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Anna Plemons
Washington State University, aplemons@wsu.edu

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Literacy as an Act of Creative Resistance: Joining the Work of Incarcerated Teaching Artists at a Maximum-Security Prison

Anna Plemons

Considering the situated complexities and competing interest of exploitation and hope inherent in community literacy work, this article examines the ways that the Community Arts Program (CAP) at California State Prison-Sacramento complicates and also reifies archetypal grand literacy narratives and considers the place of such narratives within a broader argument for *literacy as acts of creative resistance* scaffolded by small, organic, tactical moves.

> *Literacy is valuable—and volatile—property … a grounds for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as well as potential hope, satisfactions and reward. Wherever literacy is learned and practiced, these competing interests will always be present.*
>
> —*Deborah Brant,* Literacy in American Lives

Spoon Jackson played Pozzo in the 1987 San Quentin production of *Waiting for Godot*. Jackson's performance in *Godot* was preceded by his enrollment, in 1985, in a non-credit bearing poetry course taught by Judith Tannenbaum. Twenty-seven years later he teaches poetry at California State Prison-Sacramento (CSP-Sac) where he is serving a life-without-parole sentence. Last summer, when I was a guest teacher in his classroom, I asked him to sign a copy of *By Heart*, the book he co-authored with Tannenbaum.

Jackson's literacy narrative seems to reify the well-worn literacy myth of "have-nots" aligning themselves with academic sponsors to move from powerlessness to a place of economic viability and autonomy. A close look at the space in which Jackson finds himself as a writer and teacher is an appropriate starting point for building an argument that takes into consideration the situated complexities and "competing interest" of exploitation and hope that Deborah Brant notes are always present where literacy is "learned and practiced." Drawing on the work of Brant, as well as Kirk Branch, and Jeffrey Grabill, I will look closely at the ways that the Community Arts Program (CAP) at CSP-Sac – where Jackson teaches –complicates and also reifies archetypal grand literacy narratives. Furthermore, I will use the specific example of CAP to build a larger argument about community literacy sites – one that aims for *literacy as acts of creative resistance* scaffolded by small, organic, tactical moves. Thinking about literacy sites as organic, tactical spaces *without* an eye toward the strategic is important for a few key reasons.

Tactical moves are made by those without power (de Certeau). When programs move towards institutionalization (and strategic power) they inevitably move away from the margins, and the voices of those without power are subsumed. Thinking about literacy as an act of creative resistance fundamentally requires that the resistor retain ownership of – or agency over – the program. Secondly, the institutionalization of literacy programs sets them on a trajectory – establishes momentum – that almost always becomes self-serving. People are employed who then expect paychecks. Infrastructure grows. And infrastructure is always hungry for more infrastructure. The genuine support of creative, resistive literacy acts demands a type of space – a type of moment – that is not endangered by the births and deaths of the literacy acts themselves.

I want to focus on the literacy community but realize the impossibility of distancing myself from institutions in general, and (in this case) the totalizing institution of prison (Grabill 2). Making a case for organic, tactical moves inside (but at least in some ways distinct from) the institution is tightrope work. Grabill sees the need to view communities and institutions as mutually reinforcing, suggesting that if we do not see literacy as situated within these communities/institutions, we will be unable to spot the ways that local people and places construct alternative literacies (117).

That being said, recognizing the situated nature of local literacy practices is not the same as conceding all agency to the institution or supporting the creeping institutionalization of organic, tactical literacy practices and communities where they spring up. Essential to Grabill's argument is the clear articulation of ethics for any sponsor of literacy. Anyone who endeavors to commit themselves to such an effort must be clear on the "how," "why," and "with whom" of their commitment (53). Lorie Goodman reiterates: "Our grounds for action must remain under revision. We can never suppose that we are 'just' serving; we must always ask, 'In the service of what and whom?'" (Mathieu 93). This clarity, of course, leads back to a clear-eyed view of the institution in which the literacy practice or community is being established.

The connection between institution and community that Grabill suggests functions primarily by way of literacy sponsors, defined by Brant as "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way" (19). In this study, CAP is the direct literacy sponsor, but Brant's notion of a sponsor is complicated by the context in which CAP operates. At present, CAP facilitates non-credit bearing creative writing and poetry classes in addition to a wider set of courses in visual arts, music theory, and performance. The most recent version of CAP sponsorship is difficult to situate bureaucratically – it is currently staffed under the umbrella of mental health with additional program materials coming from the Inmate Welfare Fund which supports inmate self-help programing (such as AA, NA, Toastmasters, etc.). CAP employs four inmate clerks who teach and organize the class offerings. Furthermore, in any given year, dozens of volunteer artists from outside the institution come in as guest teachers and performers, working with the incarcerated teachers who teach the bulk of the classes. Thus the sponsorship for the program is, in some ways, loose and difficult to define.

Because CAP facilitates relationships across race, class, and gender and makes attempts to mediate the clearly unequal relationships of power between members of the community, the work of Brant, Branch, and Grabill offer important theoretical framing for the study. However, because the Community Arts Program exists inside a maximum-security prison it requires an additional lens that takes into account the specific histories, limits and implications of working inside. To that end, I will look to Alexander, Cleveland, Cummins, Davis, Gilmore, Hartnett, Jackson, Lawston and Lucas, Meiners, Rusche and Kirchheimer, and Tannenbaum to articulate the constraints and possibilities of literacy work inside.

Moral Ambiguity, Trickster, and Prison Myth

It would be ill-conceived to begin talking about CAP as a site of creative, resistive literacy without recognizing that the literacy sponsorship for the program is bound up in the specific context of a particular maximum-security prison, inside the wider prison-industrial complex, inside the political economy that allows and encourages its growth. We can read about prison, and work to understand the systemic operations that explain how prison came to be, why is it growing like crazy, and who stands to benefit; but bringing the systemic critique to ground level often obscures a real, representative description of prison work.

Branch, who has taught inside, understands the obscured and situated nature of the prison classroom (10). He nonetheless makes a case for "carving out space to act," even within the systems that "appear so restrictive as to almost determine action" (12). He suggests that rather than "claiming to work for ends separate from the institutions we teach in (an impossible ideal), we need theories of pedagogy that allow for moral action in morally ambiguous contexts," suggesting a resistive agency that shapes even as it is itself shaped (11). Branch: "A teacher in a prison is never apart from that prison, and never apart from the penal system and the criminal justice system either" (93). In that sobering context, Branch creates some wiggle-room for individual agency by evoking the trickster figure who, by definition, functions in places of moral ambiguity (189). The trickster, in the case of the prison classroom, is drawn by Miles Horton's "magnetic pull of the *ought to be*" (Branch 18).

In *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*, Lewis Hyde describes the boundary-crossing trickster who acts without the paralysis of a totalizing moral judgment over the sacred work at hand. Trickster tales describe the double movement of hegemony – maintaining boundaries and simultaneously allowing ruptures (13). Trickster as agent is the "character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart" (14). About the goings on of prison there is much myth, myth that supports the status quo and myths created in opposition to it. Myths about prison fills the cavernous spaces where words would go if we knew how to talk about the complications and contradictions of the place; it seems impossible, or at least daunting to go looking for the words that substantively communicate what CSP-Sac is really like, or explain why I would choose to do work there that is in perpetual danger of supporting a profoundly oppressive system.

So, since I cannot claim the role of sage or all-seeing eye, in this essay I claim the role of witness. I am not the trickster who creates agency and bends the rules

behind bars; the trickster teachers and tactically savvy administrators who make CAP work will be introduced later. I start my work as witness the only way I know how – with a memory.

Witness Work: Making a Case for Work Inside the Prison-Industrial Complex

My first experience on the yard at CSP-Sac was as a guest, invited to a concert made up of inmate Jazz bands, each with a coach from the outside. I tried to hold as still as possible, only moving my eyes to survey the bizarre scene – concrete everywhere, brittle grass, bent backs in oversized prison denim with bold block letters, army green officers with black sunglasses, and signs that said "NO WARNING SHOTS WILL BE FIRED." – I was ten miles from home on another planet. My escort leaned over and began overlaying the scene with important details. "See that guy at the mic – he is the number two Kumi on this yard. Kumi, the Swahili word for "ten" is the sum of four plus one plus five – and the name for a powerful prison-instigated Bay Area gang. And see the guy next to him, he's a Southern." Historically, C-Facility had been a site of violence between Black and Southern Mexican gang members. Entire cellblocks had been locked down for yearlong stretches. And recently, a guard had been stabbed.

The more I listened the more I understood that prison, already obscured from the public eye and all but severed from public memory, is complicated in ways that I, an observer, would never come to understand. It is full of violence and some "seriously sick shit," as one inmate recently told me. But, as evidenced by the concert I was attending, it could also be a site of creative resistance. At one point, I sat down within conversational range of two inmates. We talked about the upcoming parole of one man who had been inside since the year I was born. He explained to me that "two hundred bucks and a bus ticket" was going to be a rough transition.

The bus ticket story fits easily into a narrative web of scholars and practitioners like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Eric Cummins, Stephen Hartnett, Erica Meiners, Howard Winant, Victor Villanueva, Charles Mills, Marc Mauer, Georg Rusche, Otto Kirchheimer, and Buzz Alexander. Some speak directly to the political economy which is feeding the insatiable prison system on a steady diet of U. S. citizens. Others describe the landscape in less overtly materialist terms, but cannot seem to altogether escape noticing the heavy clouds that rain acid "justice" disproportionately on poor urban neighborhoods.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out that 60 percent of California's prisoners come from a five-county region in and around greater Los Angeles. This means that the State of California has committed to spending 60 percent of its billions of correctional dollars every year on selected men and women from a relatively small geographic area. Those dollars, however, are attached to the bodies of these people, which mean they are spent all along the 1-5 corridor in converted farmland, not in the urban neighborhoods that so clearly need support.

The insane lack of human logic that surrounds the prison-industrial complex (PIC) turns my stomach. It has also brought scholars and activists from a variety of disciplines to the Prison Abolition Movement, loosely defined here as a set of

strategies and positions focused on loosening the corporate clutch of capitalism on U.S. systems of punishment, in large part by stemming the tide of people being sucked into the system. Thinking again about Los Angeles and all that is lost when generations are chained, bused, and scattered across the central valley is motivation enough to join the cause. Communities are hemorrhaging. And the blood that is lost shows up on the evening news as a conformation of pervasive "tough on crime" anti-logic.

There is ample evidence that "tough on crime" really means surveillance and punishment of the poor. Christian Parenti uses examples from New Jersey and Massachusetts to point out that those in the drug trade who can afford to, pay their way out of the system with their illegal profits, thus avoiding mandatory sentencing and the spectacle of the courtroom. The discrepancies between sentencing for powder and crack cocaine are well known. And then there are the stories like Enron. Punishment does not linearly follow crime.

For that reason, the stories and numbers offered by scholars like Gilmore and Parenti need to find a place in the conversation. Almost nobody I know in prison thinks that prisons should go away. There are people whose violent and/or deviant acts violate the social contract in ways that justify imprisonment. But that reality does not account for the exponential increase in the use of incarceration in the United States, or the ways that class and race based policing and judicial practices disproportionately target poor, urban neighborhoods.

Considering the momentum with which the PIC grows and the scope of its effect on the poor, a radical prison abolitionist position argues against opportunities for inmates, assuming that such opportunities serve the system, or to state it in more vulgar terms, placate the slaves on America's new plantation. At the same time, I argue that scholars, activists, and particularly teachers can (and must) work from inside and outside the PIC in tactical, organic, critically resistive ways despite the moral ambiguity that surrounds the work.

So what can tactical, organic, critically resistive literacy look like? As Stephen Hartnett articulates, a critical resistance that aims at empowerment, community building and social change, can – no *must* – incorporate the aesthetic and the pedagogical alongside the political. It is not enough to take an ideological political position. Likewise, teaching in the prison or encouraging creative endeavors without an eye towards critical resistance (both of dehumanizing systems and personal processes) is in danger of continuing a long history of control and manipulation under the guise of "rehabilitation."

I suggest that prison classrooms (where inmate teachers, for example, facilitate literacy alongside a wider offering of the arts) are sites with real tactical purpose and import. If the people inside stop participating in organically constructed ways of their own choosing, the broader conversation about what do to with incarcerated people becomes abstracted in ways that are ultimately unhelpful and end up (re) commodifying incarcerated bodies as Eric Cummins (1994) points out is his treatise of the radical prison movement in California (discussed later).

There are myriad charts and graphs that explain the "what" of the PIC. There are even charts and graphs that deal with the "why" – threading its development to capitalistic agendas delivered through political mouthpieces and the evening news.

But amid the charts and graphs there needs to be space for unlikely organic things to happen and space for prisoners (who choose) to reimagine themselves outside of their crime, even if that (re)imagining does not seem to change their material situation, at least not in ways that feel palatable to scholars looking in from the outside.

Beginning to (Re)Imagine: Big and Little Literacy Narratives in the CAP Program

When I teach at CSP-Sac, I am a guest in a few different writing classes and one intensive journaling group. I work with classes on both a mainline yard and in the mental health unit. Ducats, the roll call sheets that authorize inmates to attend, can have up to 20 people on them. But by the time the last writers trickle in, attendance is usually in the teens. Guards are not always eager to call inmates out of their "houses." Depending on the day of the week, some writers don't get called at all, since the gang violence between Northerns and Southerns precludes their use of the yard on the same days.

Incarcerated writers have described the CAP room, where classes meet, as safe and sacred space. They talk of taking off their armor when they enter, and speak of the even more arduous process of putting it back on when they leave. They describe the portal as a time-space continuum of sorts and sometimes talk about how the jarring of coming and going can be too much; sometimes writers choose not to come, any gains weighed against the pain of leaving.

In the room, I am learning, there is code of safety that makes space for each writer's work, even when it reifies the dominant narrative. We offer comment and critique for each other, but we also allow writers to write from the place where they stand. Grabill says it this way: "Programs and teachers cannot force critical consciousness after all, nor can they minimize personal and/or functional needs" (113). Barging in with a narrowly defined agenda is both unproductive and profoundly disrespectful.

Sometimes writers draw from a place of thinly veiled fiction. Often, especially when writers are new to the class, the writing fits neatly into clichéd prison genres – memoirs from the street or poems about the steamy lady who is waiting back home. Sometimes the writing is real, raw, and thoughtful. Sometimes it is combative – explosions orchestrated by razor sharp intellect. I take my cues from the group whose default posture is a *patient knowing* based on years of watching new writers inevitably feel the need to say some of the same old things on their way to saying something new. Writers offer each other suggestions and challenges that sometimes start heated conversations that zig and zag through race, class, gender, and politics. The exchanges that are made are made with the coin of the realm – scraps of public writing. Everyone who comes, writes. Most who come, read aloud. And each public offering is wrapped in a *patient knowing* that each man has to wait for his own word.

This *patient knowing* somewhat overlaps with Paul Loeb's "radical patience" described by Paula Mathieu in *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in Composition*. Mathieu summarized Loeb's idea as the "ability to remain engaged in the messy, unpredictable process of public participation without burning out or becoming

cynical" (47). I have watched incarcerated writers responding to each other with this long-term vision and have tried to likewise adopt the posture. The violence and control of a maximum-security prison make it predictably unpredictable. The moral ethic of Grabill requires that teachers in this space be ever sure of their intentions, and careful with the power they wield. This added to Branch's realistic articulation regarding the moral ambiguity essential to prison makes for a volatile cocktail. A respect for the work of CAP requires that teaching guests adopt the local turn towards radical patience – both with the other writers in the circle and with all (read *nearly everything*) that is out of the control of those who make the program work. Bringing impatience to this place threatens its very existence.

As a guest (and even as a sponsor) of this local literacy community, I forfeit the "right" to unreflectively speak my mind to the guards who are also caught up in this maddening ecosystem. Appreciating the delicate, tactical nature of what CAP is attempting to do requires a patience that often chooses small actions instead of big ones, or sometimes (what appears to be) no action at all. The politics of the prison ecosystem seems absurd at best and cruel and arbitrary at worst. I have seen volunteers come into the institution and immediately adopt a "change agent" posture that seems focused on the material conditions of inmates, but, I would argue is often times, at bottom, an unreflective coping strategy for processing their PIC experience. Unreflective action on the part of volunteers can dangerously subsume the articulated desires of inmates, ending with volunteers making decisions for which inmates are ultimately disciplined (Cummins). The rules of the PIC may, over time, be negotiated, but they cannot be ignored, because when they are, the punishment comes back – every time – on the incarcerated men and women who choose to risk community partnership.

When I teach I am a guest in classes usually taught by Spoon Jackson and Marty Williams, both of whom are inmate teaching-artists and long-term CAP clerks (the title of clerk allows inmate teaching-artists to make prison wages while teaching and handling the administrative duties, like making ducats, that keep the program going). Spoon Jackson has been a teaching-artist at CSP-Sac for over eight years. He is currently in this thirty-fourth year of a life-without parole sentence. His first contact with CAP (then Arts in Corrections) was a poetry class taught by Judith Tannenbaum at San Quentin, an experience he writes about in *By Heart: Poetry, Prison and Two Lives*, the memoir he co-authored with Tannenbaum.

Jackson writes about how he showed up for Tannenbaum's poetry class and sat in silence, with his back to the wall in a ring of chairs he set up as a perimeter of defense. Then, after a year, he brought a stack of poems. And played Pozzo in "Waiting for Godot" at San Quentin in 1987. Then authored a book. And continues to write peer-reviewed articles that I can find at the campus library.

This bulleted list of Spoon's endeavors reads like the reifying salvation narrative so readily accessible, even in scholarly discourse. In *Right to Be Hostile*, Erica Mieners offers a poignant example from the genre: "I was born; I had problems; I made the wrong choices; I was apprehended by the police; I was incarcerated; I found God and He helped me. And…my life is now on a better track" (139). Eve Ensler's 2003 documentary, "What I Want My Words To Do To You: Voices from a Maximum-Security Women's Prison" unwittingly offers a glaringly flat-footed window into

the composing of salvation narratives. Ensler designs writing prompts that continually situation writers inside their crime, encouraging remorse and individual responsibility. At multiple points she talks over writers as they are explaining or reading their work, making suggestions about their feelings and their experiences with their families. Even when writers push back or dismiss her inappropriate over-stepping, she does not change directions. Ensler's PBS documentary is representative of the genre that Meiners and others have openly critiqued. Critics of the salvation narrative script rightly find that it is wholly inappropriate for literacy sponsorship to delineate the socio-emotional boundaries of the writer.

For me, however, narratives like that of Jackson significantly complicate the genre, calling for a "both/and" space where incarcerated writers have the freedom to tell their stories as they see it, even when those tellings seem to come back around to worn out myths. In *By Heart* Jackson describes the scenes (prison library, prison classroom, and prison theatre production) where he "finds his voice" and credits reading and writing with bringing a sense of purpose and creative outlet that helps him reimagine himself (or at least get back to what was lost early in his public schooling). He writes: "I learned a few new words each day and each one brought a geyser erupting inside my mind and soul. The more I read and studied, the clearer life became. I became richer and deeper inside . . . I had to till the endless gardens in my mind, heart, and soul" (2). Of the library years before he began attending poetry class he writes: "For eight years I had stayed to myself at San Quentin, learning who I was and what I was about. I avoided crowds. Although my heart, mind and soul burned with thoughts, vibes, and feelings, I let none surface and stepped over wounded, dying, or dead bodies as everyone else did" (2). Jackson writes of his expectations about the poetry course: he was sure he would not like it, considering poetry to be the realm of "women, squares, nerds, weirdoes, professors, and highbrows, people caught up in some unreal academic world" (2).

But he *does* begin to write. And writing does change – in small, organic, tactical ways – his material situation. He becomes a published writer and teacher. And more recently, when offered the opportunity to move to a different institution where he could more closely align himself with a university, he chose to stay at CSP-Sac, calling the program he has helped build "a mecca for the arts." Jackson navigates impossibly narrow constraints without strategic control over some of his most basic needs. And yet he gets to decide (for the moment) whether or not to move from one institution to another, weighing his opportunities as a teaching artist in each place. With Jackson in mind, I find support for the articulation that writing and teaching bring some small agency and serve to alleviate (to some extent) the oppressiveness of doing "life without."

Thinking about the way that Jackson moves inside the prison, creating spaces and moments that transcend incarceration, calls up the image of the trickster with parallels between Jackson's literacy narrative and Hyde's analysis of the literacy narrative of Frederick Douglass. In *Trickster* Hyde uses the trickster myth to situate the life of Frederick Douglass. Hyde concedes that "a person as serious and moralizing as Frederick Douglass" does not seem to embody the trickster myth, but takes up some trickster qualities because he is so clearly situated on the margins (226). Douglass was born into a deeply conflicted moral system, a system in which

he adopts the Hermetic position of theft. He "steals" literacy from his father who is unwilling to give it, and that stealing of literacy leads Douglass to see, in his own words, a "pathway from slavery to freedom" (228). Hyde suggests that the acts of reading and writing, when performed by Douglass, are acts that "undercut plantation culture" (229). Hyde continues: "If Douglass hopes to be the active disenchanter of his master's world, he must speak and write" not just to any public, but specifically to a white public – the public of his oppressor (229). This speaking across the color line, this breaking of the rules of silence, this contestation of the "white world's fictions about slavery" leads Douglass to articulate a sense of freedom. The quality of the silence that Douglass must break runs parallel through Jackson's narrative. Choosing to write, for both men, is a choice against silence and a move towards public engagement with the oppressor (and/or his proxy). And in both instances breaking silence through literacy fundamentally disrupts (or at least disorients) the well-tended hegemonic fiction.

Hyde's analysis of Douglass also exposes complications to the Frederick Douglass literacy myth where all ends well for those who learn to read and write. Douglass *does* gain some tactical (and maybe even strategic) power in his lifetime. But, as Hyde points out, despite the fact that Douglass lives to see much of plantation culture collapse, no utopic phoenix rises from its ashes: "Yankee culture [has] its own organizing divisions, some of them odious and remarkably indelible" (237). Looking back on his own life, Douglass writes in his 1855 autobiography about his youthful enthusiasm in adopting a good cause with good people; with the encouragement of his white supporters, Douglass speaks and writes to and for an audience and is "made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisped" (quoted in Hyde 243). This close circle of white supporters "prompted, sanctioned, introduced and authorized Douglass's voice; they were also his sympathetic listeners" (245).

Hyde describes him as a man "moving from speechlessness into speech as he enters what he thought was a world organized to include him" (246). But time proved otherwise and in the eventual writings of the *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he is described by African American readers as finally developing a "colored" voice: "I have read his paper very carefully and find phrase after phrase develop itself as in one newly born among us" (247). Douglass's literacy moves from aligning with his early literacy sponsors to choosing to pursue what Hyde calls an "essential self" in the voice of the *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. This movement charts a course through a profound disillusionment with his lack of true membership in the white circle of his literacy sponsors.

Douglass as Trickster: Literacy Sponsorship and Tactical Moves

I want to make the case that Douglass uses literacy in tactical, organic and nuanced ways that resonate both with Jackson's story and the underlying principles of the CAP program. Douglass starts with a salvation narrative of sorts which catches the imagination of his literacy sponsors, who (intentionally or not) co-opt and attempt to censor his story as well as directly manage its telling. Douglass: "It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story, month after month, and to keep up my interest

. . . 'Tell your story, Frederick,' would whisper my revered friend, Mr. Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always follow the injunction, for I was now reading and thinking" (243).

So Douglass – Hyde's trickster at the threshold of possibility – leans hard against the edges of hegemony. This is the same dangerous ground where incarcerated writers like Jackson and his students find themselves. They are sponsored to a point, and that point – that edge – is the focus of much of the extreme prison abolitionist debate. What is the real use of tactical power? Can literacy programs inside maximum-security prisons be anything other that a grand and cruel placation of America's new slaves? What is really to be gained by incarcerated men and women who choose to read and bravely write their own story?

Proponents of programs like CAP talk about (re)discovering humanity. Opponents of such programs argue that a discovery of humanity without the material gain of physical freedom is at best a sham and at worst a deep violence. But, when the organic, tactical opportunity for discovery exists within a person, there is also violence in working against such men and women, working as they are to rupture the big and small lies they carry and bring a bit of a silenced soul to the surface. Douglass's story does not really begin with a salvation narrative; it begins with his pursuit of something that was being strategically withheld from him. So he pursues literacy, finds sponsors, writes a salvation narrative, outgrows the space that once felt free and moves for the first time into a voice that is his own.

Hyde writes that after 1847 Douglass no longer "forgets" his dark skin and crisped hair. "He becomes black, reimaging his family history and redirecting his voice to a more receptive audience" (247). Hyde suggests that this is a reluctant rebirth brought on by Douglass's profound tiring of the trope of the self-education savage. The liminal space between man and his trope suffocates, "but what were his choices? If there is no way to stay poised on the edge, which is the better fate, cannibalism or anthropemy, to be eaten by ideology or vomited into exile? Unless he wanted to leave the country, he would have to work with the hand that history had dealt" (248).

Therein lies the fundamental seat of contradiction for literacy sponsorship in places likes a maximum-security prison where the literacy myth of economic gain does not hold. The teachers I know at CSP-Sac are serving life-without-parole sentences. Barring some cataclysmic event they will leave prison in body bags – either by violence or old age. They can choose organic, tactical moves inside the belly of the beast but their choices will not lead to physical freedom. Their choices can, and often do, offer a measure of agency in a near-totalizing institution. And such agency has real value, even if it is tactical and contingent.

Agency and Sponsorship: Getting to the Specific Context of CAP

Fundamental to an organic, tactical position is the understanding that the people inside can (and must) participate in organically constructed ways of their own choosing. Broadly, if teachers like Jackson and Williams stop teaching, and the writers they are working with stop writing and speaking in public and semi-public

spaces, the outside conversation about what do to with incarcerated people becomes abstracted in ways that are ultimately unhelpful and end up (re)commodifying incarcerated bodies. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*, Cummins goes into great detail about how the Bay Area Left's co-option of the *hyper-sexualized inmate outlaw* ended up disrupting community support for inmate-initiated reform at San Quentin. The situation Cummins describes is highly complicated with lots of moving parts, but what is clear, even at a surface level, is that incarcerated writers fostered connections with the Bay Area Left based on the promise (or at least the imagining) of a strategic alliance. The incarcerated writers at San Quentin mistook the Left's interest for real, material opportunity. By the bloody end, the community writ large had withdrawn its support for inmates, yet probably never really understood what it was that they were asking for. The drama calls back the details of Frederick Douglass's experience with white sponsorship of his abolitionist agenda.

Understanding the messy and impossibly contradictory nature of prison politics, CAP works to circumvent a strategic political agenda. It also rejects outright the notion of rehabilitation (the "R" word) with its terrifying history of abuse. Without a political or rehabilitative agenda, CAP chooses to narrow its own articulation of itself to this: basic opportunities to do creative work in community. This seemingly small agenda inside the massive machine of the PIC seems almost laughably foolish. But the lack of hubris is quite possibly the very thing that has allowed the program to exist amid the twin extremes of violence and control that define prison.

As tactical and organic as it may be, CAP does require sponsorship. As Grabill understands, a program like CAP must have "an insider," an agent with considerable institutional power (141). At one point, what is now CAP was called Arts in Corrections, a statewide program with a state employee at each institution serving in the dual role of teaching-artists and bureaucratic insider. CAP has retained, for the moment, a version of that position. And the person who holds it understands that what CAP fundamentally requires is a rupturing of sorts in the dominating, oppressive social relations that are standard in prison. Mathieu moves towards recognizing the well-timed dance of the bureaucratic insider when she takes up the work of Iris Marion Young (1990) and William M. Sullivan (1995). Young reframes rights more as *doing* than as *having*, a position in keeping with de Certeau's original statements about tactics belonging to those without "real" material power. Sullivan makes a bit more room for the agency of the insider, suggesting that although "institutions make certain practices possible and others impossible . . . individuals can also change institutional orders" (122).

Mathieu continues to speak to CAP's seemingly small, tactical agenda – offering basic opportunities to do creative work in community – in her framing of tactical work as grounded in a hope characterized by a "critical, active, dialectical engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures" (xv). Her claims about what tactical work should look like and what it should be aiming for call back to Miles Horton's "eye on the ought to be." She suggests that tactical projects "accomplish only themselves" (xix). Mathieu:

> One works for and hopes for change in the powerful systems that script our society, but one does not look to transactional rewards as a needed extrinsic exchange for the act of writing. The doing of the thing itself has to be enough pleasure or reward, because being heard in a fractured public and making change in the world is a slow and unpredictable process. (47)

Mathieu understands that organic, tactical work seems to aim low, and even when its sail *does* catch a breeze and fly, it does not expect that it has become a bird.

I attended a debriefing meeting in November where Williams and a few other teaching-artists met with a band of visiting musicians who had spent six days inside. This was the seventh year that they had made the trip from Alaska to California. Those particular musicians bring an energy to the CAP program that opens up spaces that close again when they leave. Williams thanked the artists for coming and described his personal process for dealing with the coming and going of volunteers. And I, as witness, heard again the same thing Williams has been telling me for years – that a tactical orientation allows him and the other teaching-artists agency in an otherwise totalizing place.

I end this witness back where I began, with three scholars who speak directly to the dangers, contradictions and ambiguities of literacy acts, literacy communities, and literacy teaching in a maximum-security prison. Brant calls for a framing of literacy that understands that it is always situated. Branch calls on Horton as he makes the case that "to work towards something that seems impossible to realize is not the mark of a futile activity" (11). Literacy sponsorship that operates primarily through tactical and organic means in the morally ambiguous context of a maximum-security prison does (and should) give us pause. But a clear-headed and well-informed look at the institution of prison does not need to preclude tactical work from inside the system.

Teachers, in any institution, who continue to show up day after day cannot escape some belief in individual agency. Branch claims, and I agree, that all classrooms where literacy practices are taught (or supported) ascribe some agency to those literacy practices. "Educational literacy practices are supposed to take students beyond the literacy practices already familiar to them when they enter the classroom. Why else would we presume to teach? (214). We do teach. And for most of us, an unresolvable moral ambiguity will always accompany the work (216).

Williams says that before there was CAP he was playing his guitar against the wall on the yard. What Williams and other incarcerated teaching-artists I know will say is that literacy, defined here as acts of creative resistance, will be part of the prison fabric, whether or not it is scaffolded by the organic, tactical support of bureaucratic insiders and volunteer teachers. The question is not whether or not these literacy communities make sense to outsiders, but whether or not they find support to function in the ways of their choosing.

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Anna Plemons is a guest teaching-artist at California State Prison-Sacramento. She is also a PhD candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Washington State University where her primary research interests revolve around teaching and writing in prison, and the complications and implications of such work.