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Shannon Carter

Texas A&M Commerce, shannon.carter@tamuc.edu

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## HOPE, “Repair,” and the Complexities of Reciprocity: Inmates Tutoring Inmates in a Total Institution

Shannon Carter

This article analyzes one prison literacy program in Texas that trains inmate participants to teach other men and women, likewise incarcerated and often dyslexic, to read and write in English. Noting the regular recurrence of the words “repair” and “hope” in participants’ descriptions of HOPE and associated activities, the author makes extensive use of feminist-epistemologist Elizabeth Spelman’s theory of “repair” and Paula Mathieu’s articulation of “hope” in her attempt to understand the nuances of “repair” and the “hope” it enables/generates behind these prison walls. Finally, given HOPE’s configuration as a faith-based program with Christian origins and Carter’s own position as a secular academic, the article ends with an extended discussion of the tensions between Bible-based discourses and the academy.

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*It’s easy to talk yourself into despair. Hope is physical and visceral. I don’t think you can talk yourself into it. I think you have to do yourself into it. The more people try things, work at things, test things, push boundaries, experiment, the less we just angst about it, the better (Studs Terkel 242).*

Now at five different facilities in the Texas prison system, Texas HOPE Literacy offers a powerful argument for the benefits of collaborative learning. The core activity in which HOPE participants are involved is individualized instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics. As the vast majority of this instruction takes place between and among the inmates themselves, HOPE is the embodiment of the kind of “hope” Studs Terkel describes. It’s *physical*, *visceral*, and something participants *do* themselves into, standing as it does for “Helping Others Pursue Education.”

As a writing center director and tutor trainer, it is this peer-to-peer interaction that I have found most intriguing. Of course, it has long been held as a truism that the collaborative model so much a part of writing center orthodoxy benefits everyone involved—tutors, students, and even the communities in which they write. In fact, “The Peer Tutor Alumni Project” emerged from the sheer volume of former tutors who reported continued benefits from their tutoring experiences long after they stopped working as tutors. What struck researchers Harvey Kail, Paula Gillespie, and Brad Hughes what “how significant the experiences of collaborative learning is for peer tutors even after they graduate from college, leave the Writing Center or Writing Fellows program behind, and plunge into their post-graduate lives.”

It appears that this “experience of collaborative learning” is not less significant for the inmates involved with the Texas HOPE Literacy Program at Dawson and Hutchins State Jails, in Dallas, Texas. By working one-on-one via the collaborative method, these tutors report life benefits even more significant than those reported by tutors “after they graduate from college and plunge into their post-graduate lives.”

My focus here is not, however, the “benefits of collaboration” per se, but rather the ways in which tutors describe such benefits as they relate to literacy education and the “life changes” experienced from such activities. These activities are often described as “repair.” As HOPE tutor and resident Ava Nix

explains in a recent article for the new inmate-generated newsletter *HOPE Headlines*, “The destruction of one’s self often feels *irreparable*. . . The chances of finding a place in prison that promotes healing and transformation are few and far between. . . . When this program [Texas HOPE Literacy] is worked [sic], and all the tools provided are

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used properly, you will continue to grow and *repair* all that has been *broken* within your family and yourself” (emphasis mine).

### Literacy Education as “Repair”

*We humans don’t just live in a world of breakables; we are breakables, our bodies and souls by their very nature subject to fracture and fissure. And we are social animals, our dependency on each other given shape by the connections we find and forge among ourselves. These relationships are by their very nature subject to damage, dissolution, collapse—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse (Spelman 49-50).*

*Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people (Barton and Hamilton 42).*

Literacy education in most American prisons is informed by a rather progressivist (and mechanical) definition of literacy. The *Texas Adult Literacy Survey*, for example, defines it as the ability “to use printed and written information to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” Similarly, according to feminist epistemologist Elizabeth Spelman, “. . .just as cars are repaired so people can use them as they desire, people are repaired so they can get back in basic working order, in order to get on

with what they want to do” (36). In other words, the function of literacy education in the Texas prison system may be to actively *repair* illiteracy with the assumption that doing so will better enable currently illiterate offenders to avoid future criminal behavior. Such a perspective is rather optimistic and avoids the possible causes of criminal behavior among highly literate offenders, but this progressivist myth is very attractive and persuasive when it comes to supporting community activism like the HOPE Literacy Project.

Metaphors like “damaged,” “broken,” and “repair” often describe public perceptions of the incarcerated, and I use them here not by accident but in order to emphasize the active and dynamic nature of “rehabilitation efforts” and to stress the agents involved. When we apply these metaphors to literacy and literacy education, we may assume literacy to be the “complete” or “intended” state of being and illiteracy the “broken,” “damaged,” or “incomplete” state. Since literacy is, as Jacqueline Jones Royster suggests, “a people-oriented enterprise,” such models treat the illiterate individual as “broken,” “damaged,” or struggling to prevent further decay in his or her relationships within various communities. Since men and women in prison are almost twice as likely to be considered “functionally” or “completely” illiterate than those in any other institutional space in the United States, literacy education may be seen as a way to repair these “broken” individuals in order to more successfully integrate them into society upon release (Rubenstein).

But repair work involves many nuanced and deeply social activities, as Elizabeth Spelman explains in *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (2002). Spelman’s argument regarding the social significance of repair work is telling:

To repair is to acknowledge and respond to the fracturability of the world in which we live in a very particular way—not by . . . accepting without question that there is no possibility of or point in trying to put the pieces back together, but by employing skills of the mind, hand, and heart to recapture an earlier moment in the history of an object or a relationship in order to allow it to keep existing (5).

Thus it becomes important for us to examine what we judge to be worthy of repair, the form that repair takes, and the function we expect that object or relationship to perform once it is “fixed.” As a metaphor for the more directly people-oriented “repair” work like restoring relationships damaged by crime, unspeakable and ongoing racism, etc., Spelman illustrates the value-sets embedded in repair work through “Willie,” a Saab mechanic whose customers trust to keep their work trucks, cars, furnaces, and other necessarily machinery in good working order; Fred, a motorcycle enthusiast attempting to restore an Indian Chief motorcycle to resemble, as closely as possible, the vehicle when it “came off the factory floor” (14); and Louise, a painting conservator carefully mending Barnett Newman’s *Cathedra* after it was “severely slashed with a Stanley knife” (16).

Like Spelman, I understand the problems associated with comparing the “repair” of humans and human relationships to the repair of cars and paintings. I do not like the ways in which this metaphor positions inmates as “damaged,” “broken,” and otherwise inadequate. Even so, this is a very common characterization within prison-based educational systems, and thus it becomes important to unpack the metaphor “repair” and the value-sets and activities it reproduces. When applied to human beings—as objects of repair—Spelman’s notion of “repair” forces us to explore the value-sets and rhetorical construction of the work itself and everyone it affects.

In the pages that follow, I explore the nuances of “repair” through literacy education as it manifests itself behind prison walls—at least within the walls of Texas HOPE Literacy at two correctional facilities in Dallas, Texas. In order to do so, I will make extensive use of the tutors’ perceptions of this repair work, perceptions culled from multiple interviews with ten inmate tutors at Hutchins State Jail in 2004-2005 and the autoethnographies and other writings created by nine inmate tutors at Dawson State Jail in 2007.

I begin with an extended discussion of life on the inside as described by the women at Dawson State Jail because, as Wally Lamb explains, “To imprison a woman is to remove her voice from the world, but many female inmates have been silenced by life long before that transport van carries them from the courthouse to the correctional facility” (9). So, too, does this silence envelope the men at Hutchins State Jail. It is thus important to hear from them firsthand. Following this description, I explore HOPE’s origins and the program itself, providing a tentative foundation for an extended critique of the metaphor “repair”—the ‘doing’ that makes up HOPE and, as I will argue, embodies hope for the men and women involved. Finally, I will analyze repair via several different perspectives, choosing one more in line with improvisation and a *project* orientation than with institutionalization and a *problem* orientation.

## HOPEplace

Life in prison is loud. It is stressful. It is dehumanizing. It is what Erving Goffman calls “a total institution.” That is, “[a] place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from a wider society for an appreciable period of time together, lead an enclosed formally administered round of life” (xii). According to Goffman’s theoretical framework, the prison itself is but one type of “total institution,” this one “organised to protect society and the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue” (xiii). For the women at Dawson State Jail, all of life takes place—with few exceptions—in the very same room with the very same women—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, week-after-week, month-after-month, and—in some cases—year-after-year. Students and tutors live, work, eat, and sleep in the same room, leaving only for “pill call,” trips to the commissary, classes, parenting, Bible study, GED preparations, and the rare visit with friends and family from the free world. Seven toilets, four showers, and fifty-four bunks line the perimeter of each dorm. Tutoring takes place at a series of tables in

the middle of the room—the same tables upon which they eat their meals, write letters to their families, and worry about the future. It is monotonous. It is institutionalized. It is institutionalizing. It is a “Total Institution.”

In preparation for their autoethnographies about their experiences as tutors for HOPE, the women in my writing group last spring began with taking extensive field notes of their day-to-day experiences in this dorm. The experience itself was an enlightening one. During our initial meeting about these field observations, all writers involved were excited about taking their own field notes when they returned to their dorms. All felt prepared to do so, especially given that we had done a couple of practice runs together. But none expected the response they got when they began taking such notes back in their dorms; neither did I. The other residents were defensive, offended, mad, and, at times, even confrontational. The writers found themselves taking notes in secret, from their bunks under the guise of writing letters home, after lights out, from behind the bunk of another resident. Jessica’s field observations began from behind her friend Cyndi’s bunk, a good vantage point and one hidden from the majority of the other residents. Like many of the women here, Jessica is serving time on a drug-related charge.

In her field notes, Jessica focuses first on the way the space felt to her and describes the limits of the space itself from her vantage point on the floor next to the bunk:

March 27, 5:48pm: Cold floor, concrete, discolored. . . so uncomfortable. It feels like I am sitting in a gym or a warehouse. Shoes under beds. Bags of clothes snug in between the boxes beneath the beds on either side of me, each box only about two feet wide, one foot tall, and three feet deep. Everything we keep here has to fit here. . . . All the clothes you own stuffed in between boxes. The boxes themselves filled with roman [sic] noodles, books, shampoo, and all my precious letters. Boxes that are frustrating to life in. Boxes that confine us, the confinees.

But in this space it is the small things that make for the greatest pleasures. As Deidre describes it, “everywhere white plastic TDC [Texas Department of Corrections] cups—coffee and hot chocolate. *Thank God I have some coffee to drink.* Crystal at ‘her’ table, slowly stirring her cup. She scratches her hip in a t-shirt and boxers two sizes too big. Her long hair braided. . . She’s going home soon” (emphasis in original).

In the HOPE-designed dorms, everyone is either a student or a tutor. Each morning the dayroom is transformed into “HOPEplace”—the space where all the tutoring takes place. Here is Jessica again, describing the dorm itself and providing a verbal map of how and where HOPE functions in this space:

A large open room with 54 bunks. . . Dayroom in open part of the room where beds aren’t. Tables seat four except one big table in the middle of the front row. That seats

twelve. That's my table and all my friends can sit with me. . . . Books and binders on tables, pencils, dry erase boards and erasers, coffee mugs, water bottles . . . Each table holds a whole world of *change* for someone. Brings together tutor and student to *change a life* of an inmate and the lives of that inmate's family. So many people affected by sitting at this table (emphasis mine).

At the time of her observation, the tutors' and students' work had been interrupted by the presence of a maintenance worker. The rule: when an outsider is present, all inmates must "rack up"—meaning get in their bunks—and wait quietly for the work to be completed. Jessica continues to describe HOPE in compelling detail:

Each woman looking a little sad and lonely. Patiently waiting to get back to tutoring (maintenance is in dorm fixing toilets). Some women sleeping, dreaming. Uneasy feeling in the dorm. Kind of like a waiting room in a hospital. The dayroom like a skeleton that is *nothing* without these brilliant women in it (emphasis in original).

But once the work begins, so does the excitement. The "noise" we know and love—not the television, not the yell of the guards or—necessarily—the flushing of toilets, but the sounds of writing center work, of the group work in the classroom, of writing and reading together, of collaboration. "At 8:00 am," Melanie explains, "the workplace begins. That's when the peer educators and students begin tutorials. From the outside looking in, it looks pretty overwhelming. You can notice the desire to teach in the peer educator's and student's faces. It's a beautiful sight!"

As Jessica describes it, the noise from the workplace at the beginning of the day includes

...the flipping of pages, the sounding of letters of the alphabet, the words, "I don't understand." "Are you ready?" "Do you see?" Flushing toilets, shower running, cups of coffee, barely open eyes, freshly washed hair, some women reading...confusion...trying...working hard...trying to understand...concentration.

The sounds of concentration. No easy feat in this environment where, like Diedre, many have begun to wonder if they are not, in fact, "becoming institutionalized" (personal interview).

On the weekend, when HOPEplace is not in session, things are very different indeed, as Diedre describes in her field notes taken from the vantage point of a top bunk in the corner with a window overlooking downtown Dallas (the HOPE dorms are on the tenth floor) and the parking lot where she can see visitors coming and going.

Saturday, March 17, 11:30 am. St. Pats Day. I am sitting on my bunk. In the rear corner of the dorm. To the right, I see out my window (3 foot by 4 foot grey metal bars). Downtown Dallas across Interstate 35. . . . The asphalt is wet. Traffic on the interstate moves slowly. Construction continues across the street. New lady in bunk next to me is sleeping. She's from my hometown. Most bunks are in compliance. 10 out of 54 [women] sleeping. Two TVs loud—compete. As more time passes in the day here, the volume increases. People are talking louder and louder to be heard over both TVs and other conversations. It's rarely quiet in prison. A typical Saturday afternoon. Disagreement between three women next to me. Two are crying.

I'm staying neutral.

I hear Sheila laughing. It makes me smile. Her dad's near death.

Hospice.

Cancer.

She has a year to go.

She'll never see him again.

I remember

My momma

My stomach churns.

Two bunks over my friend is very ill—colon cancer. She has begun bleeding again and is in pain. Medical has done nothing yet. She is afraid. I am afraid. We are all afraid. We are *always* afraid.

. . . I can hear the bass from the stereo blasting from the street below. I look at all the cars and stoplights below. Can't tell which is which. Three different women. One says, "It's no big deal." Second one is still angry. Third one says, "She overheard you. Best thing to do is leave her alone."



In the parking lot below I see a man coming to visit. He is holding hands with two very small children. They are dressed in jeans and short sleeved shirts. They head toward the entrance to Dawson below the winder. Visitation day. One woman across the way gets called for a visit. She is very excited. She says she just got them approved to visit. She is getting into her “whites,” putting her bed in compliance. She’s gone.

That’s what it’s really about—the boyfriends, husbands, parents, friends, and children. The people we have left behind in the free world. I fight my urge to look out the window to the city of Dallas below. Try not to look at Interstate 35 and remember heading south to Tyler. Home.

But as these women tutor, talk about tutoring, write about tutoring, and train to tutor, life becomes something very different. Something more than looking out the window through the bars to the “real” world below. Something somehow more meaningful. As they explain, that “something” is HOPE. Enacting HOPE (the program) enables the “hope” that Paula Mathieu argues is what “mediates between the insufficient present and an imagined but better future” (19). According to Burl Cain, warden of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, “[p]risons are places where real changes can occur. More and more we see that the persons destined to live out the rest of their days behind bars have great ability to learn and even discover hidden talents when given the opportunity to be creative” (xi). But incarceration without something like HOPE is, in fact, not enough to facilitate the kind of hope Mathieu describes, the hope Terkel articulates as both physical and visceral. HOPE/hope “requires joint effort—everyone working together to create successful solutions” (Lagana and Lagana xvi).

## HOPEworks

*Duckie, a tutor in HOPE for 11 months: “This program has taught me patience and structure. It has taught me fellowship...”*

*Ava, a tutor in HOPE for three months: “This program has taught me to get along with women. It has taught me to give people a chance, something I was too busy to do in the world...”*

*Christine, a student in HOPE: “Patience and endurance and self-control are just a touch on what I have learned. It has also taught me to think before I speak...” (qtd. in Debbie, 17).*

What makes this program unique are several things. First, its focus on the needs of men and women who are—by most accounts—functionally illiterate and thus perhaps unable to comprehend the materials designed to help them pass the GED. As Tobi Jacobi explains, the vast majority of “current literacy

education efforts focus primarily on helping incarcerated students achieve GED certification...” (5-6). However much of the instruction associated with GED preparation includes large classes and rote workbook training, which is ineffective and inappropriate for most any learner but especially problematic for learners who have struggled the most in traditional classes working from similar models—those with learning differences. As Terra White explains, “Learning disabilities (LD) severely inhibit many individuals, including a disproportionately large percentage of the prison population, from reaching a standard level of achievement” (51). And LD is quite common among American inmates. In fact, “[a]mong the prison population, the rate of learning disabilities is nearly *four times higher* than among the household population” (White 54, emphasis mine). Through HOPE, these men and women are given the one-on-one attention they need via a curriculum designed specifically for LD students, which is perhaps the most unique and interesting feature of this program.

According to Lucy Smith, founder and CEO of Texas HOPE Literacy, inmates “who are LD are often very bright, intelligent people, but . . . their functional illiteracy comes from not being taught the way they learn best.” She tells me of one man who was, before HOPE, “totally illiterate. He had no concept of numbers, no concept of letters. No concept of the alphabet. No concept of sounds. Didn’t even know what a number meant. An extreme case, but not an uncommon one.” She continues,

. . . The teachers in the classroom are doing the best they can. [It’s just that] your functional illiteracy, in my opinion, comes from the lack of appropriate instruction in the classroom, which even if a student is not LD . . . a phonics approach will just expedite them further, faster. Those who are dyslexic need specialized instruction that is an Orton-Gillingham based methodology.

In other words, the way to “repair” functional illiteracy is to reteach these functionally illiterate men and women in the “right” way—a phonics approach, not a “whole word” one. “The facts are these kids who have dyslexia respond to this approach. . . Research has shown this is the only way” to get these men and women reading and writing (telephone interview).

Originally, HOPE’s reliance on Peer Educators (the preferred term) was borne from necessity. The curriculum was the focal point, designed to teach these illiterate adults the letters of the alphabet, Greek and Latin roots, pronunciation, and other methods making up phonics-based literacy education. But the needs were so great that Smith found the best way to reach the vast population of functionally illiterate inmates was to train literate inmates to teach other inmates via the curriculum described above. As a Certified Language Therapist, Qualified Instructor of Language Therapists, and specialist in learning disabilities, Smith was, of course, appropriately qualified to make such judgments.

It is important and relevant that HOPE is an educational program that focuses on inmate needs that expand well beyond basic literacy skills. The

needs of these men and women, as well as their families, are profound; as anyone spending time with them will quickly learn, as anyone considering the complexities of incarcerated life will quickly argue. As Smith explains, “They’ve got to get education, [in part] because the academic success raises their self-esteem. ...[So] you’ve got to start with the academic.” But you can’t end there, “because they are a whole person. If I treat just the arm and the rest of the body is injured then all I have is a healthy arm. The arm’s going to give up.” As such, and unlike the general prison population, HOPE residents have regular access to, among other things, parenting classes, leadership training, reentry counseling, career advice from professionals, and visits with representatives from Child Protective Services (CPS). They also engage in community building events such as an annual Christmas Pageant and play, community outreach activities such as HOPE 4 the People—choir and steppers that perform at area churches—and local politics like organized elections for “official” HOPE offices and the development of a City Charter (“HOPE Community Model”). In other words, HOPE goes to great lengths to “repair” much more than the student’s inability to encode or decode print-based, page-bound text.

### Willie-Like Repair

*Reflection on the ubiquity and variety of the activities engaged in by H. reparans brings into bright relief some prominent features of the world we inhabit—its mutability and impermanence—and a range of skills we deploy in response to that world (Spelman 8).*

Willie and his customers value the ordinary, day-to-day functions of the objects he repairs. As Spelman explains, “People come to Willie for repairs, not for new cars, not to have their old ones restored to mint condition. His job is to make sure that once again the engine runs, the wheels move, the doors open and close, the roof doesn’t leak” (9). Willie’s customers do not have deep pockets and, out of necessity, he has become quite adept at expanding the flexibility of objects he is charged with repairing and the parts and tools he uses to engage in this repair work.

In many ways, the values embedded in the HOPE Literacy Project and the repairers associated with it (the tutors) are quite similar to those embedded in the damage control Willie carries out. First, Willie uses his tools, the parts he already has on hand, and his extensive knowledge of the machinery as constructed by the original engineers to determine the sorts of repair work possible. Next, he couples this with his knowledge of the ways his customers will likely use this repaired object, so he can be sure that they will actually be able to use it in ways their lives demand—as workers, consumers, and citizens. Likewise, HOPE tutors use everything they have on hand in order to repair illiteracy among previously illiterate inmates, so they may later use these newly acquired skills in ways their lives (inside and outside) demand—as current inmates, former inmates, consumers, and citizens.

Much of what these tutors have “on hand” is their intimate knowledge of the lives some of their illiterate students have been forced to endure—personal knowledge of their own, often quite strained relationships with literacy. In fact, every one of the ten men I interviewed and just about all of the women writing about their HOPE experiences revealed long-term, strained relationships with public education—the kinds of relationships many felt may have led them to prison. As Christopher, a 22-year-old, confident, articulate tutor explains, “Feeling stupid basically got me into prison.”

In fact, Christopher has only recently begun to understand his own struggles with reading and writing to be caused by his undiagnosed dyslexia, a revelation prompted by the training he received to become a peer tutor just six months before our interview. Until that point, Christopher just thought he was stupid—a self-description compounded by the special education label he received in middle school and beyond. According to Christopher, “Special education devalues a person.” The majority of the tutors I interviewed described similar participation in remedial or special education programs during their public school years and felt equally “devalued” by the experience.

**The needs of these men and women, as well as their families, are profound, as anyone spending time with them will quickly learn, as anyone considering the complexities of incarcerated life will quickly argue.**

Neal, a 60-year-old tutor with a BS in chemistry and a long career traveling around the country as a salesperson of pharmaceuticals, shares this story of his early relationship with literacy education:

In third grade, I had to read from that . . . *Dick and Jane*. I ran my finger across, pretending that I was reading so the teacher would see me. Then I would close the book and stare out the window. The teacher would catch me daydreaming and ask me a question about what I supposedly “read” and I couldn’t answer her, of course. So she sends me out in the hall. I’d just sit there and look at girls. See Jane run? Give me a reason. I don’t want to see her run.

In fact, Neal couldn’t.

Again, much like Willie, these tutors “fix” illiterate inmates by using (1) the “parts” they have on hand (curriculum/materials/personal experiences as literate prisoners), (2) extensive knowledge of their own relationships with literacy and literate needs as convicted criminals serving time and hoping never to return to prison, and (3) their own training as tutors for HOPE. As Neal explains of his fellow inmates, “Most don’t want to go back to doing drugs and learning how to read and write may be a good way to keep out of that and to avoid coming back here.” In other words, the tutors at HOPE

may use literacy education to get and keep their students “on the road,” just as Willie uses what he has on hand to get and keep his customers and their vehicles on the road.

## Fred-Like Repair

Unlike Willie and his customers whose primary concern is to get the repaired object back in good working order, Fred’s primary concern in restoring the Indian Chief motorcycle he found in a junkyard is to replicate the original design as closely as possible. The function of Fred’s restoration is not to produce a vehicle to *use* so much as one other people can admire. Fred restores his motorcycle in ways that allow him to, in a sense, turn back time to a moment in the life of the vehicle before the decay, aging, and damage began marking and changing it into something else. Willie, on the other hand, doesn’t concern himself with removing all signs of time but rather with ensuring that the vehicle functions again—safely and reliably—in ways the current users need it to.

The parallels between the repair work at HOPE and Fred’s own are a bit more tenuous than the ones we see between Willie and HOPE. Parallels can be traced, however—especially when we remember that HOPE is a faith-based program with many direct ties to Christianity and associated, Bible-based discourse. Though tutors are discouraged from bringing religion into their tutorial sessions directly, religion remains very much a part of all the repair work at HOPE. When asked about the role the Bible plays in HOPE, Smith explains that it “is paramount... [T]he Bible is the rulebook to life...it tells us how to live our lives. If we get off track with what God tells us to do, . . . [a return to the Bible] will get us back on track.” Much of the reading material the tutors have on hand is based on the *King James Version* of the Bible. Tutors begin each day by arranging themselves in a large circle, giving “thanks,” reading a short passage from the Bible, and joining hands to recite the Lord’s Prayer together. Throughout the day, many begin each tutorial session with another prayer in this one-on-one format. At the end of each workday, HOPE participants repeat the ritual.

If we understand the repair work of HOPE to be more Fred-like than Willie-like, it may seem that the repairers are less concerned with mending the inmate’s relationship with literacy so he can function again as citizen, consumer, or worker than they are with restoring or creating more “spiritual” relationships. According to the Christian origins of HOPE, the soul itself may be what is repaired in that these newly literate individuals can now read for themselves what is often referred to as the “Word of God.” As Smith explains:

HOPE has been non-denominational from its inception. It is supported by churches of varying denominations who share the same belief that *the inner soul needs repair* just as much as basic life skills in the lives of inmates. Inner change results in external changes as the individual realizes he or she is not alone in the incarceration process,

that God is with them and volunteers are standing in the gap with them, too (emphasis added).

She continues:

Reading and comprehension are so vital because I do not believe anyone can go through life and realize the potential they were created for without a relationship with Christ. To be a successful person in life, to truly be successful in life, I believe they need to make a commitment to Christ.

And this commitment comes directly from the “reading and comprehension of the Bible.” Sean, a 25-year-old inmate tutor, whose heroin addiction has led him in and out of prison for most of his teenage and young adult life, explains this profound paradigm shift this way: “Before I found Jesus here at HOPE,” he explains, “I was just spending my life shooting dope and waiting to die.”

William F. Cox traces the origins of formal education in early America to religious and moral training. The Massachusetts School Laws of 1642 and 1647, for example, required that all children be educated in response to the fear that Satan would “keepe men from the knowledge of ye scriptures” (Commager, qtd. in Cox). In fact, as Cox explains, “colonial education regularly interwove biblical and educational content. For instance, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were studied for a better understanding of the Scripture, . . . The Bible was used to teach reading,” and the New England Primer “referenced the Bible as its main source of information” and inspiration. According to Cox, “[t]he Bible was the moral and religious base of early America’s public school system.”

Students involved in the HOPE Literacy Project also learn to read by memorizing Greek and Latin roots and practice putting these new reading skills to use via the Bible and Biblically-based materials. Thus, perhaps the form and function of the repair work at HOPE may be understood as mimicking, as closely as possible, the American educational system as many have argued it was originally designed, just as the form and function of the repair work Fred undertakes approximates, as authentically as possible, the Indian Chief motorcycle, as it was originally engineered.

In some ways, however, the analogies between repair work at HOPE and that at Willie’s or Fred’s garages begin to fall apart when we consider that, according to Spelman, Fred-like and Willie-like repair work belongs to “a family of repair activities [that] shares the aim of maintaining some kind of continuity with the past in the face of breaks or ruptures to that continuity” (5). Not one of the thirty inmates with whom I spoke and worked share fond memories of the “good ole days”—a past to which they long to return. Though I have not yet spoken with many of their students, I can only assume that they would offer similar sentiments. If the past to which we refer is the life of the inmate herself, we must assume that for the previously illiterate “literacy” would be a new state of being rather than a return to the past. A more appropriate analogy may be available in a new kind of repair work: the kind my grandfather, Alton, performed when he approached repair work in and for his own life.

## Alton-Like Repair

*Reparative improvisation involves making things up as you go along, not necessarily repeating what has come before and not worrying about similarities between this improvisation and the ones you've done before and the ones you'll create in the future (Spelman 71).*

Alton was a plumber by trade who, like Willie, made do with what he had on hand. However, Alton increased the flexibility of the objects at his disposal further than I think even Willie would have found possible, necessary, or even appropriate. For instance, he kept a butane tank in every vehicle he drove that he would use to “fix” everything from a flat tire to an empty gas tank. Typical of Irish-Catholic families of his generation, he and his wife had several children—most less than a year apart in age. Though his driveway was often filled with many vehicles, very few of them worked at the same time. As his children began closing in on their teenage years, it became increasingly difficult to grab a working car before his daughters drove off with them. Since it was, in his mind, more efficient, he chose to keep his keys in the ignition. In response to the increasing surplus of drivers, however, he soon began “reserving” his car by rigging a somewhat complicated series of wires and circuits, so he became the only one who knew how to start the selected vehicle.

The repair work in which Alton engaged was much less concerned with maintaining “continuity with the past” than it was with the present and the immediate future. His repair work made vehicles and other machines work for him in ways more appropriate to the way he lived his life—repaired them to function in ways they’d never performed before. As his family grew, the form and function of his repair work changed—out of necessity.

Alton-like repair differs from Willie-like repair in that while we may assume that the majority of Willie’s costumer’s felt the objects they brought in to be worth saving, most of what my grandfather worked with may have been considered irreparable elsewhere. At HOPE, tutors working from an Alton-like perspective enable the “reparative improvisation” described above—one that involves deliberately and purposefully “making things up as you go along” in order to “repair” illiteracy in ways their students can make most relevant to their lives on the outside as they wish to live them.

Willie-like repair work may lead some inmates to “pick up a thread with the past” that they may be better off leaving behind. At Hutchins State Jail, a number of the older tutors with whom I spoke explained that younger inmates are often all too willing to fall back into the ways of living that keep bringing them back to prison. One told me he once overheard a tutor using the white board in a tutorial session to teach his student how to more efficiently “cook dope.” Another shared that a previous tutor smuggled in *High Times* (a periodical offering growing tips and politically-charged articles in support of marijuana use, cultivation, and distribution) to use as reading material in tutorial sessions instead of the Biblically-inspired materials HOPE endorses and provides.



Using as a model the form and function of Alton-like repair may bring to the surface and thus resist some of the ways that literacy education may, in fact, serve as a form of social control. As Harold Davidson asserts in *Schooling in a Total Institution* (1999), “Along with forced labor, schooling is the principle method for controlling prisoners” (1). The argument goes like this: the illiterate prisoner is, initially, an “incomplete” or “broken” individual; HOPE fixes this individual within the parameters of institutional norms. That is, by working from an understanding that the “continuity with the past” that can be restored in this sort of repair work is continuity with the original form and function of literacy education, HOPE teaches illiterate inmates to read and write in ways that enable them to access and be guided by the Christian worldview (Fred-like). By working from an understanding that the “continuity with the past” restored via literacy education is actually drawn from the past experiences and knowledge-base of the tutor (including knowledge of the curriculum and, perhaps, the communities in which the inmate will be using literacy on the inside and “in the world”), HOPE teaches illiterate inmates to read and write in ways that better enable them to function as citizens, consumers, and—it seems likely—“well lubricated cogs the social machine” (Willie-like).

By working from an understanding that the most important way to make literacy relevant to inmates is to consider the ways in which they need it to work in their lives as they hope to live them—hopes based on realistic expectations of what is possible and what is likely—tutors may use HOPE to teach illiterate inmates how to read and write in ways that enable them to live life the way they want to live it, at least within the parameters of what is possible given the material conditions that await them (Alton-like). In other words, Alton-like repair work, much like Spelman’s “reparative improvisation” and Mathieu’s conceptualization of “hope,” is “grounded in imaginative acts and projects, including art and writing, as vehicles for involving a better future” (Mathieu 19). It is project-based, not problem-based, but it is not random or arbitrary. “Hope does not offer a blueprint to follow, but compels a critical function of engagement” and improvisation (Mathieu 32). As Spelman explains, “improvisation of all kinds takes discipline and skill. But by definition, improvisation involved doing something different from what you did the last time a similar occasion arose” (71).

For this reason, an Alton-like perspective cannot be institutionalized.

In *Tactics of HOPE: The Public Turn in Composition*, Paula Mathieu explores the complexities of university-community partnerships, especially as experienced by the communities associated with university-based service learning programs. Building on Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics, Mathieu argues that in community literacy work, university-community connections must be forged and perpetuated via a tactical orientation, not the strategic one so often favored and perpetuated in the academy. In the latter, the repairer is most concerned with solving problems and either following previously established protocols in a given situation or institutionalizing new ones for others to follow. In the former, the repairer is most concerned with the project at hand, quite often improvising and always prioritizing context and temporality



over universality and standardization. Strategies only work when we control the space—a dominant process; tactics work when we don't/can't—a marginalized process. “Thinking strategically ...is not an option” beyond the university, “because the dynamic spaces where we work should not be considered strategic extensions of academic institutions” (17).

A tactical orientation, on the other hand, “is grounded in *hope* but in a critical manifestation of hope,” (xix) and “a critical spirit of inquiry ...based not on certainty but on hope” (17).

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**However Mathieu helps me understand that as a researcher in the community, my job is not to judge the program and its approach (a strategic orientation), at least not in the absence of much dialogue and true reciprocity of knowledge, expertise, and experience.**  
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As a HOPE researcher, volunteer, and teacher, I must also adopt and enact an Alton-like perspective in order to avoid judging the shape and function of the program and activities according to criteria established by my own discipline, preferred theories, and value-sets. As a

secular academic, the Biblical foundations of HOPE make me uncomfortable. And I am not yet certain this discomfort is unwarranted, as I will explain in the next section. Though Mathieu's goal is, most directly, to critique the course- or program-based university-community partnerships, her cautions are equally important for researchers. As a researcher, rather than viewing HOPE's approach to literacy education as “right” or “wrong,” I should instead “view the constituency [itself]...as a source of knowledge and expertise” (Mathieu 110) and work from there.

For the last few years, I have attempted to apply a “strategic” orientation to HOPE. As a university-based academic, teacher, and researcher, that is what I am trained to do. And, as Mathieu points out, the system supports such an orientation via current measures for tenure, grades, and other outcome-based evaluations. From a researcher standpoint, I understand that the Fred-like approach to literacy education describes HOPE's curriculum and the Willie-like perspective describes the approach and training of the tutors. From my perspective as a researcher informed by critical theorists like Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, I identify a Fred-like approach oppressive. Inasmuch as a Willie-like approach operates from and perpetuates a lack of critical consciousness, I find such a perspective no less problematic and certainly not empowering.

However Mathieu helps me understand that as a researcher in the community, my job is not to judge the program and its approach (a strategic orientation), at least not in the absence of much dialogue and true reciprocity of knowledge, expertise, and experience. Instead, as she explains, “the value in...[such] work is to create relationships that undercut elitist notions that form communities...as sites of problems that only academics can fix” (111).

Again, it was, and is, crucial “to consider the community as a source of expertise” (Mathieu 106).

Something amazing is happening within the walls of Texas HOPE Literacy. The way these men and women describe their experiences with HOPE gives me—and, much more importantly, them—hope. As explained at the agency’s website, HOPE is designed to help them, among other things, “understand that crime violates people and damages relationships” (“About Us”). And for primarily these reasons, the men and women in HOPE give back to the community, as a self-sponsored attempt at “restorative justice” (Spelman). They have crocheted blankets for the elderly and the homeless at area shelters and nursing homes, created booties and caps for AIDS-infected babies in Africa, and—following the Katrina disaster—purchased items from the commissary to send to victims there. Incredible acts of altruism, especially given the limited resources many of these men and women endure. As their motto promises, Texas HOPE Literacy is indeed “changing lives” (hopelit.org).

However, that “something amazing” that happens at HOPE is, according to Smith and many of the inmates involved, nothing short of God Himself. As a former tutor for Hutchins State Jail explained in his cover letter for an early draft of a collaborative article we were attempting to write, “[a]s you suggested, I toned it down for the ‘secular’ reader; however, I still firmly believe I would never have got into the program or that it would ever exist had it not been for strong brothers and sisters in Christ. After all, it is our goal to share his love wherever we go” (Justin). As Smith has told me on many occasions, she would love to see a study that “put our program up against another exactly like it but without the spiritual foundation. I can tell you right now which one would work and which wouldn’t.” Without God, according to the inmates and believers involved, there is no HOPE.

Of the HOPE tutors with whom I have spoken and worked these past few years, the vast majority attribute their “success” in the program—however that’s defined—to their faith. In a recent interview, Smith told me with pride that “last week, one-third of our HOPE women [58] accepted Christ and were baptized. Another 30 already had. No one’s beating anyone over the head with a Bible, but they are being exposed to it and in with [other] women who have accepted Christ.” She continues,

If we took the Bible out of HOPE and just did a secular program, it would not be what it is today. Their opportunities for success would be improved but they would still be limited because we are created according to the Bible in the image of God. Man is created “body, soul, and spirit,” so we cannot take God out of the equation. They know that God has saved their lives because they have come to prison, put them in a place where they were totally broken before him, and gave them hope and a new life. So we can’t take out the faith component [because doing so] would render all that we are doing ineffective.

Smith, Jake Pichnarcik (a former tutor for both HOPE and the university Writing Center I now direct), and I have presented our work and experiences together a number of times—describing Texas HOPE Literacy and the inmates involved. In front of these academic, secular audiences, it seems important to push the Biblical influences and Bible-based discourses into the background. Bible-based arguments and secular academic ones are most often seen as incompatible, and attempts to integrate Bible-based discourse into secular contexts are often met with hostility (Carter “Living Inside”). Before our presentations, I mention this disconnect each and every time. Smith understands this disconnect very well, but, as she explains it, she’s not going to hide or even apologize for the role God plays in her own life and the program that she says came *through* her (from God) not *from* her. For her, to downplay the Biblical influences would be “hubris,” and, when it comes down to it, downright dishonest. As a Christian, her faith forbids it. According to these believers, HOPE is, at its core, a program inspired and “orchestrated by God” (Nix).

Even so, the high profile nature of the faith-based component—whatever we think about it ourselves—may preclude widespread acceptance and, likely, a formal university-community partnership with HOPE.

### A HOPEful Partnership

Recently, Smith, Pichnarcik, and I were invited by the then Associate Provost—and current Interim Provost of my university—to present to key administrators and faculty across campus the ways in which we might make happen a formal partnership between ourselves and HOPE. Following the meeting, one particularly supportive and involved administrator from another discipline attempted to help me understand the complexities and problems associated with the proposed partnership. As he explains,

[t]o recruit faculty, you will need to have substantive academic research questions....To pursue this and make something academic out of it, you will have to ask a good question that can be addressed using these subjects and this program as a source of data....Good “academic” questions do not come out of programs like this because the program is not designed to address an academic question (email correspondence).

Indeed. From a strategic orientation, my work with HOPE makes little sense. Nothing “academic” can come from it. As he explained, “seldom is an academic career built” on such things.

From a tactical orientation, however, an informal partnership with HOPE seems much more hopeful. Again, I turn to Mathieu, who,

...propose[s] an alternative model for creating community-university projects that are tactical, localized, and begin from developed relationships within

communities. Rather than starting from institutional imperatives, tactical projects foreground the needs and expertise of communities, and seek to highlight—and work within—the possibilities and limitations inherent in university partnerships (90).

We weren't trying to develop a service program, but we were attempting to institutionalize a partnership between A&M-Commerce and Texas HOPE Literacy. Part of the reason behind such an attempt was selfish—I felt myself researching in vacuum and I wanted to build on, resist, or otherwise engage with the work of others in that space. And none was forthcoming.

My association with Texas HOPE Literacy began in 2002, and while such work excites me and always has, my complete lack of training in community literacy and naivety led to some complications early on. Like many projects of its kind, I became involved with this prison literacy program by chance—for me, when I began my first tenure-line job following graduate school and met Pichnarcik. At the time, Pichnarcik was in his first year of his BA here at A&M-Commerce, where his strength as a writer and student had already earned him a position as a tutor in our Writing Center. He had a manner of working with students, particularly some of our otherwise most resistant ones, which put everyone involved at ease. He was a careful reader of student prose and had high expectations for these writers. In short he was, and still is, a master tutor—a gifted writing teacher and, soon enough, tutor trainer, with a patient way and listening ear.

And while I hope I was able to provide enough training support to account for some of these incredibly effective tutoring techniques he exhibited from day one, the vast majority have nothing to do with me, the research reproduced and validated in writing center studies (in general) and tutor training (in particular), or even the day-to-day activities of the university Writing Center in which he worked. His core strength as a tutor and scholar of individualized instruction came during his previous incarceration at Hutchins State Jail where he worked for two years as a top Peer Educator and facilitator for the then-quite-new Texas HOPE Literacy.

In the years since I have visited HOPE many times—sometimes with Pichnarcik, sometimes with other graduate students, sometimes with Smith. Every time I visit, I am blown away. Every time I visit, I am forced to “re-examine . . . the work [I] do as [a] teacher, writer, and scholar” (Mathieu 116). Every time I find doing so uncomfortable, but every time I learn something new.

As a teacher and a scholar, however, I have learned that my work with HOPE is only reciprocal as long as I retain an Alton-like perspective, valuing improvisation and spontaneity over planning and inflexible hypotheses (see Spelman's reparative improvisation), *tactics* over *strategies*. According to Spelman, “repair is but responding to the damage they have endured and finding a way to continue their existence in the aftermath of such damage” (137). Even so, “successful repair requires knowing what the actual damages are” (Spelman 59). In the end, then, perhaps the most appropriate way to

respond to this damage—as a researcher, a teacher, or an advocate—is by understanding the value-sets embedded in the form and function of the repair work we undertake. Thus, the value-sets that govern Willie-like repair work are available within the work of HOPE, but so are those that govern Fred- and Alton-like repairs. And, from a tactical orientation, all can be equally valid, depending on the particular needs of the project involved and the agents affected by and associated with the relevant repair. The choice may be ours, as long as we know such choices exist.

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