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Radical Togetherness: African-American Literature and Abolition Pedagogy at Parchman and Beyond

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Abstract: This article makes the case that the student-centered learning paradigm that I have aimed to establish at Parchman/Mississippi State Penitentiary as a member of a college-in-prison program represents a prison abolition pedagogy that builds on Martin Luther King and Angela Y. Davis's coalitional models of abolition work. Drawing from Davis's abolition-framed conception of teaching in jails and prisons as expressed in her autobiography and her critical prison studies text *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, I argue that the learning environments that I create collaboratively with students at Parchman similarly respond to incarcerated students' institution-specific concerns and African-American literary interests in ways that lessen, if only temporarily, the social isolation and educational deprivation that they routinely experience in Mississippi's plantation-style state penitentiary. Moreover, I am interested in the far-reaching implications of what I have theorized elsewhere as "abolition pedagogy"—a way of teaching that exposes and opposes the educational deprivation, under-resourced and understaffed learning environments, and overtly militarized classrooms that precede and accompany too many incarcerations. As such, this article also focuses on my experience of teaching about imprisonment in African-American literature courses at the University of Mississippi at the same time that I have taught classes at Parchman that honor the African-American literary interests of imprisoned students there.

Keywords: Parchman; abolition pedagogy; radical togetherness; educational deprivation; African-American literature; education; abolition

1. Introduction: Remembering Histories of Abolition Pedagogies in Jails and Prisons

"Can the penitentiary teach the academy?" asks H. Bruce Franklin, the well-known scholar of literary works produced from jail and prison (Franklin 2008, p. 643). Franklin's question is one that warrants reconsideration in light of our current historical moment in which many models of college-in-prison programming continue to emerge within an ever-expanding, profit-driven, racially discriminatory system of incarceration that is currently responsible for the punitive confinement of 2.3 million Americans—disproportionately Black, poor, and mentally ill adults and children (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). Among educators, this prison-industrial complex has sparked not only outrage, but also sincere curiosity regarding the place of higher education in prison programs in challenging—or reinforcing—its existence.[1] While Rebecca Ginsburg, co-founder and director of the Education Justice Project college-in-prison program in Illinois, rightly notes that "[m]aking college courses available to people serving prison sentences does not hold promise to redress what ails the U.S. system of criminal punishment" (Ginsburg 2019, p. 4), critical prison studies scholar Dylan

[1] *Prison-industrial complex* was a term coined by social historian Mike Davis, but Angela Y. Davis popularized it. For Davis, the term refers to a method of conceptualizing late twentieth- and twenty-first-century imprisonment as an industry, increasingly with private investment. The supply of raw materials for this "punishment industry"—disproportionately, Black, Brown, and poor bodies—is made available by social factors that cannot be reduced to crime, especially ideologies of racism and corporate agendas premised on global capitalism. For more, see (Davis 2003, pp. 84–104).

Rodríguez—a founding member of Critical Resistance, a national organization that aims to abolish the prison-industrial complex—has issued a justifiable challenge to instructors who teach on either side or both sides of the razor-wire fence in our epoch of the prison-industrial complex: reimagine abolition itself as a pedagogical position. Rodríguez states:

> I do not think the crucial question in our historical moment is whether or not our teaching ultimately supports or adequately challenges the material arrangements and cultural significations of the prison regime … [T]he primary question is whether and how the act of teaching can effectively and radically displace the normalized misery, everyday suffering, and mundane state violence that are reproduced and/or passively condoned by *both* hegemonic and critical/counterhegemonic pedagogies. (Rodríguez 2010, p. 8)

In this article, I am in appreciative engagement with the perceptiveness of Ginsburg and other higher education in prison (HEP) scholars, like Robert Scott, and Erin L. Castro and Michael Brawn, who have made profoundly evident the multilayered, undeniable problems that arise when outside instructors conceive of college-in-prison programming (and particularly the unquestioned insertion of critical pedagogies within them) as inherently abolitionist work (Scott 2013, 2014; Castro and Brawn 2017). But in light of Rodríguez's challenge, I also argue that a more comprehensive understanding of abolition as a pedagogical position and the potentially broad socially transformative impacts of that position—however temporary those impacts might be—can be attained by our heightened attention to an extensive historical contextualization of the abolitionist teaching paradigms of critical prison studies scholars: I refer, in particular, to the abolitionist teaching of the former political prisoner, critical prison studies scholar, and anti-prison activist Angela Y. Davis (Davis 1974, 2012). So, more precisely, it is my contention that we can grasp more fully the range of teaching approaches that Rodríguez sees as having the potential to "effectively and radically displace the normalized misery, everyday suffering, and mundane state violence" of the prison-industrial complex when we revisit, through the lens of critical prison studies scholarship, histories of those abolition pedagogies that have made concerted (though inevitably imperfect) efforts to esteem student leadership (Rodríguez 2010, p. 8). Thus, while this article does not seek to provide a definitive formula for abolitionist teaching—and does not find such an approach particularly useful—it does fundamentally seek to reframe important recent discussions of abolitionist teaching and critical pedagogies in HEP discourse by foregrounding critical prison studies scholars' pedagogical theories and by re-historicizing their abolitionist work, particularly in jail and prison classrooms.[2]

As a point of departure for this reframing, let us consider anew how student activism functioned as the abolitionist centerpiece of an epistolary jail teaching that took place more than a half century ago. In April 1963, a justice-minded Georgia preacher was unjustly jailed in a city over one hundred miles from his home for leading a peaceful protest. After being arrested with others on the trumped-up charge of parading without a permit, this Black Baptist minister and anti-segregation activist persisted in abolitionist struggle as a kind of improvisational incarcerated educator. From within a bitterly cold,

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[2] Critical prison studies, which I refer to here and throughout this article, is an emerging interdisciplinary field that has perhaps been made most visible terminologically by the American Studies Association's Critical Prison Studies caucus, as can be seen at the following link: http://www.theasa.net/caucus_prison_studies/.Broadly speaking, critical prison studies encompasses humanistic studies (including literary studies, history, ethnic studies, visual studies, sociology, and geography) that draw on cross-disciplinary analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality in order to critically examine domestic and international regimes of criminalization, captivity, and punishment. Particular emphasis is placed on investigating the centrality of global capitalism, racism, gender discrimination, and heteropatriarchy in the expansion of prison systems and in the normalization of state violence and patriarchal violence. Scholarship in this field also emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing coalitional strategies for prison abolition. Representative works of critical prison studies scholarship include: Angela Y. Davis's *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Dylan Rodríguez's *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (Gilmore 2007) *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, and Victoria Law's *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*. Critical prison studies scholar Micol Seigel has written a particularly instructive summary of the field of critical prison studies in the official publication of the American Studies Association, *American Quarterly* (Seigel 2018, pp. 123–37).

perpetually dark, fifty-four-square-foot mattress-less solitary cell—and amid an eight-day incarceration in which, in his words, "jailers were extremely harsh in their statements"—this Black demonstrator continued to teach about and live out the Jim Crow abolition movement (King 1991b, p. 333). Relying on the strategic collaboration of local Black student activists—high school students and middle schoolers, and even elementary school students who faced police dogs, violent arrests, and punitive confinement during the Children's Crusade of May 1963—he gradually transformed what he had called "the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours [he had] ever lived" from mind-numbing jail time to society-altering classroom time (Bass 2001, pp. 102, 132; King 1991a, p. 544). As numerous scholars have shown us, by staging the production, distribution, and mass-based abolitionist performance of his most widely anthologized work of cultural critique from Birmingham city jail—by modeling, like the prison epistle writer affectionately known as the Apostle Paul, how prose can be most convincing when an alleged convict receives a large-scale literary hearing—this Southern-born Black freedom fighter, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used the open letter as a form and a forum to challenge all self-proclaimed Americans toward abolishing systems of white supremacy through nonviolent direct action (Snow 1985; Branch 1988, pp. 708–55; Tiefenbrun 1992; Bass 2001, pp. 87–152; Gaipa 2007; Rieder 2013; Luk 2018, pp. 193–202). Thus, King's now-acclaimed "Letter from Birmingham Jail," because of the pathway it laid for the centering of Birmingham's young student-activists in abolitionist struggle against Jim Crow during the Children's Crusade, exemplified an abolitionist teachable moment, especially when that moment is considered in light of Rodríguez's charge for abolitionist educators to consider "how the[ir] act[s] of teaching can effectively and radically displace the normalized misery, everyday suffering, and mundane state violence" of white supremacist social control systems (Rodríguez 2010, p. 8). To be precise, King's social transformation strategy of nonviolent direct action—performed anew through his act of civilly disobedient public letter-writing—was eventually witnessed widely, but was enacted afresh in perhaps the most memorable manner through the headline-grabbing peaceful protests of Birmingham's preteen and teenage student activists, who, in turn, inspired more of King's fellow Jim Crow detainees as well as aspiring anti-segregation activists to join him in abolishing a racial caste system that the Supreme Court had long outlawed.

Writing the beginnings of his famous jail letter on toilet paper scraps and newspaper margins, King declared that he could not "sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what [was] happening in Birmingham" because "injustice *anywhere* is a threat to justice *everywhere*" (King 1991c, p. 290). As a Black man and as a professor who teaches in the South just one generation after that incarcerated Black male educator penned that jailhouse jeremiad, I decided that I could not sit idly by in Southern U.S. classrooms and not be concerned about educational injustice in a region of the nation that routinely ranks among the highest in incarceration rates.[3] As a Duke University graduate instructor, and later, as a University of Mississippi professor, I have been deeply concerned about the educational well-being of the innumerable U.S. students who have had limited access or no access to books, higher education opportunities, or learning communities in North Carolina and Mississippi simply because they are incarcerated. *Injustice anywhere is still a threat to justice everywhere*. And for abolitionist scholars, teachers, and cultural workers in our contemporary era of the prison-industrial complex, the real work

[3] By calling King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a "jailhouse jeremiad," I mean to call to mind the words of Andrew Young, King's close friend and fellow activist, who remarked that, by April 1963, "[King was] like Jeremiah with fire *pent up* in his bones, and that's the way this letter (from Birmingham Jail) was. It just *spewed forth*" (Rieder 2013, p. xix). Additionally, my phrasing, "jailhouse jeremiad," situates King's jail letter in the context of some of his public addresses that scholars like David Howard-Pitney have conceptualized as shining examples of the African-American jeremiad. According to Howard-Pitney, African-American jeremiads focus on social protest and social prophecy: those who deliver these addresses, who have included African-American abolitionists David Walker and Frederick Douglass, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) co-founder W.E.B. Du Bois, generally expose white America's sins of slavery and segregation while advocating for African Americans to lead in realizing the unrealized promise of democracy for all in the United States. The African-American jeremiad is typified by three elements: the "citing of [a] *promise*; criticism of [America's] … retrogression from [that] promise; and a resolving prophecy that [America must] … redeem the promise" (Howard-Pitney 2005, p. 7).

of making educational justice a reality everywhere—that is, the work of both exposing and opposing the injustices of systemic undereducation, unequal access to education, and militarized learning environments inside and outside of jails and prisons—begins with the realization that education has long been means of social control on both sides of the razor-wire fence. Making educational justice a reality everywhere thus demands a high-level commitment to what I call radical togetherness.

With the term "radical togetherness," I mean to convey a coalitional commitment between teachers and learners to undermine the social control logics of human disappearance and human domination that are so central to the operation of the prison-industrial complex by esteeming student leadership as a viable approach to curricular development and learning activity creation in jail and prison classrooms. Additionally, I intend, with the term "radical togetherness," to draw attention to the solidarity-sustaining character work required of outside instructors who intend to teach in prisons and build community with incarcerated learners: this is ego-stripping, savior complex-eradicating character work along the lines of what Ginsburg has called "maintaining a due modesty" (Ginsburg 2019, p. 5). Put simply, radical togetherness, as a conceptual framework for educational justice within learning communities behind razor wire, demands that we who are not incarcerated listen and learn from those who are incarcerated—or who have been incarcerated—as we collectively rethink what we study, how we learn, and why we teach. Radical togetherness reflects the spirit of the Stepping Stones Program, a United Way-recognized college preparatory initiative that I co-founded in 2007 with the support of the Orange County Literacy Council, professors and graduate students from Duke and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and area churches, in order to spur on the educational justice organizing efforts of more than fifty college-aspiring imprisoned learners at Orange Correctional Center, a small men's prison in Hillsborough, North Carolina.[4] Radical togetherness also helped to birth the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program (PTCPP), an award-winning university-community engagement initiative that I co-founded with my friend and colleague, Dr. Otis W. Pickett, in 2014, to honor the educational goals of men and women imprisoned in the state of Mississippi—which have included increased access to high-quality, for-credit college courses and the opportunity to pursue and complete college degrees.[5]

In the ensuing sections of this article, I make the case that the student-centered learning paradigm that I have aimed to establish at Parchman/Mississippi State Penitentiary with incarcerated students and PTCPP teaching team members represents a prison abolition pedagogy that builds upon the radical togetherness abolition models of King and another Southern-born, jailhouse-teaching Black freedom fighter: the Birmingham native Angela Y. Davis. Drawing from Davis's abolition-framed conception of teaching in jails and prisons as expressed in her autobiography and her critical prison studies text *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, I argue that the learning environments that I create collaboratively with students at Parchman similarly respond to incarcerated students' institution-specific concerns and African-American literary interests in ways that lessen, if only temporarily, the psychological toll of social isolation and the human rights abuse of educational deprivation that they routinely experience in Mississippi's plantation-style state penitentiary.[6] Moreover, I am interested in the far-reaching implications of what I have theorized elsewhere, drawing from the pedagogical scholarship of

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[4] For more on the Stepping Stones program, see (Alexander 2017) and (Alexander 2011).

[5] For more on the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program, see (Alexander and Pickett 2018) and (Alexander 2017). In 2018, the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program won the Mississippi Humanities Council's Humanities Educator Award.

[6] I have discussed "the human rights abuse of educational deprivation" in a previous article:[W]hat is also disturbing about the prison-industrial complex is its institutionalization of educational deprivation—a practice that I argue constitutes a breach in international human rights standards for the treatment of imprisoned people. Recall that when Congress eliminated Pell Grants for imprisoned learners by passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994, it effectively terminated public funding for the more than 350 college-in-prison programs then in existence, and thereby reduced the number of these programs to a meager eight by 1997. That law alone—passed under the Clinton administration—relegated higher education initiatives for imprisoned learners to the unpredictable whims of private support and donated labor and thus led to a mind-numbing disciplinary practice at odds with the United States's position as a United Nations signatory. On the one hand, the United States has essentially institutionalized the deprivation of postsecondary education in prison; on the other, it remains a signatory of the United Nations's 1990 resolution, "Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners,"

Davis (2012), Paulo Freire (1996), and bell hooks (1994), as "abolition pedagogy"—a way of teaching that exposes and opposes the educational deprivation, under-resourced and understaffed learning environments, and overtly militarized classrooms that precede and accompany too many incarcerations (Alexander 2017, pp. 10–11). As such, the latter portion of this article focuses on my experience of teaching about imprisonment in African-American literature courses at the University of Mississippi at the same time that I have taught classes at Parchman that honor the African-American literary interests of imprisoned students there. I contend that incarcerated and non-incarcerated students find within African-American literature nuanced interrogations of institutional power that help them to reconceptualize abolition work and affirm the often-overlooked humanity, diversity, and agency within marginalized communities—including those marginalized communities whose members happen to be incarcerated.

2. The Jail Classroom Roots and Routes of Angela Davis's Abolition Pedagogy

In 1970, Davis was a young college professor—just twenty-six years old—yet her political activism had led to her high-profile appearance on the FBI's list of the Ten Most Wanted Fugitives. After Davis spent months living as a fugitive, fighting harrowing national headlines, she was captured by FBI agents, confined to the New York Women's House of Detention, and eventually transported across the country to Marin County Jail in California. Once there, she was held for nearly a year and a half, awaiting a trial for three capital crimes of which an all-white jury would ultimately acquit her. For the purposes of this article, it is important to recall that Davis actually continued her professorial work during her incarceration: she taught fellow incarcerated women in the midst of her subjection to an unjust incrimination, wrongful incarceration, and media assassination. To be precise, Davis found ways to facilitate informal educational meetings among incarcerated women during the time that she spent in state custody, and she did so with an abolitionist framework. Davis wrote about her jailhouse pedagogy in her self-titled autobiography, published in 1974. Davis revealed there that her desire to teach emerged from her sensitivity to the expressed intellectual desires of the House of Detention's disproportionately Black and poor women. In particular, Davis learned that these yet-to-be-convicted women desperately wanted to understand why they were subjected to lengthy pretrial detentions in the House of Detention.

Davis heard these women out. While incarcerated, she secured for their reading and discussion copies of *Soledad Brother*, a collection of prison letters published in 1970 that would make its author, a well-read Black political prisoner named George Jackson, an internationally recognized intellectual. Jackson had, in addition to publishing this acclaimed prison letter collection, organized a prisoners' liberation movement while serving a sentence of one year to life in the California prison system for alleged complicity in a seventy-dollar gas station robbery. Armed with *Soledad Brother*—now a widely studied work of African-American literature—Davis had the opportunity to enlighten fellow incarcerated women about the radical thought of Jackson, a Black Panther Party Field Marshal whose political activism made him a routine target for abusive treatment by prison staff, so much so that Jackson would be shot dead by San Quentin Prison officers in August 1971. In *Soledad Brother*, Jackson exposed vestiges of slavery in the social control practices that govern prisons and jails. Davis remarked that copies of Jackson's *Soledad Brother* were "always in demand and were widely read" by the incarcerated women she was teaching, for his book helped them to better comprehend just how deeply racial injustice and economic exploitation were ingrained in the bail system (Davis 1974, p. 62). Moreover, as these incarcerated women studied Jackson's tracing of the racialized social control logic of the contemporary prison system to the institution of slavery, they began to discern and define their own strategies for organizing against injustice in the jail system, as Davis reveals in her autobiography:

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which states: "All prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities *and education* aimed at the full development of the human personality" (Alexander 2017, p. 10, emphasis added).

> More than half of the jail population have never been convicted of anything, yet they languish in … cells. Because the bail system is inherently biased in favor of the relatively well-off, jails are disproportionately inhabited by the poor, who cannot afford the fee. … The political issue, therefore, is how accused men and women can benefit from the so-called presumption of innocence by being free until proven guilty. [In light of this issue], the sisters wanted to talk about the [Black liberation] movement—and *this was on their own initiative, without the least prodding from me*. … When I wrote George [Jackson] of the enthusiastic reception of his book among the sisters there, it gave him pleasure to know that they were learning to relate to the movement through studying his individual political evolution. … *A real togetherness* was developing. I was anxious to strengthen this sense of community. (Davis 1974, pp. 60–63, emphasis added)

From Davis's earliest carceral classroom teaching days with these "sisters" at the House of Detention to present, she has been committed to implementing counterhegemonic educational paradigms in order to establish solidarity—or, what she calls in the passage above "a real togetherness," which also relates to my term "radical togetherness"—in spaces premised on the enforcement of social isolation, educational deprivation, and political passivity. Yet by foregrounding the intellectual curiosities of incarcerated learners in her jail teaching, Davis has helped to "strengthen [the] sense of community" not only between those within her classrooms, but also among those beyond it. Later in her autobiography, for instance, Davis recalls writing Jackson a letter regarding the reception of *Soledad Brother* at the House of Detention. The letter revealed how his book, on the one hand, elevated incarcerated women's awareness of and organizing against racial injustice in the bail system, and on the other, sharpened their incisive critiques of patriarchy—owing to Jackson's unconcealed misogyny in his conceptions of leadership in social transformation movements: "When my message reached George in San Quentin that the women were exhilarated by [*Soledad Brother*] but disturbed by his … uncomplimentary remarks about Black women, he apologized and wanted them all to understand his misjudgment" (Davis 1974, p. 317).

I am arguing for a reconceptualization of Davis's post-incarceration scholarship and activism around policing, prisons, and the meaning of freedom in the context of her teaching a work of African-American literature specifically requested by incarcerated women in a New York jail—an important but unequivocally misogynistic work of African-American literature, *Soledad Brother*. Davis, that is to say, responded well to her fellow incarcerated women's desire not simply to learn, but also to be agents in reshaping a discourse that itself was invested in the interrogation of various forms of power: African-American literature. In this way, they could better decipher and defy racial injustice in the jail system and sexism in society at large. Thus, by what she teaches and how she teaches behind bars, Davis has taught us not just to affirm incarcerated people's humanity—but also their agency. Davis uses the term "genuine solidarity" to describe this conceptual shift in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, a book she published in 2003 that has emerged as a landmark text in the field of critical prison studies. It is my contention that Davis has practiced "genuine solidarity" through the student-centered paradigm that she introduced in the aforementioned informal classes while she was incarcerated at the House of Detention and even through a unique course that she taught at the San Francisco County Jail many years after her incarceration, which I have discussed elsewhere (Alexander 2017, pp. 11–12). Both classroom experiences reflect Davis's commitment to "genuine solidarity" in a way that illustrates abolition pedagogy, for, in both cases, Davis seizes upon the teaching moment to expose and oppose the asymmetries of power, educational deprivation, and logics of human disappearance and human domination that characterize a contemporary jail and prison system that critical prison studies scholars like Davis (2003), Rodríguez (2006), and Victoria Law (2009) have shown to be focused on incapacitation—not rehabilitation. Concerning such genuine solidarity, Davis writes: "Radical opposition to the global prison industrial complex … calls for the abolition of the prison as the dominant mode of punishment but at the same time recognizes the need for *genuine solidarity* with the millions of men, women, and children who are behind bars" (Davis 2003, p. 103,

emphasis added). It is worth noting here that Davis does not refer to people who are "behind bars" as "prisoners" or as support-seeking objects of charity; she refers to them as distinctively gendered, aged, and engaged human beings—"men," "women," and "children." Such language, in fact, calls to mind the humanity-affirming, agency-honoring terminology that Davis used, pedagogically, to identify with fellow incarcerated women at the House of Detention: "sisters." Davis was and is not alone in her critical understanding of the power of using agency-honoring language—terms like "sisters," for instance—in connecting more deeply with incarcerated communities in order to actualize genuine solidarity within jail and prison learning spaces. For instance, in a published letter correspondence between Davis and her friend and fellow activist Ericka Huggins that Davis includes in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*—Davis's edited collection of political prisoners' writings that she completed during her incarceration—Davis commends Huggins for her commitment to abolition work through the ideological reframing of the prisoner identity that Huggins enacts through her expressed intention to create a "Sisterlove Collective" among imprisoned Black women at Niantic State Farm, a Connecticut women's prison at which Huggins was awaiting trial:

> [T]he leadership you have given the sisters at Niantic . . . was unmistakably clear. . . . I thought the idea of *Sisterlove Collective* [was] positively powerful: the mere notion of sharing among prisoners militates all the internal hostilities officials invariably attempt to engender. . . . As you well know, sisters behind these walls are urgently in need of outside encouragement and support. . . . Many more of these kinds of projects are needed . . . to uncover in their entirety the abominable conditions prevailing in women's institutions. (Davis 1971, pp. 124, 126, 127, emphasis added)

Again, Davis's and Huggins's commitment to such radical nominal transformation is the kind of ideological-level, racial-historical abolitionist work that can also be seen in an imprisoned Malcolm X's repeated references to his fellow imprisoned learners as "my black brother inmates" or "brothers" in his acclaimed autobiography, and in Jackson's titling of his prison letter collection *Soledad Brother*, emphasizing the unforeseeable political-intellectual community-building that he and other imprisoned men established amid the prison's routine disciplinary practices of social isolation, educational deprivation, and political repression—practices whose emphasis on mass-based alienation inevitably call to mind the social control methods of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery (Malcolm X and Haley 2001, p. 278).[7] The abolition work of radical nominal transformation is thus also reflective of what I have termed radical togetherness.

[7] With my phrasing, "radial nominal transformation," I am attentive here to a trend in African-American writings produced from jail and prison in which incarcerated or formerly incarcerated Black writers, like Malcolm X and Davis, intentionally use the endearing title of "sister" or "brother" when referring to fellow incarcerated persons to contest ideologically and terminologically the practices of deindividuation, alienation, and disidentification inherent in jail and prison employees' and administrators' institutional practice of referring to incarcerated people by their jail or prison number and/or by infantilizing labels. Davis notes, for instance, that jail employees often demeaned her and her fellow incarcerated adult learners by referring to them as "girls," as is the case with the guard she quotes in her autobiography: "I can't let you out. Hasn't anyone explained to you the rules of 4b? The 'girls' can only come out of their cells when two officers are on duty. (All prisoners—whether they were sixteen or sixty—were referred to as 'girls')" (Davis 1974, p. 30). The aforementioned imprisoned intellectual George Jackson is another Black writer whose work reflects this trend, as can be seen within his collection of prison letters, *Soledad Brother*, where, for instance, he refers to a fellow imprisoned man as "Brother Billingslea" and others imprisoned with him in California's San Quentin State Prison as "brothers" (Jackson 1994, pp. 19, 26, 27).

3. Abolition Pedagogy at Parchman

Davis's student-centered approach to jail teaching has deeply informed the radical togetherness and abolition pedagogy that I have endeavored to establish in prison classrooms in the South, where I have, per the requests of imprisoned students, taught African-American literature. One of those Southern prison classrooms is located within Parchman, Mississippi's state penitentiary. Aside from being Mississippi's oldest prison, spreading across 18,000 acres of the state's Delta region, Parchman has been—since its opening in 1901—both a material and metaphorical marker of slavery's unending past. The racial violence and economic exploitation so central to Parchman's origins and development—including the mass-based, racially discriminatory criminalization of Black men and women who became the primary source of hard labor on this lucrative state prison farm—led the award-winning historian David Oshinsky to label the penitentiary as "synonymous with punishment and brutality" and "the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War" (Oshinsky 1996, p. 4). More recently, psychiatric expert Terry Allen Kupers—who has testified in federal court about harrowing conditions at Parchman's supermax unit that was finally closed in 2010—made the following observation upon reflecting on slavery's vestiges at Parchman:

> Prisoners in striped garb work in the fields, supervised by officers on horseback with shotguns across their laps. The scene is reminiscent of a pre-Civil War plantation. . . . The conditions for . . . inhabitants [in the supermax unit] were repugnant. Cells had a small window on the outer wall, but most of the screens were broken. . . . The toilets tended to back up in one cell when flushed in the next, and the cells were filthy but the prisoners were not provided any cleaning materials. (Kupers 2017, p. 39)

Today, Parchman definitely displays evidence of reform, but students who I teach through the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program (PTCPP) at Parchman frequently remind me and my fellow professors and teaching assistants that our class meetings—which only happen once a week for three hours and are limited to twenty imprisoned participants—are vital diversions from their slavery-reminiscent penitentiary experiences. PTCPP students' candid remarks about conditions at Parchman do not represent overstatements: since the closure of the prison's supermax unit in the aftermath of an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawsuit in 2010, investigations have exposed recurring issues at the penitentiary ranging from non-functioning showers, sinks, toilets, and water fountains to medical neglect to guards' outright acts of assault against imprisoned men and imprisoned men's routine unexplained premature deaths (Mitchell 2015; Clarion Ledger 2017; Fowler 2018; Rojas 2020).

From the standpoint of abolition pedagogy, PTCPP students' statements about Parchman's contemporary conditions at Parchman, as well as their specific historical and literary interests, shape our PTCPP curriculum, learning activities, and course offerings. Our esteeming of PTCPP students' leadership in course development and classroom instruction has been the pedagogical approach, per students' evaluations, that they have valued most since my fellow PTCPP co-director, Dr. Pickett, and I cofounded the PTCPP at Parchman in 2014—and this has been the case even when PTCPP students and/or faculty have encountered challenges from prison administration as a result of this approach, as I have discussed elsewhere (Alexander 2017, pp. 16–19). So, Dr. Pickett and I continue to work with our fellow faculty to design seminar-style, for-credit courses collaboratively with PTCPP students—which is to say, by prioritizing PTCPP students' intellectual curiosities. As of late, their curiosities have included African-American literature, the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the history of Mississippi, and the speeches and writings of Black Mississippians. So, in summer 2018 and summer 2019, Dr. Pickett and I taught, with the support of PTCPP teaching assistant Allison Serraes, two versions of a course titled "Mississippi: Then and Now." The course traces the evolution and legacy of the civil rights struggle in Mississippi from historical and literary perspectives. Throughout both versions of the course, we paid careful attention to known and lesser-known works of African-American literature authored by several Mississippi-born Black writers. In the weeks preceding

our offering of each course, we made an effort to practice radical togetherness by way of course interest inventory meetings in which we discussed with students what works they would desire to be part of the course curriculum and why. While I selected some foundational authors and texts, and offered curricular recommendations—including that our authors reflect diversity in terms of gender, age, class, and political viewpoints—it was ultimately up to our students to read summaries of the works that I had printed out from publishers' websites to decide which authors or texts we would actually read in the course. I noticed that students were particularly drawn to the relatively recently published works of the two-time National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward—including her acclaimed memoir *Men We Reaped*. One student was, like Ward, a native of Pass Christian, Mississippi, and thus eager to see how that Mississippi community he knew so well would appear in the pages of Ward's memoir. Other students, who hailed not far from Ruleville, Mississippi, where sharecropper-turned-civil-rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer spent much of her life, insisted on reading and discussing lesser-known speeches that Hamer delivered among Black communities in her home state, not only the famous televised address that she gave on a national stage at the 1964 Democratic National Convention—which we did. In the end, our course reading list spanned more than a century, and included a range of African-American literary works produced in and about Mississippi: the speeches and writings of Ida B. Wells, the fiction and autobiographical writings of Richard Wright, the oratory of Hamer, the reflections of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders, and memoirs by Ward, the activist Winson Hudson, and University of Mississippi professors Ralph Eubanks and Kiese Laymon. Students often shared with us how much they enjoyed authors or texts that they had selected for our collective study.

At the course graduation ceremony for the summer 2018 version of "Mississippi: Then and Now," one PTCPP student made the case that his engagement with Wells's anti-lynching literature in our course and his and his classmates' roles in helping design the course's curriculum revealed to him a centuries-spanning problem that the existence of our class was helping to undermine: systemic undereducation in Mississippi's public schools, which he argued, was just as unjust as the racist practice of lynching that Wells fought so fervently. This student, Jeremy Hicks, illustrated this point well in the conclusion of his essay on Wells's anti-lynching oratory. Hicks delivered this course graduation ceremony essay before an audience that included faculty, staff, and administrators from the University of Mississippi and Mississippi College; PTCPP students' families, friends, and loved ones; local news media; and even officials of the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Hicks wrote:

> In her speech, "Lynching: Our National Crime," Wells basically encourages us to demand our given rights. She gives us an outline of what we want and how to get it. She tries to arouse a response from us that helps reshape the nation into what it is supposed to be. She reminds the law of the law. . . . She is most definitely a great part of American history. Without her determination, courage, smarts, and perseverance, the United States wouldn't be what it is today. I first read . . . Wells's work in [this] prison course. The thing I enjoyed about reading her work was everything. I love everything about her and the struggle she fought to win. She was a very intelligent woman. She has really inspired me. I'm upset that she wasn't taught to me in high school. I believe I might have had a broader look at the world and my purpose in it. I actually believe I wouldn't have ended up in prison. I believe I would've strive[n] to be more like Ida.

In many ways, Hicks's words echoed those of Davis's students at the House of Detention, for, at one level, he was grateful for the opportunity to engage the literature of a fellow native Mississippian whose ideas granted him access to language that helped him to articulate more fully an issue he had always known was an issue: the distance between U.S. democracy's lofty ideals and the disturbing facts of the nation's sanctioning of mass-based, lethal white supremacist practices like lynching. At another level, though, and again like Davis's students at the House of Detention, Hicks's engagement with a literary work that is part of the field of African-American literature also facilitated his launch of a critique of the broader society. In this case, Hicks critiqued his systemic undereducation in Mississippi, a state with a long and troubled history of underfunded, under-resourced, understaffed, and low-rated

public schools—and thereby intimated that such state-sanctioned inferior education played a defining role in his own incarceration (Mitchell 2019; Harris 2020). Recall again Hicks's concluding statement: "I'm upset that Wells wasn't taught to me in high school. I believe I might have had a broader look at the world and my purpose in it. *I actually believe I wouldn't have ended up in prison*. I believe I would've strive[n] to be more like Ida."

In sum, Hicks used his engagement with an indicting speech that Wells delivered in 1909 to write an essay that subtly exposed and opposed systemic undereducation and its role in contemporary racialized mass incarceration in Mississippi. In so doing, he also carried on the tradition of the African-American literary tradition. As a field, African-American literature has long contested the claim that African people and their descendants in the Americas—people deemed chattels or second-class citizens, constrained by experiences and legacies of mass-based transatlantic kidnap and containment, natal alienation, forced labor, and enforced illiteracy—could not think, read, write, or critique the U.S. nation responsible for their centuries-spanning history of enslavement, inequality, and systemic undereducation. As scholars like Henry Louis Gates have argued, African people and their descendants in the United States, though ascribed the statuses of either subhuman or subcitizen by federal and state governments, have used mastery of the written word and manipulation of Western signs of literacy not only to disprove these statuses, but also to declare an unforeseen fact: through their now-documented moral superiority, they have aspired to a higher form of humanity than that often championed by their white, Enlightenment-minded readership. In Gates's words, "unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afr[ican] American literary tradition was generated as a response to allegations that its authors did not, could not, create 'literature'" (Gates 2000, p. 300). With his essay on Wells, Hicks—who has been rendered a subcitizen by virtue of imprisonment and civil death—made known to a sizable witnessing public the role of systemic undereducation in mass incarceration all while demonstrating his unforeseen literateness and citizen-ness from within an incapacitation-minded prison system that has generally functioned to institutionalize educational deprivation and enforce social isolation. Hicks's essay on Wells is thus a shining example of the potential impact of abolition pedagogy—the teaching style that I have introduced at Parchman that honors his and his classmates' leadership in curriculum development in ways that have helped them to better comprehend and combat substandard education inside and outside of prison.

Hicks's essay, in this latter regard, inspired similar critiques of systemic undereducation from classmates following the ceremony, such as those of Hicks's fellow PTCPP course graduate Cimetrio Davis, who quipped in an interview: "I feel so much has been hidden [from me] over the course of my school years" (James 2019). Davis later elaborated on the significance of his learning in the Summer 2018 PTCPP course at Parchman:

> I learned that the fight for equality, the fight for civil rights went beyond Martin Luther King and people like that that they taught us about in high school. . . . They did not teach us about Fannie Lou Hamer and Ida B. Wells. I didn't know the extent or depth of lynch law and how deeply rooted it was in our government. (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2018)

While Hicks's essay and Davis's remarks express understandable frustration with the facts and impacts of their undeniable systemic undereducation in Mississippi, their concluding observations speak to how their collaborative curricular planning for the "Mississippi: Then and Now" seminar with the PTCPP teaching team has helped them—much like the women studying and discussing *Soledad Brother* in a jail space with Angela Davis—to raise consciousness in ways that improve, if only temporarily, the educational well-being of other incarcerated men in the many environments within Parchman that extend beyond the prison classroom. Along these lines, a feature published in one of Mississippi's most widely-read newspapers, the *Clarion Ledger*, notes that "Hicks, who presented his writings during the class meetings, now uses his books to teach other incarcerated men the things that he's learning now that . . . he missed in high school" (James 2019). In the same feature, Cimetrio Davis states: "No one could convince me I'm not a student, a teacher, a scholar, and capable. . . . I can be of more help to myself and those around me by utilizing what I know and teaching them as well" (James 2019).

4. Radical Togetherness at the University of Mississippi

As I think about outside-of-prison learning communities in relation to the Parchman prison classroom in which I have facilitated and witnessed abolition pedagogy, I am reminded of the extent to which nonincarcerated students I have taught at the University of Mississippi have begun the work of radical togetherness as a result of their critical engagements with African-American literature. By way of example, I teach an upper-level undergraduate course at the university that focuses on representations of prisons and imprisoned people in African-American literature. Throughout this course, titled, "Prison and the Literary Imagination," I insist that students do more than investigate literary depictions of prison life in a formal, research-paper type of way. They also complete a Justice Journal in which they write entries that extensively reimagine scenes of crime, arrest, courtroom testimony, sentencing, confinement, or prisoner abuse from the limited or omitted perspectives of minor figures in an assigned novel or memoir. I see such Justice Journaling as an opportunity for nonincarcerated students to engage empathetically with incarcerated people and their families and friends because—at least within these journal entries—they become those incarcerated people, their families, their friends, and their medical staff. Yet what makes Justice Journaling a form of radical togetherness is that it moves students beyond cultivating empathy to affirming agency: after writing Justice Journals, my nonincarcerated students begin to see incarcerated people not only as people, but as fellow students, fellow teachers, and fellow agents in the pursuit of social transformation. Such was the case with a nonincarcerated student whose engagement with Richard Wright's well-known work of African-American literature, *Native Son*, led her to that precise critical understanding. In the introduction to her Justice Journal, she wrote:

> The reflection that was the most challenging [for me] to write [was] Justice Journal #2, [which I wrote from the perspective of] the [white male] character . . . Jan [from Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*]. [Becoming Jan] made me reckon with my whiteness and the harm that certain versions of white liberalism can bring about. . . . In fact, one of the most important things I learned from Jan is that there are harmful ways to attempt to help [incarcerated] people, and that before I do anything to help—I have to generally question how I fit into the larger white supremacist system. In a sense, I am learning to construct a new lens with which to see the world, and that has been difficult, painful, and beneficial in immeasurable ways.

This student's awakening, by way of African-American literature, not only to her own "whiteness and the harm that certain versions of white liberalism can bring about," but also to the specific way in which her previously unquestioned "fit" within "the larger white supremacist system" has the potential to reproduce harm in her attempts to aid incarcerated people returns me to the challenge raised by Rodríguez that I discussed at the outset of this article.

To be precise, when one conceives of abolition as a pedagogical position, then any attempt to, recalling Rodríguez's words, pedagogically "displace the normalized misery, everyday suffering, and mundane state violence" of the prison-industrial complex becomes significant labor—even if such pedagogical labor does not happen within the carceral geography of the jail or prison classroom (Rodríguez 2010, p. 8). As Rodríguez elaborates:

> [T]eachers and students can attempt to concretely understand how they are a dynamic part of the prison regime's production and reproduction—and thus how they might also be a part of its abolition through the work of building and teaching a radical and liberatory common sense (this is political work that *anyone* can do, ideally as part of a community of social movement). (Rodríguez 2010, p. 13)

The Justice Journals that I challenge my students at the University of Mississippi to create with a sensitivity to the often-overlooked agency of incarcerated people constitute a kind of re-education inspired by African-American literature—a field of study that, at its core, interrogates institutional power and the self in ways that make what Rodríguez calls "the work of building and teaching radical

and liberatory common sense" more possible in this epoch of the prison-industrial complex. In sum, the raised consciousness of nonincarcerated students, and the processes of self-interrogation that their critically reflective engagements with African-American literature inspire are also (self-)teaching acts; these acts potentially displace, ideologically, the practices of human disappearance and agency disavowal that typify the social ordering logic of the prison-industrial complex. So nonincarcerated students' commitment to re-view and reaffirm the agency—not only the humanity—of incarcerated people through their encounters with African-American literature is also the kind of abolitionist work that I call radical togetherness.

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