*, after not mattering at all, to anyone.

Prison education resists hegemonic masculinity as a means of resisting not “mattering.” Upon entering prison, prisoners undergo a process Goffman called “mortification of the self,” wherein they are “shaped and coded into an object to be fed into the institutional machinery.”⁴⁸ “One is ground down into the lowly and homogenized status of inmate. The newly initiated prison inmate is refashioned in state-issued clothing and relegated to a small living space shared by individuals of unknown history and status.”⁴⁹ Cutting them off from their loved ones and forcing them into complacency and compliance, the prison system circulates a discourse that prisoners no longer matter. The prison classroom circulates the opposite discourse. For Key’s students, “the adoption of student, artisan, or tradesman identities nourishes the self... ‘Scholar’ and ‘work’ identities also provide an alternative to the dominant masculine hegemony.”⁵⁰

When prisoners enroll in classes, they are participating in a discourse that produces them as scholars instead of inmates, learners instead of threats, people instead of numbers. Key’s students choose to abandon their means of resistance and survival by trading the tools of hegemonic masculinity for paper, pencils, and textbooks. In the classroom, they prove themselves not through violence, but through scholarship. In sum, they break from what they are told they are and dare to become scholars. In this special issue, authors with experience teaching prisoners in a variety of states offer their perspectives on

prison education. In addition, for the first time we are aware of in the history of all the National Communication Association journals, the final article is authored by a group of students and graduates who are currently incarcerated in a Texas prison. We hope you enjoy reading these perspectives on prison education and reform both about and with prisoners.

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