Ante Up: Econocide and the Literacy Game in U.S. Prisons

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> "There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about."
>
> —Jean Rhys

> "The point of collaborative learning is not simply to demystify the authority of knowledge by revealing its social character but to transform the productive apparatus, to change the social character of production. In this regard, it will help to cast consensus not as a "real world" practice but as a utopian one."
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> —John Trimbur

I.

In "(Un)rigging the Literacy Game: Political Literacies that Challenge Econocide," Daniel Cleary and Christopher Wilkey describe writing projects they have implemented in prison and university classrooms, respectively, that serve as sites of resistance to the disempowerment of marginalized voices. Cleary, who teaches writing in a prison, encouraged his inmate students to "mushfake"—which loosely means to fake it until they make it—in dominant modes of literacy and to reflect on this mushfaking through creative writing. Wilkey, who teaches writing at a university in Cincinnati, had his students interview community members of Cincinnati regarding a giant mural of a white politician in a top hat that was placed in their neighborhood without their input. Wilkey's students help vocalize the feelings of the poor and marginalized, who overwhelmingly expressed a sense of displacement from the mural. Cleary and Wilkey frame these acts of resistance as responses to econocide, which affects both those behind walls and those being pushed to the outskirts of their communities through gentrification. Cleary and Wilkey cite Arjun Appadurai, who defines econocide as "new modes of violence playing out across the world in the wake of massive inequalities and the rapidity of change produced by world capitalism" (Appadurai, qtd. in Cleary and Wilkey 45). By situating prison literacy alongside the silencing of those affected by gentrification, Cleary and Wilkey draw attention to the continuum upon which econocide exists.

Cleary and Wilkey's projects do not share much in common, beyond their fundamental resistance to econocide. The collaborative and community based project Wilkey is able to facilitate in the university classroom seems beyond the grasp of the limited means of the prison writing classroom. The positioning of these projects side-by-side opens up the space for much dialogue. As Cleary and Wilkey note,

> The driving force behind such calls as the fight against gentrification and the support of

prison education is the very valid fear that the most vulnerable among us are at risk of not experiencing the benefits that come with economic development and access to formal education. An even starker threat is the very real possibility that people could be altogether removed from the community to make room for financial investment and educational opportunities for only those deemed worthy enough. (45)

Cleary and Wilkey draw attention to the fact that the people who are pushed out by gentrification are one step closer to being removed from their communities altogether and put behind bars. Though such acts of violence seem to exist on a spectrum, the etymology of the word *econocide,* with the suffix "cide," suggests not only the violence mentioned in Appadurai's definition, but death. Whether literal or figurative, econocide entails exclusion akin to death. Another definition of econocide, in fact, specifically refers to "the wave of suicides…linked to the [recent] global economic crisis" (Schott). The state of imprisonment is sometimes referred to as "civil death," (Dayan 25) a legal fiction contrived in order to "extinguish" (25) people from civilization. Non-incarcerated individuals who are pushed to the outskirts of society or otherwise denied access to or participation in dominant Discourse experience a form of social death or negative personhood (25).

In order to combat econocide, Cleary and Wilkey illustrate, we need to make the most of classrooms and the resources available to us to formulate sites of resistance. "At the end of the day," they conclude, "it is developing political literacies that un-strip the authority of oppressive Discourses while assisting economic others in reclaiming their rightful position within the body politic that holds out the best hope for delegitimizing econocide in the public consciousness" (56). Yet how do we go about delegitimizing ideologies ingrained in our consciousness? Toni Morrison notes that our very concept of freedom is predicated upon our history of oppression (38). Centuries of econocide have enabled the rhetoric of freedom to sound louder in contrast. Overcoming econocide will take more than delegitimizing a concept in our public consciousness; it will require changing the structure of that collective altogether. In a sense, we as academics must mushfake our way in the world of politics until we see real change brought about. And even if the situation seems as bleak and unalterable as the walls of a prison itself, we must not stop trying.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges in resisting econocide in the classroom, however, is discrepancy in resources. This particularly pertains to prison writing classrooms, where technology and even basic resources are often lacking. In a 2014 letter, an inmate in a U.S. state prison reports, "You have no idea how hard it is to find a dictionary around here" (Anonymous). Though this predicament might sound shocking to those who have not been inside prison walls, his problem is not uncommon. In a prison writing class in which I serve as research assistant (primarily an intermediary between the prisoners and digital world), students can often only find textbooks that are several decades old and bring them to class to aid with their research. Telling students the few resources they have worked so hard to obtain no longer hold much currency in the dominant Discourses in which they are trying to establish their competency is difficult. Though many of these students are no strangers to insurmountable obstacles, the last thing we want to do is add to this list. Striking the right balance between remedying lack of relevant resources and encouraging mushfaking as a means to success is key.

In many ways, Cleary's project offers an important intervention in critical discourse on American prison literacy, which does not commonly address the need for mastery of dominant Discourses. Mushfaking is premised upon not letting insufficient resources be a deterrent. Cleary and Wilkey cite Nancy Mack: "'Mushfake' means to make do with something less when the real thing is not available. So when prison inmates make hats from underwear to protect their hair from lice, the hats are mushfake" (55). However, though paucity of resources is widely regarded as problematic amongst prison educators, on the flip side it fosters the teaching of non-dominant Discourses that might seem more exciting in their deviation from the norm. Indeed, subjugated Discourse can also be an important form of resistance. "Looking beyond the normative discourse to develop a fuller definition of literacy," states Anne Gere, "entails rehabilitating subjugated discourses and considering how these discourses of difference alter the normative version" (250). Subjugated and non-dominant Discourses are championed by many writing teachers in prisons, who adhere to a therapeutic model of literacy instruction (Sweeney). Gregory Shafer notes of his students who are inmates, "While most high school and college students approach writing as a way to acquire the academic skills needed to survive in the society in which they hope to flourish, these unique pupils approach it as a precious gift that can help give voice to their feelings of consternation, alienation, and pain-feelings that erupt in fonts of warm emotion" (75). Though such representative perspectives can indeed be beneficial for both students and instructors, they also perpetuate the divide between the under-resourced prison writing classroom and the well-equipped university writing classroom. Ironically, for many teachers, the prison writing classroom becomes an escape from the confining parameters of the university classroom. In "Teaching Literature in Prison," Raymond Hedin claims that for both teacher and inmate student, the prison classroom is an escape from the normal routine. Writes Hedin, "[The inmate] escapes to the classroom rather than from it," and for the teacher, "the prison course is inevitably outside the daily routine, the ordinary 'business' of the profession" (282). Consequently, reports Hedin, there is more freedom and opportunity to escape dominant Discourse.

Hedin and Shafer were writing during and after the era of Pell Grant funding, respectively, thus showing the continuity of escapist ideologies amongst prison educators. The end of Pell Grants caused the 350 existing prison college programs to dwindle to only a handful and for resources to be cut (Tregea and Larmour 195). This reinforced the shift from rehabilitative to draconian policies that occurred in American prison reform starting around the 1970s (Davis 51). Subtle differences in the tone during the Pell Grant era are apparent—Hedin does clarify, for instance, that his goal is not to "other" the prison classroom, whereas Shafer seems to revel in the contrast the prison classroom offers. This suggests that resources and infrastructure have some bearing on our expectations and goals, and it further illustrates how the draconian disciplinary policies in place today can potentially cause educators to use therapeutic pedagogies to compensate for this fact.

Cleary focuses on the need for competency in dominant Discourse among inmates and goes a step beyond what much current critical work on prison literacy in America does. Cleary and Wilkey recognize a need to create dialogue about the different ways in which econocide impacts literacy practices. They point out that "fluency in, or even apprenticeship into, prison Discourses can inhibit prisoners' abilities to master dominant secondary Discourses," and thus can prove counterproductive

for inmates when re-entering society and trying to escape the cycle of recidivism which affects 75% of American prisoners (Cooper et. al). Prisoners have typically failed to demonstrate fluency in a dominant secondary Discourse, and even though lack of resources can make this feat difficult, developing "metaknowledge regarding their primary Discourses and their non-dominant secondary Discourses" is a step in the right direction (Cleary and Wilkey 54-55).

The ways in which the academic discourse is affected by the surrounding political discourses becomes increasingly apparent when examining European scholarship on prison writing. In Europe, where in legal terms postsecondary education is viewed as a human right rather than a privilege, prison writings classrooms in Europe are much more developed than the majority of their US counterparts (Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 24). In composition and in other subjects in European prisons, resources are much more widely available. At the flexible school in Danish prisons, students have access to the databases such as *Britannica Online,* online dictionaries, library facts base, nine million newspaper articles from the most important Danish news papers, the largest Danish database with press photos, and all data from the Danish Meteorological Institute ("Prison Education").

In Europe, high quality prison education is viewed as a moral obligation rather than an issue of debate. In "E-Learning in Prison Education in Europe: Recommendations for European Policymakers," for example, Friedrich states:

> Education and training in prisons have to aim at levels of competence which are comparable to those outside the prison…. In today's society, where digital competence is becoming necessary at the workplace as well as in daily life, the chance for ex-offenders to be reintegrated can be greatly improved by offering qualifications in the field of new media and computer use. People lacking digital competence are at risk of exclusion. (5-6)

The statement is representative of the norm; the majority of recent European publications on this issue share the same priorities and concerns.

The lack of resources in prison writing classrooms in America remains an undeniable setback. Attempts to re-integrate international human rights law and incorporate the internet often prove futile; for instance, a recent request to incorporate the internet for educational purposes in New Mexico was denied on the grounds of its being deemed unconstitutional (Lockard). Even when technology is incorporated into prison education, it is rarely cutting edge or has the goal of promoting equal opportunity. Texas policymakers, for example, are boasting their innovativeness in being among the first to grant computer access to prisoners for educational purposes. In reality, however, they have cut millions of dollars of funding and fired teachers who were providing face-to-face instruction in the Windham School District. They now plan to replace this with old software with curriculums that may or may not be up-to-date and satisfactory. Mere implementation of technology is not enough to rectify inequalities; if technology is used as a means of cutting back resources rather than creating additional resources then, as Lockard notes, technology could become a way of perpetuating hierarchies rather than undoing them (Lockard).

II.

Any attempt to create continuity between literacy instruction at prisons and at universities is beneficial, and the pairing of Wilkey and Cleary's projects does just that. However, this pairing also makes apparent the deep-rooted and oftentimes unnoticed differences in how we approach literacy in these settings. Beyond the shared goal of resisting econocide, Wilkey's and Cleary's projects don't have much in common. These divergences all stem from material disparities in one form or another. Wilkey's project is in a university class taken for credit; Cleary conducts his work in a creative writing workshop. Wilkey's class is centered upon community literacy, and Cleary's class is isolated from the community. Wilkey takes advantage of mobility and various resources, whereas Cleary's classrooms must manage with the few resources available to students. Perhaps most importantly, in Wilkey's class, students became active agents collaboratively participating in a dominant Discourse. While Cleary's project encourages students to think about what such participation means, they have little opportunity to actually do so. The inmates remain the objects of their own inquiries, whereas the students in Wilkey's class collaborate with others and take on the role of objective reporters. The introspective reflection practiced in Cleary's workshop is certainly beneficial and something all students—whether in prisons or universities—should have the opportunity to do.

With the ultimate goal of bridging the gap between the literacy practices of the privileged and unprivileged, we must also keep in mind the importance of fostering collaboration in prison writing classrooms, of encouraging the inmates to step outside the role of self-examining subjects in need of rehabilitation. This is not to undermine the importance of this meta-cognitive work, but rather to draw attention to how collaboration is an integral part of literacy development and a key pedagogical cornerstone. In *NCTE Framework for 21st Century Curriculum and Assessment*, collaboration is emphasized as much as technology. The second criteria listed, after developing "fluency and proficiency with the tools of technology," is "to build intentional cross cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought" (NCTE Executive Committee). This sentiment is echoed by the majority of rhetoricians and writing teachers, yet it often gets cast aside in the prison writing classroom. Motivational factors for collaboration include increased audience awareness, crossing socio-economic and cultural boundaries, and working through difference (see John Trimbur, Linda Flower, and Ken Bruffee for more on collaborative pedagogy).

Indeed, Cleary and Wilkey point out the problematic nature of the hyper-individualization that often occurs in prison settings. The remedial approach to literacy instruction in American prisons, which emphasizes assessment and literacy rates, can create "a rhetoric of personal responsibility" that makes the individuals accountable rather than the system (46). Cleary and Wilkey state, "This purportedly apolitical treatment of literacy actually does a great deal of political work, shifting the blame for incarceration completely onto the prisoners themselves. It assumes that the incarcerated either lack the literacy skills valued by the institution and society, or that they possess these skills and have purposely chosen not to use them" (54). Reflective writing allows multiple literacies and subsequent complexities to emerge, but, on its own, it also perpetuates, albeit to a lesser degree than assessment, isolated modalities of literacy development.

If hyper-individualization is part of the problem underlying the lack of educational resources in prisons, then moving away from this focus seems as though it would be a useful means of un-stripping political discourses. Thankfully we are no longer in a culture where prisoner communication is prohibited, for the most part, but *how* to best facilitate communication in a truly collaborative way proves challenging. Cleary mentions facilitating class discussions, which is perhaps the most foundational form of collaboration. Interviewing and peer review are also both useful collaborative strategies; even if an interview can't go beyond the bounds of the classroom, having students interview one another and write about each other's experiences can be an effective shift from the primarily introspective focus of prison writing. Considering these collaborative possibilities would create more dialogue between Wilkey's work and Cleary's work. Though of course resisting econocide entails the un-silencing of disempowered voices, we must also view the possibility of moving beyond one's own narrative as a means of empowerment.

Collaboration, whether it is in an isolated classroom or whether it is able to push past those boundaries, enables students to conceive of themselves as active agents and to become part of something larger than themselves. Reflective writing also serves a hugely important role, and students both in the prison and university classrooms can benefit from having that balanced with collaborative learning. By striving for congruity between prison and university writing classrooms in whatever way we can, we take a step in fostering transparency and change. And as we try to carry on this important work of helping the marginalized "reclaim . . . their rightful position within the body politic," we need to foster all the dialogue that we can (Wilkey and Cleary 56).

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