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Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom: Options and Opportunities

Anna Plemons

CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing
and Rhetoric, 2019, pp. 185

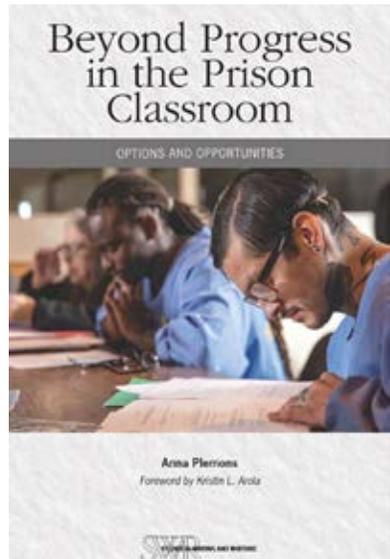
Reviewed by Natalie Kopp

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“After three hours I will go out the way I came in, but while I am here, we will write from deep wells, some recently discovered under the concrete strewn with broken glass and bits of bone” (Plemons 7). The concrete upon which Anna Plemons and her students write is that of California’s New Folsom Prison, and the aforementioned sentence—from one of her nonfiction essays—is a near-perfect encapsulation of what brought her to write *Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom*. As a long-time community writing instructor in the Arts in Corrections program at New Folsom, Plemons has spent years thinking not only about the “deep wells” discovered by her incarcerated students but also about how these students must play an active role in shaping their writing curriculum—how it should not be defined solely by people who can come and go at will “the same way they came in” (7). Plemons’ classroom space is one in which, for different incarcerated writers, the act of “writing in community will fall somewhere between fully transformative and merely entertaining” (7). And yet, Plemons and her students exist in a world in which personal “transformation,” as defined by non-incarcerated people, is often the required outcome for all incarcerated writing and for the continued existence and funding of prison arts programming. It is Plemons’ personal experience with and reflection on these issues that inform this book.

In *Beyond Progress*, Plemons makes the case for a classroom pedagogy that moves beyond colonially-driven narratives of transformation. She argues that, when we as teachers and compositionists stop prioritizing student narratives based on individual transformation—narratives that position incarcerated students as personally responsible for their incarceration and in need of self-driven transformation through writing and education—we can begin to recognize larger webs of relationality that inform the lives of our students and the social factors that lead to incarceration.

While Plemons’ study focuses on the teaching and writing done in the Arts in Corrections (AIC) program, her aim is to view the program as a microcosm for rhetoric and composition classrooms at large and the change that must be made in them



to move beyond colonial ways of thinking. The theoretical framework of Plemons' book is one based in Indigenous scholarship rooted in relationality and respect. Plemons' writing combines theory and storytelling, and the book's four chapters are separated and introduced by four "Writers and Teachers" sections, composed of topical creative prose and poetry by AIC participants and Plemons.

Plemons begins in the first chapter, "Getting Inside: Measuring Something Other Than Progress", with a review of scholarship explaining the problem with the transformation narratives and emancipatory projects that remain prevalent in prison and college composition classrooms. She does not merely disavow these narratives through theory but brings to light some of the real-world reasons they persist, highlighting, for one, that many prison writing programs must adhere to the desires of funding organizations that commodify incarcerated students by requiring proof of transformative outcomes such as reduced recidivism. Instead of coercing incarcerated writers to produce the non-nuanced narratives others often expect, Plemons, in the book's second chapter, builds "The Case for Relationality as Decolonial Practice." Some scholar-teachers fail to recognize or envision their incarcerated students outside of prison, in turn failing to understand the many ways in which students seek to reconnect to their place in the outside world. Plemons calls for the work of "re-membering"—as opposed to dismembering, or separating parts from a whole—in the classroom. A strength in these first two chapters is the way in which Plemons allows her experiences as a community teacher-scholar to strengthen and add nuance to her theoretical framework. Plemons acknowledges, for one, that students themselves sometimes perpetuate transformation narratives and may desire to envision their stories in this way. She writes about the "need to show respect for incarcerated writers even when and perhaps especially when they do not share my own philosophical orientation" and demonstrates a respect for student writing that is not outshined by adherence to any one theoretical perspective (Plemons 28). At the same time, she describes the "yes/and" complications revealed by some of her students when writing proves "transformational *and* yet not quite so" and stresses the harsh reality that, while writing may prove personally rewarding for incarcerated student writers, it cannot lead to freedom from incarceration (Plemons 52). In these chapters, Plemons speaks openly about her own positionality in her work and the personal history of her involvement with AIC, and she embraces the personal and its influence on our scholarship.

In the third chapter, "Toward Relational Methodologies: Learning from the Work of Indigenous Scholars", Plemons outlines the Indigenous scholarship that influences her theory of the prison as a relational space and cites Indigenous scholars directly without, in the words of Zoe Todd, "filtering ideas through white intermediaries" (87). She proposes a relational methodology, based on the work of Margaret Kovach, for other prison scholar-teachers to consider adopting. This five-point methodological model calls for decolonial intention and ethic, research preparation, community accountability, reciprocity/community benefit, and knowledge gathering/meaning-making (Plemons 102).

The fourth chapter, “Opportunities and Options: Relationality at New Folsom”, takes this five-point methodology and uses it to evaluate some of the specific programs at AIC, namely the family arts (FA) program, which includes initiatives such as a writing exchange between incarcerated students and family members and guitar lessons with concerts held during visiting hours. Instead of relying on a deficit model to justify its existence, the FA program aims to “position incarcerated people as cultural assets in their respective communities and actively support them in that role” (Plemons 122). Until this chapter, the book relied primarily on theory and storytelling to make its pedagogical suggestions and included few specifics from the AIC classroom. This chapter gives readers who work or are interested in doing work as prison teacher-scholars concrete pedagogical examples and a way to measure their impact quantitatively that does not commodify incarcerated students.

Beyond Progress concludes with an afterword in which series editor Steve Parks facilitates a conversation between author and Indigenous scholar Kristin L. Arola in order to discuss the ethical issues that arise when non-Indigenous scholars work to implement Indigenous and decolonial theories. The conversation provides additional insight into Plemons’ positionality as a white scholar relying on Indigenous scholarship and digs into complex questions about citing the stories and scholarship of those with different traditions, backgrounds, and histories than those of the writer. While these questions cannot be answered fully in a short afterword, the section does provide a uniquely personal view of Plemons’ writing and research process alongside the perspectives of Parks and Arola.

Beyond Progress excels in many ways. Plemons presents a useful model for those looking to add creative and narrative elements to academic writing. Within the text, Plemons’ roles as a scholar, teacher, and creative writer inform each other, and the book represents a wonderful example of what can be accomplished by embracing interrelated writerly identities in academic scholarship. Additionally, the student writings included in the “Writers and Teachers” sections work not only as examples of student writing that elucidate and complement the book’s themes, but also serve in their own right as pieces worthy of anthologizing and analyzing.

The strength of Plemons’ inclusion of personal elements in her scholarship goes beyond just the “Teachers and Writers” sections. Her frank discussions of her IRB process and the conflicts that arose as she brought her community work at Folsom into the institutional context of academic research will be particularly useful for other community practitioners. Methodology sometimes remains hidden in academic texts, but Plemons gives voice to struggles faced by community researchers trying to conduct their work within the constraints of timed studies, grappling with the ethical precariousness of surveillance, or transitioning from collaborative community partnerships to more restrictive researcher-subject relationships. Plemons speaks openly about these struggles while also recognizing the undeniable importance of the IRB process, and many scholars navigating these aspects of community work will benefit from her insights.

The nuance of Plemons’ arguments and the honesty of her prose make her book a valuable contribution to the recent influx of texts detailing prison writing programs.

Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom is an important and pressing book for all prison teacher-scholars as well as anyone in the fields of rhetoric, composition, or creative writing doing community-based writing and research. The book will also be of interest to scholars and students of autobiography studies, narrative, or literacy studies. Plemons' storytelling skills, clear prose, and succinct explanations of her theoretical framework also make this a useful and accessible book for graduate students new to these areas of inquiry.

One place *Beyond Progress* falls slightly short of its ambitious aims is in making the case for the prison classroom as a microcosm for the rhetoric and composition classroom at large. While a decolonial framework is urgently and undeniably necessary in the university setting, and Plemons effectively reminds us of this, her book speaks most directly to the issues most relevant to sites of incarceration and community collaboration; in fact, her book addresses these important issues so well that it would be unreasonable to ask or expect it to do more. Plemons leaves it in the hands of future rhetoric and compositionist teacher-scholars to apply her pedagogical methods to their classrooms and write about it, which I hope they will. Ultimately, Plemons book is a gift that we should make use of in our own teaching and research.