

May 2018

## Our Academic Penalscape: Slow Work in Always Urgent Times

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### Recommended Citation

Meiners, E. (2018). Our Academic Penalscape: Slow Work in Always Urgent Times. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 17 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.17.1.03>

## Our Academic Penalscape Slow Work in Always Urgent Times

Erica R. Meiners

The slogan on the Left, then, *universities, not jails*, marks a choice that may not be possible. In other words, perhaps more universities promote more jails. Perhaps it is necessary finally to see that the university produces incarceration as the product of its negligence. Perhaps there is another relation between the University and the Prison—beyond simple opposition or family resemblance. (Fred Moten, in Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 41)

Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I'd rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me. (Dorothy Allison, 1995, p. 71)

### Scene I

It is the first day of my course, *LGBTQ Lives in the Justice System*, and the room overflows with people. Budget cuts in Illinois mean scant upper level electives are available. Further ego squashing: this Tuesday / Thursday mid-day timeslot is prime for those trying to pack their campus schedules into two days a week to accommodate work and life/care commitments.

Similar to many classes I teach at this working-class urban public university, the majority of the students in the room are non-white. However, a significant difference from the classes I teach in Women's and Gender Studies and in the College of Education: at least half the people in the room are cisgendered men.

I always struggle with a rhythm for any first class. I make some jokes and fail to break the awkwardness in the room, a moment rendered just a little more complicated by a class with "LGBTQ" in the title.

We do the compulsory introductory go-around the room and I learn that about

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75% of this class of thirty-five people, including almost all the men of color, want to work in the punishment industry: cops, parole officers, prison guards, probation, state police.

As the term progresses, the line between us in this room and those who we will police and cage grows thin, or simply porous and visible: Darryl has a record, he whispers to me at the end of week two as we walk out of class together. He is caring for his sister's two kids because she is back inside: drugs. "He was a gangbanger," Anthony says stoically and decisively week three about his brother who has been "away" for the last decade and "deserved to be locked up," but he sounds less sure of this by week ten. Julia's hasn't seen her father in years, she started writing about him in her assignments midway through the term but won't say anything in class. Week seven Maritza describes to the class, causally, another time this summer when she and some friends got picked up by the police and spend the night in lock up. And each week there is more.

The line is staked out in our own flesh and blood, and held by the promise of a working future. I think of my own trajectory in rural Canada where jobs in the lumber industry, clear-cutting wasn't a blemish yet, offered one economic anchor to some enviable families. The lure of good union wages, of a profession with stature that is not unmanly, draws these men to corrections and not to teaching.

## Scene 2

A maximum-security prison about forty-five minutes from downtown Chicago, Stateville Correctional Center, cages approximately three and half thousand people—overwhelmingly poor, Brown, or Black people serving very long sentences—the people who the Illinois Department of Corrections considers among the "worst of the worst." Many wait years to be admitted to the few GED and adult basic education classes offered - that students report as mainly consisting of worksheets. Long sentences often justify decisions by bureaucrats to deny access to education, why allocate resources to people who will be locked away for life? Death by incarceration is a relatively new invention: In 1955, the warden of Stateville stated, "Ninety-five per cent of all the men committed here are released some day" (Manly & Wright, 1955). Today, many people in maximum-security prisons such as Stateville will die serving extraordinarily long prison terms.

For the last five years I have worked collaboratively with others at this prison to build college level arts and humanities classes. As we build a creative and rich curriculum and recruit faculty to teach for no or little pay, the irony is inescapable. Free college courses, including books and materials, for classes composed of 100% poor people of color taught by faculty from some of the whitest and most restrictive enrollment universities in the region: Only at your local maximum-security prison! *The Fiction and Prose of Richard Wright*, *Religion and the Black Freedom Struggle* are also the kinds of courses that are increasingly unavailable at public

community colleges or four-year state universities, where the majority of poor people do matriculate. A bitter pill: a prison is the only place where poor people, particularly those who are Black and Brown, can access, for example, a free course by a leading artist on digital animation or a seminar on *Art and Science Fiction: Documenting the Future*.

If these folks were free, not caged in prison, would they have access to these kinds of courses and faculty? Probably not, even if they were able to afford the tuition.

### Scene 3

Suddenly Regina was just not there. In Social Studies class the previous week, she had seemed, while upbeat and funny and always trying to get in just another question, a little *off*. I chalked it up to stress. One of a cluster of fabulously fierce and smart Black women in the class, Regina was conditioned from years of school failure to hone in on what she was doing wrong: not getting the right answer, not keeping up, not being able to write everything down. When she could breathe and forget about failure, she could learn and teach and be present in the class. It was also mid-November, past the halfway mark in the term, and everyone, including me, was getting restless.

In 2001, I collaboratively started a free high school for formerly incarcerated men and women in Chicago, Sister Jean Hughes Adult High School. Started in a church basement on the city's west side with former and current nuns, teachers, and a mishmash of activists, our school offers a community-based learning environment that values prior learning. Most of our students are between twenty-five and sixty years old, and therefore our classes are designed for people who have been out of formal educational contexts for many years. The twenty to thirty students we admit every January and December seek to earn a high school diploma, to learn, and to have some possibility of economic and academic mobility. The majority of our students and teachers are African American.

Always funny and positive, Regina had been one of the students who had consistently reached out for help. I assumed we would check in later in the week. But there was no later.

A few days after this class, Regina, at fifty-two years old, had a seizure and a massive stroke, and the hospital found cancer throughout her lungs and brain. Mercy Hospital, where the ambulance initially took her after the seizure and stroke, would not keep her because the cancer was too advanced and no treatment was recommended, and, after being transferred to two different care homes, she died weeks later, surrounded by her sisters.

In my years teaching at this high school, the death toll was unavoidable. Of our very first December 2001 graduating class of twelve people, all African Americans, only six are still living by 2017. *Heart attack. Gunshot. Cancer. Diabetes. Stroke.*

Death occupies a front-row desk. Every term, someone's son or nephew dies.

A sister is in treatment for cancer. A sibling's kidneys fail and then stop. People in the class are stretched, tired, over- and undermedicated, wheezing, scarred, gasping. When I first started to organize and teach at this school, I was surprised by the amount of illness and death. I am embarrassed to consider these first thoughts. *Students are scamming. Must be. Can't be this much death, this amount of illness.* After sixteen years of teaching—funerals, asthma attacks and emergency rooms, hospital visits—the classrooms and graduations teem with ghosts.

Incarceration facilitates premature death, as Ruthie Gilmore (2007) suggests. A cursory look at the mainstream news media and advocacy reports on conditions inside prison confirms this assessment. Being locked up shortens people's life spans. With inadequate health care, substandard food, lack of mental and physical exercise, and vulnerability to physical and sexual assault (from prison staff in particular), incarceration kills.

Beyond physical health, like Regina, many exit prison with experience and knowledge but without formal credentials and narrow employment options. Reentry into formal educational institutions, while not impossible, is a formidable challenge.

Regina's death did not go unnoticed by her community at the school. Throughout the term people would reference her humor and questions. Several of the Black women she sat next to in class doubled down on their educational commitment to honor Regina's life. Many people from her graduating class do want to further their education. Many have set short-term technical certification goals they hope might lead to more secure and immediate employment: heating and cooling installation, radiology technician, and certified home health care attendant. Yet even the short walk to these programs, which often do not require entry exams or charge outrageous tuition, is complex. Some days even the local public community college seems to be meant for a different planet of people, another world away.

#### Scene 4

I am invited to give a talk at a fancy private university where the tuition costs more than what the federal government states a family of four should be able to live on for two years and yet the endowment exceeds the GDP of many nations. I get to this town via plane, train and car service and arrive early and wander around. I walk on the student commercial strip, directly across from the university and I pass Brooks Brothers and Ralph Lauren clothing stores, a private "wealth management" banking center, and an expensive jewelry store. (Yes, there is also a Dunkin' Donuts tucked into a side street but it feels and looks, well, classier than the one in my neighborhood). I wander around the campus which resembles a generic American College film set: Weathered stone statues of great men, bucolic benches under beautiful trees, enormous and bright libraries (plural), sports facilities (plural), laboratories and high tech classrooms (plural) and a surfeit of buildings named after slave-owners, anti-Semites, homophobes and misogynists. I rehearse a line

if I am stopped because I must not belong. *Except I do.*

I think of one of my nieces, only the second woman in our family to finish high school and head to university, and her equally brilliant sisters that each continue to make a way out of no way, and how much a T-shirt from this place might mean to any of them. Yet seems crazy to buy one, *to literally buy in.*

I meet with the active and organized undergraduate anti-prison group. Smart, focused, and full of energy, they are organizing for the university to divest from the private prison industry.<sup>1</sup>

Any work that weakens the prison industrial complex is useful, but all the rest swirls around me. The campus asks both prospective students and employees about their criminal histories. No returning adult students, transferring from community colleges or from the loosely affiliated “education in prison program” are enrolled on the campus. Students in the divestment group murmur that classes are probably not that welcoming to the analysis or experiences of people with criminal records or family members, *but it is just that there is no reason to think about these communities.* And while all the people in the room are not all white, it feels, as a white person, like white space.<sup>2</sup>

One bottom line keeps surfacing throughout my visit: *Why can't we all have access to these resources? What logics naturalize these life pathways for some, and legitimize paucity for others? How does this not only harm those shut out, but the very people shut in—and I count myself squarely in both spaces?* In 1972 James Baldwin wrote about how what white people called “the negro problem” created “monsters.”

This problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks.... People pay for what they do, and, still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead. (Baldwin, 2007, p. 54)

Divestment is valuable. As are campaigns to “ban the box” or the question on a wide range of applications that asks about criminal records. But locked out of this private campus are those like Regina, Maritza, and also my nieces, and not only their bodies but the histories and knowledges each represent. *And these are also my people.* What can we steal if we are able to travel here? What do we leave behind? What interruptions are possible? And how to write as if I am not embedded in this academic penalscape, a part of the problem and also part of the necessary and urgent work to build other futures?

### Fresh Analytics

I offer these overlapping teaching and learning vignettes to mark both this political moment, and almost twenty years of my collective teaching and learning

work in the heart of the US carceral regime. January 2017 feels like a hard moment to write about anything, given the ascendancy of a Trump administration keen to eviscerate the few scraps of our welfare state. Yet this moment, another “crisis” in the long history of the violence of the US, also feels like a reminder of the need for slow work, a term borrowed from legal scholar and trans activist Dean Spade, who often describes the ongoing and long haul labor to dismantle oppressive regimes and to simultaneously build new structures and modes of relationality. As slow work in our always urgent times demands other analytics, these scenes or snapshots aim to illustrate the imperative of creating a wider landscape for both conceptualizing, and resisting, the role of carcerality in everyday life, and in our schools. This requires policy and curricular shifts including denaturalizing and ending the persistence of police in classrooms (“school resource officers”) and building ethnic studies curriculums, but also means radical rethinking of our own institutional landscapes, and, also, ourselves.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli, in *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), explores how viscerally uneven life pathways necessitate new models of thinking not just about ethics but about corporeality and ontology. In her work in North Australia with and alongside Aboriginal communities, Povinelli (who does not identify as Aboriginal) charts the premature death, rampant staph infections, and chronic life-threatening illnesses while also witnessing resilience, refusal and struggle. She marks these everyday forms of harm and resistance as intimately linked to a wider colonial regime that produced Aboriginal bodies as insensate, a part of the flora and fauna, while for white settlers the same regime marked access to power, health, capital, and full humanity. A persistent dialectic: civilization requires savagery; private property produces dispossession; whiteness needs blackness; Not twinned or symbiotic, these dynamics, Povinelli suggest, shape individual bodies to produce a “shared body” (2011, p. 4), and frame our forms of resistance, refusal and engagement.

*Victim and perpetrator, worker and felon, student and prisoner, guilt and innocence*—subjectivities are intimately and dynamically relational. Povinelli’s insight is not new. The historian Elsa Barkley Brown wrote over two decades ago: “Middle-class white women’s lives are not just different from working-class white, Black, and Latina women’s lives. It is important to recognize that middle-class women live the lives they do precisely because working-class women live the lives they do. White women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do” (1992, 295). Barkley Brown’s point is not simply that black and Latinas women’s lives are different from white women’s lives, but that these differences circulate in close relation.<sup>3</sup> Povinelli and Barkley Brown’s work is also a recognition that place and institutions are marked by the color-line, through and through.

Far from two separate spheres, as I have written about previously with comrade Gillian Harkins (2016), institutions of education are part and parcel of what Joy

James has called the American penalscape (2007).<sup>4</sup> The prison, the school and the university are a “shared body.” Programs such as policing, corrections, homeland security or military studies (“forensic sciences”) proliferate in postsecondary education and increasingly in K-12 contexts (Nguyen, 2016) and economic ties—from GEO to Sodexo, from our sociology students’ service learning to the grant dollars that line criminologists’ research budgets—define the reality of a prison–industrial complex that includes institutions of education within its workings. Beyond these surface ties, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest in the opening epigraph, capital and knowledge are institutionally organized so that prison is not in opposition to the university but instead that each institution requires the other. In order to have a restrictive enrollment, curricular-rich university, do we need to have a prison? In order to have an international baccalaureate high school program, must there also be a Sister Jean Hughes Adult High School?<sup>5</sup>

### Different Practice

Slow work and new analytics also demand, or invite, other practices. Forms of resistance are both small and individual, and collective. If these institutions and their associated life pathways, for people marked as the “best of the best” and the “worst of the worst,” cannot be disentangled, is it possible to redistribute the affiliated resources? This is clearly not the same work at the site of the prison as at the university or the school, but what might it mean for all, as Dorothy Allison suggests in an opening epigraph, to refuse to wear the coat the world has made for you? A queer project indeed.

Part of the work of refusal and resistance is to make this wider academic penalscape visible, and to map the networks and the contours of state violence, a term used to identify when the harm comes from the state (or from an individual acting on behalf of a state or government) (Richie, 2012; INCITE, 2008). For example, economic disinvestment is a form of state violence, as are hyper-policing and racial profiling, underfunding schools, or supporting institutions that reward misogyny and heteronormativity. Wealth hoarding for some, and nothing for others, is not meritocracy it is sanctioned and scripted disinvestment. Naming state violence creates possibilities for intervention and engagement.

While this work includes dismantling and challenging policies that target communities, engaging a wider terrain also involves profound affective shifts. People want to feel safe, to feel secure, and these feelings have been effectively funneled into a landscape where police and prison expansion and more cameras under the stairways and in the bathrooms, however ineffective, are the dominant response. Security is conceptualized very narrowly and individually and, most centrally, often privately. Eliminating the “cops in our heads and our hearts” as antiviolence organizer Paula X. Rojas writes, is potentially as challenging as removing the cops that line our schools and neighborhoods (Rojas, 2007, p. 213). Not only are the



cops in our heads, as Rojas' notes, but we also have fixed ideas about who merits protection and resources and who does not. These systems clearly harm those they target, but they shape the rest of us who perhaps imagine ourselves either outside, or as benefitting from these systems.

There is no workshop, checklist or course that will support these movements, but our mobilizations and dialogues, however intimately these transpire, must be ignited in public.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A relatively small proportion of the prison industry is private. According to the Prison Policy Initiative's 2017 report, "the government payroll for corrections employees is over 100 times higher than the private prison industry's profits" (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, just as theorist Frank Wilderson writes, "whoever says 'prison' says Black" or "absolute dereliction" (2003, p. 25), whoever says university, says white?

<sup>3</sup> Also see, James Baldwin again: "And I repeat: The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks—the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind" (1963, p. 111).

<sup>4</sup> "Some valued and mimed for their presentations of radicalism may never pay the price of the ticket (to use James Baldwin here) in the academic landscape, a surrogate for and derivative of the American penalscape. (James, 2007, p.7).

<sup>5</sup> Consider for example, the 2015 international media frenzy generated over maximum-security prisoners at Eastern Correctional Facility in New York beating *Harvard students* at a *debate*. What are the assumptions about institutions and knowledge that make this debate win such a newsworthy surprise to so many people?

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