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# Teaching Publics in the American Penalscape

*Gillian Harkins and Erica R. Meiners*

Some valued and mimed for their presentations of radicalism may never pay the price of the ticket (to use James Baldwin here) in the academic landscape, a surrogate for and derivative of the American penalscape.

—Joy James, *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*

In 2015 the federal government announced an initiative to reinstate access to Pell grants for some incarcerated people. That same year, public arguments in favor of higher education in prison have been on the rise. On the opinion pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, and many others, contributors issued a call to conscience for a general public seemingly unaware of how prisons restrict access to education in the United States. Many pieces are written by or feature professors at restrictive enrollment, frequently private, postsecondary institutions who emphasize the equality of intellectual ability across campus and prison. These pieces note that there is no qualitative difference between campus and carceral student, although incarcerated students may be more impressive based on focus, intensity, and commitment. These pieces address audiences implicitly more familiar with or sympathetic to university rather than prison spaces. Their rhetoric and logic—perhaps induced by editorial pressure rather than authorial choice—focuses on the wasted intellectual potential of incarcerated people and the redemption offered by higher education. At times, the professor seems to stand as proxy for the reading audiences: I learned as much from my students as they did from me.

These op-eds and articles might justly be considered “teaching American Studies.” At their best, these pieces draw attention to the interdependence of incarceration and education in US society. Issues raised can include deep and racialized disparities in public education at all stages (K–16); the failure of state and federal Departments of Corrections to support access to meaningful educational and vocational pathways; movements to militarize, privatize, and marketize educational spaces; skyrocketing tuition and restricted admission at four-year higher education institutions; and the postrelease obstacle of

felony history boxes on applications for education, employment, housing, and social services. But these pieces, perhaps unintentionally, also tend to present author and audience as outside the landscape of policing, jails, prisons, bail bonds, prosecutors, and parole. In other words, even pieces focused on the interdependence of incarceration and education can end up separating what Joy James calls the academic landscape from the American penalscape.<sup>1</sup> The prison, framed as separate from the university, ends up being presented as a problem the university is uniquely positioned to solve. While it isn't remarkable that teachers learn from their students in any other type of classroom, in this context this commonplace can reinforce the idea that it is trying to dethrone—that people in prison have the potential for redemption primarily through the classroom.

The problem we wish to raise here is not about specific op-eds or the effort to create broader understanding of the inequities of education and incarceration in the United States. Rather, we wish to ask how we can work collectively to resist situating the university, the professor, and their reading publics as part of an academic landscape that exists in contrast to, and above, the American penalscape. How do we work together to challenge depictions of teaching inside prison as exceptional service from the best-of to the worst-off? These depictions often recapitulate a media discourse framed by race, class, and gender hierarchies in which the best-of and best-off, or merit and privilege, for example, are conflated and naturalized. This collective work is key to the actual transformation of academic and carceral conditions. Frameworks that reinforce the division between academic and carceral landscapes not only render exotic and exceptional the site of prison and the figure of benevolent professor and engaged community, but in so doing may consolidate problematic publics. One such example is the 2015 international media frenzy over maximum-security prisoners at Eastern Correctional Facility in New York beating Harvard students at a debate. What are the assumptions about institutions and knowledge that make this debate win such a newsworthy surprise to so many people?

As faculty members at public universities involved in supporting access to education for people inside and after release from prison, we inevitably criss-cross the landscapes of campus, community, and prison. These spaces produce meaningful publics who counter the myths of clearly divided academic and carceral landscapes (such as that described by Tanya Erzen in this forum). A key challenge for "Teaching American Studies" is confronting this divide between various public landscapes of knowledge and power and the classrooms in which professors and students navigate the prison-industrial complex. Far from separate spheres, the prison and university are enmeshed. Formerly incarcerated

people attend and matriculate through free-world college classes, people inside prisons create their own self- and community-education practices, programs such as policing, corrections, homeland security or military studies (“forensic sciences”) proliferate in postsecondary education, and economic ties—from GEO to Sodexo, from our students’ service learning to the grant dollars that line criminologists’ research budgets—define the reality of a prison–industrial complex that includes institutions of education within its workings.

The aim of this article is therefore not to separate good from bad publication but to consider how teaching American studies across these divides demands an engagement with, not just analysis of, the production of public landscapes. As James reminds, our current system presumes that the surrogacy of one position for another is inevitable, and therefore the best we can do is derive knowledge of one position from another. This presumption positions some people as radical in some spaces, but not others (teaching writing in prison is radical work, but teaching writing in a community college is not). What James calls the presentation of radicalism may reinforce unjust distributions of knowledge and power, rather than transform their distribution across positions in this shared landscape. How can commitments to radicalism become collective practices of redistribution rather than representation? How do abolitionist efforts change this landscape, rather than claim radical superiority over other positions in it (such as the lukewarm prison reformism often reflected in mainstream journalism)?

Within American studies, many teachers and scholars work to scaffold and inform movements for social justice. In this context, work on higher education in prisons should contribute to dismantling the networks that separate academic and penal landscapes. But what are the spaces for these forms of collective un-learning? How can carceral spaces of teaching and learning—across campuses, communities, prisons, and detention centers—create anticarceral publics whose collective knowledge reorganizes the American academic penalscape? How might we work collectively to dismantle the “presentations of radicalism”—in teaching practice and in media about the (prison) classroom—to build mechanisms that are shared and redistributive? Following James, answers to these questions must replace surrogacy and derivation with practices developed among those situated across the academic penalscape, including abolitionists within and beyond prisons. Radicalism is not a representation but instead a redistribution of the price of the ticket and the cost of living. Such work is obviously not easy, but it is essential to transform teaching American studies as a project of emancipation for all of us, or none.

**Note**

This essay was written by two main authors but circulated for feedback to our collaborators including Lucy Cane, Christina Gomez, Alyssa Knight, Sarah Ross, and Tonya Wilson.

1. Joy James, *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.