



PROJECT MUSE®

Doing Time with Literacy Narratives

Patrick W. Berry

Pedagogy, Volume 14, Issue 1, Winter 2014, pp. 137-160 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/530736>



Doing Time with Literacy Narratives

Patrick W. Berry

In a writing class at a medium-high security prison, fourteen men were getting ready to read aloud the opening sentences of their employment cover letters. In a raised voice, Juan began,¹ “I am writing in response to the advertisement placed on monster.com.” Forgetting for a moment that the men did not have access to the Internet, I asked Juan if this was an advertisement he had seen recently. “Come on, now,” he responded, shaking his head. “I made it up.” A few minutes later, William read from his letter: “Not only am I familiar with the regulations which qualify goods as halal,² but I also have experience as an assistant manager at Publix.” When I asked him to tell the class and me about his experiences as an assistant manager, he replied with some hesitation that he had made his story up, too. Leaving class, Juan turned to me and said, “Don’t you know that many of us are going to have to flip burgers?”

This episode captures one of the many dramas of literacy that play out across boundary spaces, like this prison classroom, in which writing is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, linked to upward mobility and a renewed sense of self. As Juan reminds us, the pretense that such boundaries can be crossed if disadvantaged students work hard at it simply ignores the reality of the material, economic, and social barriers that students like Juan fear they cannot overcome.

“I have to admit,” wrote Juan, reflecting on his cover letter assignment, “that I initially wanted to have fun with this one. I wanted to make you the owner of a nightclub, and [say that] I was looking for a bouncer job, or [to be a] DJ.” Although he imagined that he might eventually be “flipping burgers,” he remained dedicated to writing, which for him had a purpose

far beyond preparation for work. “Anybody who is able to obtain higher education while incarcerated,” he wrote, “will testify that it does something to you.” His complex understanding of what writing does and does not do demonstrates a hopeful and sometimes playful yet critical relationship with literacy that resists easy classification. Despite barriers and despite fear, he continued to write with the hope of making a difference in his own life and the world.

The pedagogical implications of Juan’s nuanced views pose significant challenges for educators, and specifically writing teachers, who are left not only with the question of what literacy can really do but also with the question, What should I teach? Given that so many students in this prison classroom wrote cover letters in which, like Juan, they made things up, one might conclude that this assignment was a failure. I suggest, however, that the conversations that were prompted by this assignment offer a demonstration of how little we understand the lives of our students and the complex investments they place in writing and literacy—and how their beliefs are often notably different from our own. Such conversations allow us to see *literacy narratives in action*, emerging off the page into our classrooms as inspired by a diverse range of writing, from cover letters to poems.

When writing teachers enter the classroom, they often bring with them a deep faith in the power of literacy to rectify social inequalities and to improve their students’ social and economic standing. It is this faith—this hope for change—that draws some writing teachers to locations of social and economic hardship and often connects the narratives these instructors ask students to write to the teachers’ own stories about literacy and possibility. In this article, I juxtapose the literacy narratives of students and their teacher in order to illustrate how teachers and students frequently hold on to competing notions of literacy and what it can do. I focus on narratives that link literacy with the prison because in such spaces notions of possibility are tested. Interrogating literacy narratives—our students’ and our own—can help us develop pedagogies that are mindful of the multiple objectives of literacy and writing instruction—objectives that go well beyond a focus on acquiring skills or gainful employment to the use of writing as a pathway toward understanding oneself in the world. While we must find ways to maintain a critical stance toward overly optimistic accounts of literacy, I argue that we do ourselves a disservice if we do not recognize the multifaceted, sometimes contradictory ways in which writing accrues value in our lives. Literacy narratives, both written and enacted in the classroom, can help educators develop pedagogies

that honor how students construct narratives of possibility in which literacy does connect—in modest ways—with social change.

What Can Literacy Really Do . . . in Prison?

“Prisons,” as Ashley Lucas (2011: 193) writes, “are seldom imagined as hotbeds of education, literacy, creativity, or the arts.” Yet they are sites in which powerful words and creative expressions are produced (see, e.g., B. Alexander 2010; Hartnett 2011; Lawston and Lucas 2011). When I first identified the prison as a site of study, I wanted to know in what ways the teaching of advanced writing mattered to students. If any hope was offered by literacy, I supposed, the prison would provoke questions of possibility in students’ narratives by influencing how they represented literacy and themselves.

Some educators (see, e.g., Torre and Fine 2005; Winn 2011) demonstrate how higher education and writing can transform the lives of those in prison as well as those caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. Others go even further, asserting that the academy can learn from those in prison. In “Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?” H. Bruce Franklin (2008: 643) points to the considerable body of work created by American prisoners, most of whom acquired literate skills in prison through self-education. Franklin also cites Jimmy Santiago Baca, whose success as a poet and writer led to his becoming a teacher and “giving others the opportunity to read and write” (645). Like Malcolm X, Baca testifies to the power of language with a narrative of a struggling student who relies on language and literacy to change; Baca then describes how he teaches others in similar circumstances.³

Still other educators focus on the critical need to write through the distortion that prevents us from seeing the lives and learning of those incarcerated and the injustices they face. In *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education* (2012), Mike Rose describes how many non-traditional students, including those who have been in prison, find a second chance through education.⁴ Programs such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (see Davis 2011; Pompa 2004) work to foster dialogue and awareness. As well as encouraging initiatives to develop mentoring opportunities between university students and incarcerated writers (Jacobi 2008) and opportunities for correspondence (Kerr 2004), these authors underscore the need for writing to circulate beyond the prison and illustrate the critical role that reaching an audience plays in literacy practices.⁵

As a literacy researcher informed by the principles of the New Lit-

eracy Studies, I have been taught to be wary of overdetermined claims that align literacy with employment (see Graff 1979; Graff and Duffy 2008), to resist overly simplistic and autonomous claims about the power of the written word (Street 1984). Even if literacy is redemptive to some, we know that it can also be used to exclude—even to engage in the kind of violence that J. Elspeth Stuckey (1991) described more than twenty years ago.⁶ Yet in the space of the prison classroom, where higher education programs are under persistent assault, it is no longer enough to criticize literacy for what it does not do without also articulating its value—or potential value.⁷ An interest in exploring the space between hope and critique, between students and myself, led me to a program that I will call Project Justice⁸—and to consideration of how we might develop pedagogies that are untethered to naive beliefs in literacy’s power, yet mindful of realistic possibilities, as well as the work that can take place in the present moment.

Literacy narratives are a productive way to explore the complexities and possibilities of literacy across diverse cultural landscapes. Among the most notable examples is the literacy narrative of Malcolm X, which is now frequently excerpted in composition readers, often with the intention of inspiring students to interrogate their own histories with reading and writing.⁹ When literacy narratives were used in a basic writing class, Mary Soliday (1994: 511) found that they could function as “sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds.” Some of our most powerful literacy narratives have come from literacy researchers and teachers (see, e.g., Brodkey 1996; Goldblatt 2012; Rose 1989; Villanueva 1993; Young 2004). Literacy narratives have also been used to explore digital literacy practices (Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe 2012; Selfe and Hawisher 2004) and are featured in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives at the Ohio State University (daln.osu.edu/).

Sometimes, however, literacy narratives begin and end with a celebration of literacy. As Julie Lindquist (2010: 180) writes, “Not all literacy narratives are created equal when it comes to the work they do for students and what they communicate to teachers.” When Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen (1992: 513) introduced the term “literacy narratives,” they were interested in how representations of literacy “challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy.” That sense of challenge was precisely what characterized my experience, so my prison research provided an opportunity to reflect on my own hopes about literacy and explore with inmate students their and my specific beliefs about what literacy had given us and what it might provide in the future.

Writing for a Change: For Business, for Life

Project Justice is a university-based program in the Midwest committed to the belief that higher education in prison can reduce recidivism and improve life prospects for the incarcerated and their families. Whether its educators are developing a “writing across the curriculum” workshop, orchestrating a student-led symposium, or working one-on-one with students in the resource room at the prison, Project Justice has created opportunities for an innovative and interdisciplinary curriculum. Upper-level courses are offered once per week at what I will call the Midwest Correctional Center. In a volunteer-supported resource room open twice a week, students may conduct research, work one-on-one with tutors, type papers, or simply spend time reading.

Under Project Justice’s auspices, every Friday afternoon in the spring of 2009 I met with the students in my advanced writing course. In contrast with many university undergraduates, my students at the prison never missed a class and were unfailingly vocal participants in every three-hour session. The course, *Writing for a Change: For Business, for Life*, combined theories of composing with rhetorical strategies for business communication and culminated in both a class publication and a symposium of student work. Students wrote poems, literacy narratives, proposals, and résumés. A considerable portion of their writings focused on the value of higher education in prison, which allowed students to simultaneously focus on their belief in literacy and interrogate their own prison program.

All the men in this program and in this study had earned the equivalent of an associate’s degree and were, by and large, “literate” in the conventional sense of the word before they entered prison. Writing for them was not simply about learning skills, although that played a part; for them, more important, writing entailed a recreating of themselves at different points of their lives. It is through such writing and performance that we can see how literacy narratives make possible the construction of a deeper, more useful representation, one that showcases students’ literate abilities while enabling them to communicate about the material and cultural constraints that have impinged on their literacy learning and practice.

The prison environment creates distinct spatial and temporal boundaries that shape literate practice. Inmates are told when to eat, when to sleep, and sometimes even when to write. Writing under such constraints, and sometimes in defiance of them, inmate students often produce narratives of freedom, movement, and transformation. Their narratives, read as both artifact and activity, demonstrate how language is used to move beyond obstacles

imposed in one's past and advance toward future goals. As one student, Louis, explained in his poem "Travelin'":

I go where I choose
Leave when ready
I can deal with the here & now
OR
escape when it gets too heavy

These talents be my balance
—between
smart and stupid.
The climax is most cool
when the groove is so fluid

Poetic accounts like Louis's become more poignant when we know that the narrator cannot physically go where he chooses or "leave when ready." His sense of being in control, transcending time and place, reflects the power of words to create what Dorothy Holland and colleagues (1998: 49) call "figured worlds"—that is, alternative visions of the world constructed by individuals using language—in this case, worlds within and beyond the prison. In his narrative poem, Louis can leave the "here & now" or "escape when it gets too heavy." If, as I believe, all stories are to some extent "figured worlds" that shape and are shaped by the "real world," then by attending to the work of narrative we can move beyond the question of whether a story is true or false and into a realm wherein it is appropriate to ask how the apparent truth of a narrative is constructed.¹⁰ As a pedagogical practice, I encouraged students to share writings in which they imagined other worlds, even when those writings did not squarely connect with the course goals, for in doing so, they began to construct identities that went beyond the prison.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Holland and colleagues (1998: 3) write, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are." The layering of histories, childhood memories, and professional identities is indisputable if we share Bakhtin's (1981) belief that language carries the freight of history and enables multiple readings. Reading narratives like Louis's provides access to the various ways in which individuals give coherence and meaning to their stories—and their lives. What follows is a series of vignettes that explore beliefs about literacy and incarceration through the juxtaposition of narratives—cultural and personal, my own as well as my students'.

Through such stories, we can see the affective links that formed among students and also between them and their teacher, as well as the pedagogical implications of attending to beliefs in literacy and the constructing of selves through writing.

Meeting the Students of Project Justice

On a gray Friday afternoon in January 2009, as I was driving to the prison, I passed the Community Café. Through the glass storefront, I saw university students seated at wooden tables in front of laptops and lattes; I myself often studied there. Now, leaving the café behind, I found myself on the way to teach writing to my new students, incarcerated men. From the highway, I saw cornfields, and my mind drifted to another time, many years earlier, when at the age of seventeen I had visited my own father, who was an inmate in New York State's Sing Sing prison.

After walking on a slant into the visiting room, my father walked up to me and asked me if I was his son. About five years had passed since I had last seen him. I was not sure whether his question had resulted from my having changed so much or from his not knowing what else to say. This was the first time I had entered a prison.

On this January night, I would be visiting a prison not as a son but as a teacher and researcher, a few days before the first day of class. After exiting the highway, I saw a sign for the community college to the left, but not one for the prison, which was on the right, across the street from a little white house. I emptied my pockets in the car, removing my cell phone and wallet. Even my laptop was left behind, replaced by a notebook and pen. The guard took my license, handed me my visitor identification badge, and began what would become routine procedure: the scanning of my belongings and my being queried as to whether I had a cell phone or weapon. I then passed through a series of unlocking and relocking doors before walking across a courtyard to the education building, which also housed the gym and art studio.

Often teachers and researchers recount scenes of passing through barbed or razor wire (see, e.g., Wilson 2005) and encountering guards who may resent the fact that inmate students are provided more opportunities for education than they themselves may have had (Coggeshall 2004). At the prison, I, too, had such experiences, but they were not what stayed with me. Instead, what resonated most with me was how the space resembled many university classrooms in which I had taught. Like other classrooms, this one

had three walls of blackboard space, chairs with desk arms, windows along the back wall, and even an old TV and DVD player.

On this day, we instructors and some other guests formed a semicircle around the front of a classroom in the education building. In the audience were the future Project Justice students, who had just registered for their courses. Four classes were being offered with focuses on literature, along with two centering on landscape architecture and my class on “writing for a change.” The director of the program told me that my course had been one of the most popular selections. Compared with the courses in history and literature, my offering likely appeared the most practical, which had no doubt contributed to its popularity.

With few exceptions, the men were African Americans of widely varying ages, and they were filled with questions about the courses, what they might learn, and how this work might help them in the future. As Angela Davis (2007) and others have noted, the predominance of African Americans in the prison-industrial complex has intensified over the years. Moreover, as Michelle Alexander (2010: 13) powerfully argues, “What is completely missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up at all. . . . They are barred by law from doing so.”¹¹ This fact made the students’ questions about possibility difficult to answer.

“Can you teach me how to write a proposal?” asked Benny, an African American man with long hair that was pulled back and a friendly smile. I asked what he wished to write a proposal for, but Benny was unsure. I explained how difficult it was to teach writing out of context, a point that I would appreciate further as the semester continued and I saw how students often attempted to reconstruct contexts and worlds that in some ways had changed a great deal since they were first incarcerated.

I would later learn how Benny urgently sought for himself the identity of a businessman as well as recognition for his way with words. In an essay, he recalled an ambivalent encounter with the “good book”: “My initial writing experience occurred inadvertently by way of what my family called the good book. As a child, I was in awe of this book, and I sensed my parents were in awe of it too. I often heard them say, ‘The good book said this, the good book said that.’ I never heard the good book say anything!” As Benny’s story continued, he explained how his parents were illiterate and that it had been his older sister, already a college student, who had taught him how to read and write. In the second grade, he remembered noticing the “smell of new books and illustrations” which “made the words easy to learn,” and he also

remembered the teacher, who had not seen his potential. When he confessed that he aspired to be a businessman, she angrily charged, “You’ll never be a businessman—a janitor maybe!” Benny had never fully understood why his teacher, his “hero,” had responded “with such wrath,” a wrath that led him to hide “under the porch of [his] dilapidated house” for days on end until his mother found him. If there is a lesson to this story, Benny tells us, it is that he learned to face “most situations and circumstances head on,” and not to hide.

While admiring his persistence, I was well aware of the social and economic challenges that he had faced and would later face. Benny, like many of the students in my class, grew up in Chicago’s inner city. Unemployment rates in inner cities, as William Julius Wilson (2009) and others have shown, tend to far exceed those of other locations. Too often, as Davis (2007: 687) writes, the prison-industrial complex has functioned to artificially lower unemployment statistics: “Mass incarceration is not a solution to unemployment, nor is it a solution to the vast array of social problems that are hidden away in a rapidly growing network of prisons and jails.” Moreover, as Erica Meiners (2007) demonstrates, schools can sometimes work to normalize incarceration for urban youth. Benny wrote against the words of a teacher who had rejected him and a society that limited his potential to become a businessperson. Through my work with Benny and students like him, I saw how an emphasis on the future could threaten to overshadow the work that could happen in the classroom in the present moment. While I do not mean to suggest that learning how to write a business proposal is useless, I wish to emphasize the value of contextualizing the experience and working with students to situate their lives.

Stories like Benny’s exemplify a familiar narrative in prison accounts—that of metamorphosis. By carefully attending to the literacy narratives written by the incarcerated, we can see narrative framing used to chronicle a process of becoming. “Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*,” writes Bakhtin (1981: 115, original emphasis). Benny’s troubled experiences in school taught him never to hide. He constructed a story in which a new Benny emerged, wherein literacy was fused with a sense of rebirth and uplift as past and present merged in the sense that “a narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name” (Bruner 1991: 69). Such narratives’ chronology is organized around exceptional moments in a life such as a struggle in school, the discovery of books, and the making

of a new self with a renewed sense of value and purpose. Literacy narratives like Benny's allow individuals—students and teachers—to reflect on such turning points in their lives. I believe that what made this assignment particularly effective was that I asked students to write literacy narratives not only for themselves but also for a class publication and, by extension, for an audience outside the classroom and the prison. Students' work was read, responded to, and edited by their peers and me. Rather than asking students to read accounts by published authors, my pedagogy valued the positioning of students as authors in a published journal that would preserve their constructions of literacy, reflected upon at this particular moment in their lives. Benny's story reminded me of my own formative years in school, from which an autograph album spoke to me about a father's hope and the racialized contexts in which literacy learning takes place.

From the Midwest Correctional Center to Gravesend

In 1978, I graduated from P.S. 95 in Brooklyn. I have an autograph album of folded, pastel-colored pages. My father's words are written on the first leaf: "Dear Pat, I know you are good at every-thing. So I hope you can be better than me. Best wishes. Love, Dad." The English teacher in me sees the grammatical errors of this man who had spent much of his adult life in and out of prison.

The second page of the album is inscribed by someone named Officer Paul, who writes, "To Pat Jr., Roses are Red / Violets are Blue / For the Sake of the Italians / Don't Marry a Jew." I did not know Officer Paul, and my father probably did not, either. These inscriptions were likely composed at a bar in Gravesend, a working-class community where celebrating Italian ethnicity and disparaging others was, and to some extent still is, all too common. In *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, Marianna De Marco Torgovnick (1994: 7) describes the prejudice in nearby Bensonhurst: "Italian Americans in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality; the slightest pressure turns those qualities into prejudice and racism. . . . Jews are suspect but (the old Italian women admit) 'they make good husbands.' The Irish are okay, fellow Catholics, but not really 'like us'; they make bad husbands because they drink and gamble." In the pages of the album, we can see traces of hope, a narrative that looks ahead but is nevertheless tainted with the racist words of Officer Paul from more than two decades ago. My father did not gamble, but he certainly did drink, fulfilling the stereotype that Torgovnick describes. I would not see him for a while after graduation.

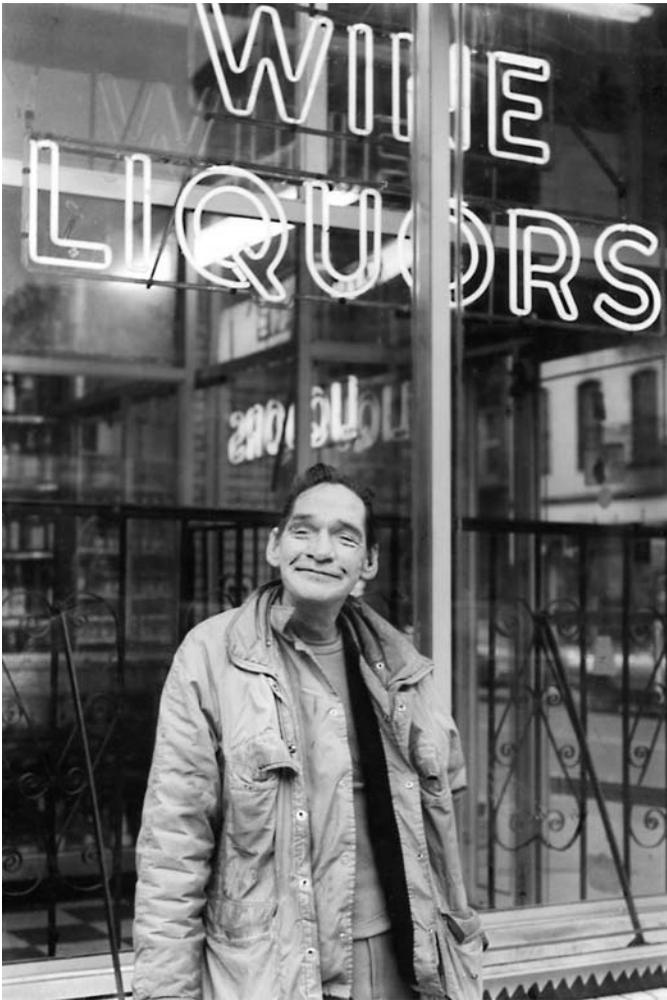


Figure 1. My father on the Lower East Side, circa 1987

With a 35-mm rented camera, for a photography class in 1987, I photographed the men and women scattered along the streets of the Lower East Side of New York City, many of whom were homeless and suffering from some form of addiction. I could not bring myself to tell my classmates or my photography teacher that the photo (fig. 1) was of my father, just a few months after his latest release from prison. In the picture, with his wry smirk and soiled clothing, he stands in front of the words that spell out what has led to his downfall. And yet, rather than seeking to present himself as a success, he is smirking at his son who is taking pictures for a class project. He knows

exactly where he is standing. He is, in fact, helping me construct a story about alcohol and homelessness, and he is well aware of the ironic positioning of these words behind his back and their significance in his life. It is a defiant representation that captures the not-so-optimistic times that followed my father's release. This photograph of my father suggests to me someone who has given up hope, a position in sharp contrast to that of the students in my class, who were focused on how the future might be better.

Literacy and the Cracker Jack Prize

During the first week of class, I sat at home pondering my students' handwritten letters of introduction, in which they told me about their experiences as writers. Many of them discussed the importance of literacy and writing, often making explicit linkages between their compositions and the power to connect to others. Michael, a gentle-mannered man with a love for art, explained that knowing how to write sometimes offered him the only way he could reach out. "Prisoners are often faced with the problem of figuring out how to write what they mean," he explained. "If no one has a phone for the inmate to call, [then] aside from a visit, writing will be the only communication. If an inmate has trouble expressing [himself or herself] verbally, the old trusty written language is the last resort." For Michael, the issue was how inmate students might cultivate the rhetorical skills needed to say what they really meant. When the spoken word proved too difficult, "the old trusty written language" proved a viable alternative, just as, I would later learn, painting had become another modality of expression for him.

Michael's words reminded me of how the functions of writing are always evolving to suit particular needs, as well as of how my position as his teacher might be influencing what he wrote. In his letter, for example, he recounted a fifth-grade literacy victory when he had submitted a winning letter in a contest while attending Catholic school in inner-city Chicago. He and a friend had been selected as finalists, with the prize being a tour of the Cracker Jack Company: an exciting proposition for a fifth grader, especially because there was the potential for receiving more than the typical Cracker Jack prize. He wrote, "The 'Cracker-Jack' Company decided that they would pick two children from Chicago's inner-city, according to the letter they received from each individual explaining, 'Why I'm the best choice for the tour of the Cracker Jack factory.'"

Two weeks after submitting his entry, he remembered sitting at his desk in school, "trying desperately to get the sticky wrapper from around a piece of 'Jungle Jolly,'" in defiance of the class rule against eating candy in

class, when he was summoned by the teacher. He walked to the front of the room, suspecting that he was being called out for his “sneaky candy antics.” In fact, he was being singled out because he had won the contest, and, as he explains, he became the pride of his school. “The realization of the power of words impacted my life from that point on,” he says. Like Benny, Michael imagined writing as a means for moving away from the everyday, from childhood struggles to triumphs, seeing composition as being simultaneously about writing and about self-formation. The reconfiguration of location in such stories—the crossing from one place to another, the time-traveling—is shadowed by an awareness that these are the expressions of one who, though he has become a writer and artist, is incarcerated.

In another piece of writing, “Creating Art through Writing: My Experiences as a Child,” Michael described sitting in the second-floor cafeteria at Malcolm X College while his mother went to class. Once she left, he exited “the cafeteria, and the halls,” which “seem[ed] to go on forever” until he found a plethora of African art, works that captured his imagination. In describing one painting, he cast himself in a scene: “I felt like I was actually standing in the village with the dark, Prussian blue sky, swallowing up the scene, as the sun, long set behind the yellow ochre straw huts, disappear[ed] far off to the right.” In relaying this story, Michael reflected on how he had told his mother about his joy and recognized his yearning to write down his feelings. “Thirty years later,” he said, “I am an artist and a writer, still in love with these two different art forms, designed to do the same thing, create a picture.”¹² In the next section, we see how students used the classroom space to perform their work, and to create a picture of their future selves.

Literacy Narratives Off the Page

For the last meeting of the semester, the men in my advanced writing course arrived in a group, as usual. At 5:00 p.m. that Friday, as I had done many times before, I began class with a writing exercise. Students were asked to spend a few minutes creating a scene that placed them in the future. With pens, pencils, and paper, they worked quietly for a few minutes and then began to share their words aloud. After each reading, there were smiles, applause, and sometimes laughter. William imagined himself getting an award for his work as a poet and artist serving youth in his community. Juan read, “The one thing I pray to God every night is to bless me with a wife who would love me unconditionally, one whom I can have children and grow old with.”

Then Anthony stood up and read his composition, which placed him in 2020, two years after his release. Like Louis, he too portrayed himself as a

traveler; he saw himself as an owner of a “biological toxins business,” passing through a small west Texas town:

There is no way I would rather spend my time than hiking around outside with my 17 year old son, James, and my trusty Australian Shepherd, Catcher, as my companions while I search for rattlesnakes and coral snakes. I hardly even remember the 13 years and 9 months I spent in the [Midwest Correctional Center], except to acknowledge all that I learned about human nature . . . others['] and my own. This evening, as the sun sets, we will eat a meal of broiled shrimp, spinach salad, and fresh steamed asparagus while enjoying our time together. Catcher will be a pain in the ass, because that is what he does best whenever food is being prepared. James will be urging me to finish the food preparation so that we can eat and get down to playing some heads-up poker. And me . . . I will be taking in each moment as the treasure that it truly is. My son still doesn't really get why I tear up each time I look at him. My dog just wants some food and for me to rub his belly. I just want time to stop so that I can make the moment last forever.

Throughout the semester, Anthony had written about his son, whom he desperately missed. Much of his writing was linked to a future in which he dreamed that he could remake himself and be with his son. As Anthony read the last few sentences of his essay, he began to cry, the first time I had seen tears all semester. The sound of his sobbing filled the room. We clapped, not knowing what else to do, but it did not feel right to me. Michael put his arm on Anthony's shoulder. There was silence. It lasted only a minute, but it felt much longer. We just sat there, many of us no doubt thinking about what we had just witnessed. I imagined that some students were thinking of their own kids and the time and space that separated them. The class moved on, with other students reading their work and projecting themselves into the future, and I did not say anything. Yet I have come to see this moment of silence as productive, its having provided an unexpected moment of reflection and evidence of a sense of community that had only gotten stronger as the semester progressed.

Anthony's story conjured an imaginary unbounded landscape where he could be a successful businessman, an adventurer, and a father—where he could be there for his son. As I contemplated his words, I could not help thinking about my own experiences with my father, who spent much of his adult life moving in and out of prison. Occasionally he would write from prison, and less frequently I would respond. Anthony's story brought back the memory of a time more than twenty years earlier.

Just as I was beginning college, my father, released from prison, was living in a flophouse on Manhattan's Lower East Side. As he had in the past, he was drinking heavily. This was the end of the 1980s, after the stock market crash, and the neighborhood had more than its share of abandoned buildings, drug addicts, and homeless men and women. In just a few years, Mayor Rudy Giuliani would begin his campaign to identify the city's "homeless people, panhandlers, prostitutes, squeegee cleaners, [and] squatters" as "the major enemies of public order and decency" and pave the way for the gentrification of such areas (Smith 1998: 3). I was beginning my undergraduate studies on the North Shore of Long Island, far removed from both the Lower East Side and Gravesend, the working-class Brooklyn neighborhood where I had lived with my mother, sister, and maternal grandparents since the age of three. My father was on my mind a lot during this time, and sometimes he would find his way into my schoolwork, in both language and image. Just as Anthony's son would emerge in Anthony's writings, I found my father in mine.

I could not have known then the compassionate role that my writing teacher would play then and would continue to play over the following years. Dr. Joan Digby directed my university's honors program, taught first-year composition, and had a reputation for expecting a great deal of her students. During a course of independent study with her, I attempted to write and rewrite a scene from my life about a desperate, unsuccessful effort to rescue my father. My account was less a story about my learning to read and write than it was a story about compassion shown by Dr. Digby, made possible within the intimate space created by reading and writing.

There is a risk, of course, in making comparisons. I did not necessarily understand Anthony any better because of my experience with my father. But I did recognize how the prison-industrial complex affects us all in ways that are not always immediately apparent. "Compassion is always, at its most authentic, about a shift from the cramped world of self-preoccupation into a more expansive place of fellowship, of true kinship," writes Gregory Boyle (2010: 77). As other students responded to Anthony's story, I took note of the literacy narrative that was emerging off the page in this class: one bound by compassion and, for a brief time, removed from the temporal and spatial limitations of prison life. I saw the students, I saw my father, and I saw a great faith in the power of language to impact what was happening in this prison classroom. It was the writing, but not only the writing, that moved us.

The potential of this somewhat common assignment—to project oneself into the future—allowed students to represent themselves to the class

and to me in ways that went beyond identifying themselves by their inmate numbers, a practice that more than a few had difficulty shaking. But what I am advocating here is less a specific assignment than it is an attention to the connections between teachers and students—in this case, between a writing teacher and inmate students. For a few moments in this class as well, over the course of the semester, I saw the literacy narratives that took place off the page, bound by memory, hope, and compassion. This attention to the *contextual now*—that is, those classroom spaces wherein students use writing to reimagine their lives and share their stories with others—is a payoff in and of itself.¹³

Prisons, Universities: Constructing a Third Space

To resolve the tension between institutional worlds and personal agency, inmate students often construct literacy narratives in which the prison is reimaged as another space that affords them a greater sense of agency—what is sometimes referred to as a “third space.”¹⁴ In her research on literacy in prisons, Anita Wilson (2000: 68) observed how inmates forged connections with the outside world, engaging in practices that were linked to their “distant knowledge of outside societies.” Rather than simply forgetting about the all-too-real material conditions in which they lived, students in my class began to reimagine literacy and, more broadly, education in prison. They became mindful of pedagogical problems at the prison, wrote about them, and began to develop proposals, poems, and essays that would be shared with prison administrators and the director of Project Justice.

In “Time Served Me,” one student, James, remembered “an unusually cold morning in January” in the mid-1990s when he had arrived at the Midwest Correctional Center. After having spent two years in “one of the most dangerous places on earth,” the Mark County Jail, James was on a bus to a maximum-security prison. “Don’t serve time, make time serve you”—these words, he explained, hung above the education building. “Where else can you make time serve you other than the school building?” he asked. For another student, William, the prison was itself a university. “Imagine being in a university in which there are several gun towers, / people inside them, bearing arms, to maintain order and display power,” he wrote. Rather than being a celebration of education, however, William’s poem displays the ambiguity of the meaning of education in prison:

Most would not refer to these institutions as universities, but only as prisons.
I refer to them as universities because in here my knowledge has risen.

In here, you have all the time in the world to contemplate and seek knowledge, read, write, think, and observe as if you were in college. Please don't mistake this, though, to mean that everything in here is fine, because though I refer to these institutions as universities, we are still doing time.

Although he had the time to write, William reminded readers that he was nevertheless within the space of a prison. If, as Anita Wilson (2000) and others suggest, students like William have constructed a third space, it is one in which transcendence is not entirely possible. But writing a proposal on how the prison program might be made better was a *real* exercise that had meaning to students and offered the possibility of bringing about change.

“It is easy to come up with reasons why we should not spend money to educate criminals,” reasoned Anthony in his proposal, reminding readers and listeners that inmates would someday be released into their neighborhoods. He asked, “Do you want the ones using their newfound education, and thinking about what good they can do in your community—or, do you want the ones that never learned a new way to exist and survive in society?” María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine (2005: 589) argue that there is irony in the fact that the power of education is found in such an unlikely space as prison. The stories presented here, both my own and those of my incarcerated students, testify to a critical hope in, and a compassionate stance toward, higher education in prison. With that thought, I come back to my own story, to a time when I shared the photograph of my father with Dr. Digby, my college writing teacher, and told her that I hoped to write a story of a meeting that had taken place between my father and his mother-in-law on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a turning point of sorts in my own life. The story I ultimately wrote begins as my grandmother and I are driving across the Manhattan Bridge:

The year is 1987. A beat-up, white Chevy enters the Manhattan Bridge in the rain one afternoon. From behind, you see two heads: the short, black hair of a man in his twenties in the driver's seat and the slight figure of an elderly woman with puffy brown hair. Her body barely protrudes up from the passenger's seat. As they ride over a continuous beat of potholes, their heads shake: the black head and the little brown head. The man's hands tremble against the steering wheel. The five inches of red strips that race across the top of the white Camaro are but a blur to the other drivers. The few cars on the bridge, some just a few inches away from the Camaro, are barely visible. The subway tracks to the left are mysteriously silent. Empty tracks, puddles, potholes, and unsteady hands.

A wrinkled hand pulls down the visor and looks into the vanity mirror. A nervous smile opens to discolored teeth outlined in red. She then raises her right hand to her powdered forehead and begins to make the sign of the cross with the rhythm of the bridge. She whispers, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” She is wearing a hairnet over the top of her head. The seatbelt holds her body in place, but it is not a perfect fit.

As they leave the bridge, the rain begins to stop. There is a red light at the end of this ride. The Camaro splashes onto the potholed Bowery. Chinese signs come into focus as they pull up to a red light. A man, around 40, in green pants and a green shirt rushes across traffic and plants a dirty rag in the center of the windshield. The locks are down. The light turns green and the car turns left on Houston Street, then right on Ridge Street, and then left on Clinton Street, past a Spanish restaurant. The car stops in front of a flower shop. The old woman makes the sign of the cross again.

My grandmother’s compassion still strikes me as remarkable. After all, my father had spent some of his years in prison for crimes he had committed against her and my grandfather. For a brief moment, on this rainy day, we assembled on the wet pavement of Clinton Street, in front of a flower shop. With some prodding, my grandmother told my father, only recently released from prison and without a home, that he could come live with us in Brooklyn if—the big “if”—he stopped drinking and entered a detox program. As she spoke these words, my father grew teary-eyed. He said thank you. But there were no hugs, no promises, just an acknowledgment of the gesture, before my grandmother and I headed back to Brooklyn. Although my father would spend one Thanksgiving with us, there would be no coming home for him. Within a year of our visit, he developed cirrhosis of the liver and died.

While working with Dr. Digby, I revised this story again and again and, in doing so, developed as a writer. Perhaps more important, though, I began to recognize the work of narrative to heal, to honor, and to teach. I often think of how Joan (as I call her now, more than twenty years later) created a safe space where I could write about a world of which I barely spoke. She came into my life at a time when I was not sure what it meant to be in college or whether this was a place where I belonged. She was a demanding teacher, and she cared deeply. I like to think that the space created in the prison classroom was one where students felt comfortable reflecting upon their own histories and constructing their potential futures. At the same time, I recognize that one class is just that—one class—and that students’ experiences with literacy and each other were shaped not only by Project Justice but also by the many networks in which they participated, both within and beyond the prison.

Closing Thoughts

The stories told here demonstrate acts of self making and, to some extent, world making through literate practice, albeit through complex reinterpretations of past histories and hopes for the future. By juxtaposing the narratives of my students and my own narrative against one another, as well as against the larger cultural narratives about literacy, I have offered an approach to working with students and understanding their hopes and beliefs about the power of reading and writing, beliefs that will vary among students and between students and their teachers. Through literacy narratives, I have attempted to broaden the discussion about prison education to include those acts of self making and world making that resist a monetary, objectively quantified payoff. Instead, I have shown some of the various returns on investment in reading and writing that are possible at an affective level.

By observing the communities that can form in classes like this one—by attending to what I call the *contextual now*—we can see the work of narrative and, by extension, how literacy in the present moment (even within an environment such as a prison) is valuable in its own right. Throughout the semester, students focused on literacy in the prison; they engaged in what one might call ethnography of prison education. Through this experience, students simultaneously began to reimagine themselves and to think about how to make their present experience better through the improvement of prison education.

At the end of the semester, community members and prison officials came to hear the presentations that students had created. Juan, the student who reminded me that many of the men might eventually be “flipping burgers” when released, asked audience members to close their eyes. Speaking a few sentences in Spanish, which the majority of the group did not understand, he reminded his audience what it felt like to be faced with trying to comprehend an unfamiliar language. He then proceeded to deliver a presentation arguing for a bilingual education program in which upper-level students like him would tutor Spanish-speaking GED students. The prison administrators and the director were so taken with Juan’s presentation that such a program is in place today. Though I wish I could say that all the presentations had a similar effect, that was not the case. But these events do point to the potential of literacy, through a writing class, to effect change.

Some question the value of programs like Project Justice. Why bother helping an incarcerated person learn to write an excellent business plan when his or her felony conviction might undermine his or her ability to obtain a business loan? I answer this question by advocating an attention to the work

of literacy in the contextual now. While not discounting issues such as recidivism, I think we need to look at the work of literacy more broadly. Too often, when the conversation aimed at answering what literacy can do is simplified to the level of generality and statistics such as recidivism rates, a negative and reductionist outlook prevails. While we must challenge naive claims about literacy's power, we should not underestimate the modest and not-so-modest ways in which writing changes the lives of both teachers and students. Teaching writing at the prison has helped me recognize the potential of using literacy narratives, both written and performed, in the classroom to explore how literacy gets configured in narrative constructions of identity across time and place. In the end, we might say that it is not literacy per se, but the substance of the narratives that arise from it (sometimes beyond the page) that has the potential to help individuals reimagine themselves and occasionally make changes, like Juan did, in the world around them.

Notes

1. All students' names are pseudonyms.
2. "Halal" refers to food sanctioned by Islamic law.
3. Jimmy Santiago Baca and ReLeah Cossett Lent published *Adolescents on the Edge: Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning* (2010), which features the following cover blurb: "I paced my cell with a book in one hand and a knife under my mattress. I knew I could have a long and happy life with a book in my hand or I could have a miserable and short life with the shank that was in the mattress."
4. In *Why School?* (2009), Mike Rose introduces readers to Anthony, a community college student in a basic skills program who had spent time in prison and whose former parole officer was the dean of his school. In his celebrated *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Rose describes teaching Willie Oates, a veteran and ex-con who spent two years in a federal penitentiary lifting weights and hungrily reading literature.
5. See also Robert Yagelski (2000) and Kirk Branch (2007) for accounts of their experiences teaching in prison, as well as Erick Gordon and colleagues (2007), who write about narrative inquiry and a prison writing initiative at Rikers Island in New York City.
6. "The fact that the relationships among Americans are established along economic lines" leads Stuckey (1991: 57) to ask, "Would it not be logical then that literacy conforms also to these lines?" Rather than seeing it as a liberator, Stuckey views literacy as a violent system of control.
7. In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flower (2008: 1) similarly suggests the need to extend our work beyond critique: "The effort to discover and describe, to enact and revise what a *transformative more* could be, is one of the most energetically exploratory agendas to emerge in our field."

8. The names I use for the program and the correctional center are pseudonyms.
9. Two examples of college readers that include sections on literacy narratives are Belasco 2001: 19–20 and Bishop 2004: 52–54.
10. See also Jerome Bruner’s *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) and “Self-Making and World-Making” (1991) for a related analysis on the power of language to construct alternative visions of oneself.
11. See Loïc Wacquant’s (2009) *Prisons of Poverty*, which explores efforts in the U.S. to criminalize poverty.
12. Michael’s passion for art and writing speaks to the importance of creative art projects such as the University of Michigan’s Creative Project (B. Alexander 2010) and the alternative sentencing program Changing Lives through Literature (Waxler and Trounstein 1999).
13. Similarly, Yagelski (2009) differentiates writing from the experience of writing. See also Yagelski 2011.
14. Drawing on geographic and discursive constructions of space (see Bhabha 1994; Soja 1989), writing researchers such as Kevin Leander and Margaret Sheehy (2004), Elizabeth Birr Moje and colleagues (2004), Nedra Reynolds (2004), and Wilson (2000, 2004) explore literacies and the remaking of social space across a variety of settings.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Buzz. 2010. *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother? Twenty Years of the Prison Creative Arts Project*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
- Baca, Jimmy Santiago, and ReLeah Cossett Lent. 2010. *Adolescents on the Edge: Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Belasco, Susan, ed. 2001. “Literacy Narratives.” In *Constructing Literacies: A Harcourt Reader for College Writing*, 19–20. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.
- Berry, Patrick W., Gail E. Hawisher, and Cynthia L. Selfe. 2012. *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times*. Logan: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press. cedigitalpress.org/transnational.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bishop, Wendy, ed. 2004. “The Literacy Narrative: Thinking about the Literacy Narrative.” In *On Writing: A Process Reader*, ed. Wendy Bishop, 52–54. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Boyle, Gregory. 2010. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York: Free Press.
- Branch, Kirk. 2007. *Eyes on the Ought to Be: What We Teach When We Teach about Literacy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Brodkey, Linda. 1996. *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 1991. "Self-Making and World-Making." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25.1: 67–78.
- Coggeshall, John M. 2004. "Closed Doors: Ethical Issues with Prison Ethnography." In *Anthropologists in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation*, ed. Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock, 140–52. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davis, Angela. 2007. "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex." In *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 7th ed., ed. Paula S. Rothenberg with Kelly S. Mahew, 683–88. New York: Worth.
- Davis, Simone Weil. 2011. "Inside-Out: The Reaches and Limits of a Prison Program." In *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists*, ed. Jodie Michelle Lawston and Ashley E. Lucas, 203–23. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Eldred, Janet Carey, and Peter Mortensen. 1992. "Reading Literacy Narratives." *College English* 54.5: 512–39.
- Flower, Linda. 2008. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. 2008. "Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?" *PMLA* 123.3: 643–49.
- Goldblatt, Eli. 2012. *Writing Home: A Literacy Autobiography*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Gordon, Erick, et al. 2007. "Writing Out of the Unexpected: Narrative Inquiry and the Weight of Small Moments." *English Education* 39.4: 326–51.
- Graff, Harvey J. 1979. *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.
- Graff, Harvey J., and John Duffy. 2008. "Literacy Myths." In *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, ed. Nancy H. Hornberger, 42–52. New York: Springer.
- Hartnett, Stephen John, ed. 2011. *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Holland, Dorothy, et al. 1998. *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jacobi, Tobi. 2008. "Slipping Pages through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail." *Community Literacy* 2.2: 67–86.
- Kerr, Tom. 2004. "Between Ivy and Razor Wire: A Case of Correctional Correspondence." *Reflections* 4.1: 62–75.
- Lawston, Jodie Michelle, and Ashley E. Lucas, eds. 2011. *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Leander, Kevin M., and Margaret Sheehy, eds. 2004. *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lindquist, Julie. 2010. "What's the Trouble with Knowing Students? Only Time Will Tell." *Pedagogy* 10.1: 175–82.
- Lucas, Ashley E. 2011. "Historical Contextualization." In *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists*, ed. Jodie Michelle Lawston and Ashley E. Lucas, 193–97. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Meiners, Erica R. 2007. *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*. New York: Routledge.

- Moje, Elizabeth Birr, et al. 2004. "Working toward Third Space in Content Area Literacy: An Examination of Everyday Funds of Knowledge and Discourse." *Reading Research Quarterly* 39.1: 38–70.
- Pompa, Lori. 2004. "Disturbing Where We Are Comfortable: Notes from behind the Walls." *Reflections* 4.1: 24–34.
- Reynolds, Nedra. 2004. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Rose, Mike. 1989. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: Free Press.
- . 2009. *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York: New Press.
- . 2012. *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education: An Argument for Democratizing Knowledge in America*. New York: New Press.
- Selfe, Cynthia L., and Gail E. Hawisher. 2004. *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Smith, Neil. 1998. "Giuliani Time: The Revanchist 1990s." *Social Text* 57: 1–20.
- Soja, Edward W. 1989. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso.
- Soliday, Mary. 1994. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English* 56.5: 511–26.
- Street, Brian V. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stuckey, J. Elspeth. 1991. *The Violence of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann.
- Torgovnick, Marianna De Marco. 1994. *Crossing Ocean Parkway*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Torre, María Elena, and Michelle Fine. 2005. "Bar None: Extending Affirmative Action to Higher Education in Prison." *Journal of Social Issues* 61.3: 569–94.
- Villanueva, Victor Jr. 1993. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Prisons of Poverty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Waxler, Robert P., and Jean R. Trounstein, eds. 1999. *Changing Lives through Literature*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Wilson, Anita. 2000. "There Is No Escape from Third-Space Theory: Borderland Discourse and the 'In-between' Literacies of Prisons." In *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič, 54–69. London: Routledge.
- . 2004. "Four Days and a Breakfast: Time, Space, and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community." In *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*, ed. Kevin M. Leander and Margaret Sheehy, 67–90. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wilson, Deborah S. 2005. "Nobody Here Is Innocent: Cultural Values, Pedagogical Ethics, and the Prison Classroom." In *Crime and Punishment: Perspectives from the Humanities*. Vol. 37 of *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society*, ed. Sarat Austin, 271–304. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Wilson, William Julius. 2009. *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Norton.

- Winn, Maisha T. 2011. *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Yagelski, Robert P. 2000. *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- . 2009. "A Thousand Writers Writing: Seeking Change through the Radical Practice of Writing as a Way of Being." *English Education* 42.1: 6–28.
- . 2011. *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*. New York: Hampton Press.
- Young, Morris. 2004. *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.