

# (Anti) Prison Literacy: Abolition and Queer Community Writing

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*This article suggests that the framework of prison abolition in prison literacy studies should be developed through the relational potential of queer community literacy practices among incarcerated writers. To that end, the author presents findings from a critical discourse analysis of a newspaper by incarcerated LGBTQ+ writers. Three primary forms of audience address and rhetorical approach are identified, as well as the opportunities they offer to understand the risks and complexities of writing in prison. These differentiations in literacy practice highlight the necessity of building relationships among and between incarcerated LGBTQ+ people in prison literacy initiatives, and situate the conclusion that prison abolition's demonstrated commitment to transformative social relations has a direct application to understanding and shaping prison literacy programming and practice.*

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For the first time in twenty years, public opinion is shifting away from harsher sentencing laws. Multiple outlets, including the American Civil Liberties Union, report that public opinion

favors reduced incarceration rates in favor of reducing incarceration rates in the United States, particularly in terms of increased distinction between violent and non-violent crime and a renewed inquiry into how severely the latter ought to be punished (Pfaff 2018). In some ways, this shift is a successful alignment with the politics of prison literacy studies, which have promoted circulation paths of writing by prisoners that create engagements with those in the free world, often with the intent of forming more nuanced perspectives about prisoners in free society (Jacobi and Johnston 2011). In higher education, the exchange of writing and, at times, shared classroom space between free and incarcerated students is an established pedagogical practice, often implemented with the purpose of increasing civic engagement and dialogue on prisons and policing (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015; Hinshaw and Klarreich 2014; Pompa 2013). However, other recent rhetorical moments entrench the power differentials between prisoners and the free-world publics they want—and are encouraged—to address. This year, when presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg contended that voting rights should be stripped from people while they are incarcerated on felony charges, he did so to applause, while subsequent polling suggested that his position was a popular one. Public perceptions—and even civic discourses—on incarceration may be shifting, but this shift is not synonymous with sharing civic powers. Though the writing and other rhetorical presences of incarcerated people have helped create successful appeals for prison reforms in various publics (however diverse and conflicting those reforms may be), incarcerated people themselves are not widely recognized as members of those publics. In this article, I offer a framework of queer prison abolition drawn from my experience as a member of Black and Pink, a community of LGBTQ+/HIV+ activists organizing for prison abolition, and assess the potential of this framework to expand the ongoing efforts to center prisoners in civic dialogues about incarceration. In particular, I figure the relationship-building functions of literacy in prison as abolitionist practice by analyzing one genre (the “family letter”) from Black and Pink’s bimonthly newspaper. Within these letters, I detail three degrees of audience for whom incarcerated writers navigate complex power differentials: readers outside prison, readers inside prison, and, finally, one-to-one exchanges (often termed “shout outs”) where writers address each other individually.

How incarcerated writers engage with diverse audiences gives insight into the restricted literacy landscape of the prison, particularly revealing the ways that prisoners can use writing to address other incarcerated people. In addition to banned books, censorship, and mail surveillance, prisoners are prohibited from contacting other incarcerated people; free allies are necessary to facilitate the circulation of writing from prisoners to prisoners across individual prisons. Such restrictive carceral literacy practices are an example of what Eric Darnell Pritchard (2017) has termed “normative literacy”—literacy that disciplines and corrects gendered, sexualized, and racialized bodies that are non-normative according to “oppressive stems that create and maintain the dominant culture and are so pervasive throughout it” (22). Directing the circulation of prison writing away from other incarcerated persons and toward free society controls many of the ways prisoners and free people might imagine and include each other as audiences and build political relationships. It particularly shapes how incarcerated LGBTQ+ people include themselves in larger political narratives, what is safe for them to say and write, and who they are allowed to address. While I suggest that the *Black and Pink* newspaper provides queer alternatives to some of the audiences and circulation paths established for prison writing as they are sanctioned by the state, the limits of the newspaper are visible even in some of its more liberatory moments; its writing reveals as much risk as it does liberation.

A key tenet of abolition is reimagined social relations (Barrow et al. 2017; Wang 2018). Abolitionists consistently explain decarceration as an imaginative community-building exercise; Dylan Rodriguez (2019) describes abolitionist praxis as “a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice” (1576). When seen fully, carceral structures are relational and participatory and can be transformed through literacies that adjust those relations. Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the global BLM network, makes a case for abolition in the *Harvard Law Review* by sharing moments from her family relationships and history in which systems of prison and policing converged to make herself and her family members more, rather than less, vulnerable to violence and harm. Cullors shares direct experience with prison and police while tracing the socially relational and familial implications of carceral culture on black queer lives. Reimagining and rebuilding

relationships is abolitionist work and, in and across prisons, it is work heavily driven by literacy and negotiated through its political networks. A framework of prison abolition must examine the relationships and power dynamics that these networks make possible and impossible.

Like many abolitionist scholars and activists, my interest in prison writing was facilitated by the incarceration of a family member. The first time my brother was locked up for longer than a few nights, our relationship helped prompt his arrest. Earlier that day, I wrote his address on a Section 35 form, a process in Massachusetts that permits family members and caregivers to request mandatory hospitalization. I was encouraged to do this at the courthouse, where I had appeared but my brother had not. His probation officer suggested that the presiding judge might respond favorably to evidence of a treatment program when my brother eventually, by choice or force, would appear before her. I filled out the form, and he was arrested less than an hour later at the address I provided. The same judge who approved the filing of Section 35 held him without bail (hospitalization immediately came off the table), perhaps also due in part to my description of his addiction in court. I asked to visit him, but my paperwork wasn't processed before I had to return to my job in another city. There was an expedited process for immediate family members, but I soon discovered that "immediate" meant children, parents, and legally married partners, not siblings.

Carceral definitions of family were on my mind when I began attending "mail processing," a community space where Black and Pink members read and reply to mail from incarcerated LGBTQ+ members seeking pen pals in the free world, submitting to or subscribing to the newspaper, or responding to a national member survey that Black and Pink published in 2015. Without a direct partnership with prisons, most of the political and support work of the organization happens through the postal service. Letters are a primary means of communication, both in the pen pal relationships Black and Pink supports among incarcerated and free members and in the newspaper itself. The newspaper keeps a regular section for "Letters from Our Family," open letters written by incarcerated LGBTQ+ people to an extended queer family inside (and sometimes

outside) prisons. Since newspapers like *Black and Pink*, which circulate across prisons, must be cautious of breaching prisoner-to-prisoner contact regulations, letters addressed directly to other incarcerated individuals cannot be published in the newspaper; the family letters rely heavily upon group address to cultivate a conscious publicity. However, the letters address a range of audiences, from non-incarcerated LGBTQ+ people to individual incarcerated writers who had previously written and published a family letter. These shorter forms of address offer a rare opportunity for incarcerated writers to communicate with each other one to one. Family letters provide readers with the first-hand accounts of other LGBTQ+ prisoners and the opportunity to trace commonalities and differences among them. As Regina Kunzel (2008) notes in “Lessons in Being Gay: Queer Encounters in Gay and Lesbian Prison Activism,” the value of LGBTQ+ publications for LGBTQ+ prisoners can be measured by the circulation paths these publications take through the prison. Kunzel cites accounts from gay prisoners “lined up” to read a single copy of an issue of *Gay Community News* (17). The family letters add another layer of shared identity and experience, as they are authored not only by LGBTQ+ writers, but LGBTQ+ writers who are also incarcerated. These letters introduced me, in their multiple voices, perspectives, needs, joys, and traumas, to how the everyday writing of incarcerated LGBTQ+ people might, through the lens of abolitionist relationship-building, surface community literacy practices that engage LGBTQ+ identity as entwined with political power-building, reimagined social relations, and mutual aid.

Though nearly all letters use “family” in their salutation, a critical analysis of the letters indicates that writers address a number of different audiences in the pages of the newspaper, with a particular emphasis on building social and political relationships with other incarcerated people. When read through a relationship-centered abolitionist framework of literacy analysis, the family letters carefully negotiate the boundaries and risks of writing to other incarcerated people, and intentionally engage these relationships to form a precarious, but persistent, community of LGBTQ+ incarcerated writers. Drawing on a corpus of over 100 letters published through the last calendar year (2017), I applied Scollon’s belief in discourse analysis as a tool to “explicate the link between broad social issues and everyday talk and writing, and to arrive at a richer understanding

of the history of the practice within the habitus of the participants in a particular social action” (qtd. in Meyer 2001, 23). Writers’ lived positions varied. Some were concerned with a particular here-and-now form of immediate problem-solving, while others wanted to connect with LGBTQ+ audiences more generally. In centering my coding on their everyday choices of who to address and how to build relationships through writing, I perceived writers connecting their letters, depending on audience, to larger political concerns and shared community values. My analysis identified three levels of audience explicitly addressed by writers: letters addressed to a wider LGBTQ+ community/allies (often outside prison), letters explicitly addressed to incarcerated LGBTQ+ people generally, and letters addressed, though never in their entirety, to a particular person. Most often, these single-person forms of address were folded into letters that addressed one of the two general audiences as well, but noted another writer’s letter in the newspaper as either an exigency for writing or issued a “shout out” offering a short, directly addressed response to another letter.

## **“OUTSIDE FOR ME, INSIDE FOR YOU”: INCARCERATED WRITERS BUILDING POWER THROUGH LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY ON THE OUTSIDE**

Though not as frequently as they sought other audiences, writers of the family letters did address free people. Most writers are introduced to Black and Pink by reading the newspaper and responding to previous family letters, making the choice to include free people as an audience all the more conscious. When writers addressed audiences beyond prison walls, they constructed wider LGBTQ+ community connections, often by addressing “Black and Pink” explicitly as a group of both incarcerated *and* free LGBTQ+ people and by connecting struggles experienced in prison with larger systems of gender, sexual, and racial oppression. In one example, Andrea Rah’kayle writes:

I want to thank [...] the entire Black & Pink family incarcerated or not, for your love, support and stories of experience. I encourage you all to continue the spread of love and compassion in much needed times [...] keep fresh on the mind our young and adolescent family members out there free in the world and in Juvenile Detention facilities who are being bullied, molested,

abused, abandoned and neglected because of sexual orientation and gender identity. I encourage you all to pray for the lives lost and taken because of hate.

Here, Andrea'Rahkayle connects the "love and experience" shared among incarcerated and free people in "the entire Black and Pink family" with LGBTQ+ youth generally, specifically raising the concern of "bullying" young people in *and* out of detention. This connection draws attention to the ways readers might connect to larger LGBTQ+ struggles (bullying of LGBTQ+ youth) and incarceration, and specifically reminds that many LGBTQ+ youth experiencing bullying are in detention. She extends the political problem of the invisibility of prisoners to a cause with perceived widespread support from LGBTQ+ communities. Andrea'Rahkayle brings imprisonment to the fore of a larger and more mainstream LGBTQ+ agenda. Though not an adolescent herself, she finds means to connect wider and wider LGBTQ+ circles through the lens of incarceration.

In a similar move, another writer, Kara, who transitioned in prison, wrote a family letter about being denied photographs of herself during a fundraiser because she was wearing cosmetics, products banned in the men's unit where she is held. Instead of receiving her photos as expected, her cell was searched and her cosmetics were taken. In response, she writes:

Wow that gives me the message that I am less than a human being and something is wrong with me. Is it any wonder why the suicide rate of transgender teens is through the roof? [...] It seems that it has always been ok to marginalize one group or another because we live in a culture that thinks its okay to treat us differently or "less than." I end up with the staff here following along with the larger cultural program.

Though Kara came out as trans in prison ("I was taking pictures for the first time as a woman," she notes earlier, "none of my family has seen me as Kara."), she connects transmisogyny in prison to a "larger cultural program" that harms others, linking her struggle to the struggle of non-incarcerated LGBTQ+ people and using her

feelings of subjection (“less than a human being”) to demonstrate empathy for a wider trans community. “Because it’s not really about the pictures,” she continues, “it’s about confronting an oppressive and abusive society that murders some of its children with scorn and condemnation. A society where bullycide is an unspoken norm.” Kara uses her story to mobilize herself and others (“Who’s down?” she asks, after outlining her political priorities for transwomen in prison) toward equality for trans youth generally, identifying her life, ostensibly alienated from others, within a greater social imperative against bullycide, a visible concern among LGBTQ+ non-profit organizations and education literature.

Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara press back on political isolation by writing a relationship between their position as LGBTQ+ prisoners and bullied LGBTQ+ youth, connecting incarceration to harassment, and vice versa. Even when protecting LGBTQ+ youth, Andrea’Rahkayle points out, incarcerated juveniles might not be included in those protections. When it comes to bullying, Kara insists her own bullying become a visible part of the political agenda. Community and individual identity, queer theorist Shane Phelan (1994) argues, do not exist outside of one another—instead, we concurrently shape and are shaped by our community relationships. Resisting a definition of community that seeks “common knowledges from a common identity,” Phelan points to the inherent difference of community as a necessary component of its function. “Being in common is the continual denial of community in favor of oneness,” she writes, “Community in fact works to destabilize identity, as our being with others brings us face to face with multiplicity and differences. Thus, community is not a place of refuge, of sameness, but is its opposite” (84). Writers like Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara remind me that political community benefits from a heterogeneity of voices and concerns in relation to LGBTQ+ causes, and centers those who might otherwise be excluded from a narrative of LGBTQ+ community. In their outreach to allies on the outside, however, each writer takes care to draw on the “common identity” of LGBTQ+ community in order to build shared values that include incarcerated people among LGBTQ+ people across prison walls. Andrea’Rahkayle positions the difference of incarceration as an opportunity to extend political attention to incarcerated LGBTQ+ youth (from free LGBTQ+ youth), while Kara calls attention to the similarities in struggles between free and



incarcerated trans people. Each writer must argue for the terms of her inclusion in a wider queer community by negotiating the level of “sameness” possible between incarcerated and free LGBTQ+ people—as a result, an emphasis on shared experience limits the possibilities that Phelan suggests are inherent to established queer communities.

The establishment of shared values to adjust for differences in experience and specific identity may also be a sustainable response to the already-partial relationships possible among incarcerated writers and their free audiences. In “Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community,” Jonathan Alexander (1999) writes that “identity politics has given us an imagination, perhaps even a collective consciousness of what we could be,” but that communities exist in relation to these political identities as “identifiable,” that is, a space where we “know that there are others like us” (299). Communities are made, or imagined, when we “buy into that identity,” but identity politics alone eventually fall short as a means to create community. Alexander argues that we ought to form communities and political affiliations around “shared queer values” rather than merely shared queer identities. His envisioning of queer community as a site of “self- and other- understanding” to “create and re-create” (1999, 313) community is at work in both Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara’s letters. By building a shared value system that includes and acknowledges the struggles of incarcerated LGBTQ+ people, they reveal the ways that LGBTQ+ communities outside prison are shaped by the exclusion of prisoners. Without Angrea’Rahkayle and Kara’s interventions, larger objectives within queer values might exclude prisoners by omission.

Other incarcerated writers sought to connect a shared sense of values even more expansively; in a third example, Marius’s letter opens by naming the “inspiration” and “wisdom” drawn from “bearing witness” from inside prison to both the Black Lives Matter movement and protests at Standing Rock. “It has been an inspiration to witness the Black Lives Matter movement as it confronts police brutality and to draw wisdom from that,” he begins, “it has been an inspiration to witness the federation of peoples supporting Standing Rock.” In addition to racialized political demonstrations, Marius turns a “witnessing” of refugee disenfranchisement and displacement: “And

we have borne witness,” he continues, “to the struggle for freedom and dignity of so many who have been forced to leave their homes in order to escape war, poverty and violence in the hopes of finding a more open society where they can put down roots.” By establishing himself as a “witness,” Marius takes an active position in prison by observing global political actions, and politicizes the position of confinement as a position of witnessing injustice outside prisons, rather than solely inside them. He connects the sites of political conflict (Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and the refugee crisis) explicitly to incarceration and status of LGBTQ+ prisoners:

Though, sadly, all refugees find themselves at risk of prejudice and abuse, trans people have found that they experience a unique discrimination and isolation as they cross borders, and find themselves set apart in detention centers, unable to access medical care and suffering abuse. For this reason, it is more important than ever for there to be a lively discussion possible between those who live and work on either side of the walls that separate us. By coming together and building community, by taking the time to develop connection through whatever means of communication, trans folks become less vulnerable to attack and our communities (both LGBT and straight) become stronger as we work to connect and protect each other. I want to thank all of you who wrote and who organized for supporting incarcerated trans people today. This means so much to me, that I and others like me can be supported. I find great comfort in helping support others who, like me, find themselves attempting to transition in prison.

In evoking an audience of both prisoners and nonprisoners to “build community” on “either side of the walls,” Marius establishes shared queer values of community safety (working to “connect and protect each other”). Like Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara, he hopes prisoners and their protections are included in the values shared by the LGBTQ+ community, and that incarcerated writers are positioned as active members in practicing those values. When Marius thanks nonprisoners for supporting incarcerated trans people, he too is active in that effort, saying that he “finds great comfort” in doing the same. Marius positions himself as both a recipient and facilitator of

support from readers on the outside, and reminds them that he is also doing the work. “It means so much to know that you are outside for me,” he concludes, “even as I am inside for you.”

## **“I HEAR YOU”: TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN WRITING BY/FOR PRISONERS**

For letter-writers in the *Black and Pink* newspaper, community-building includes maintaining writing connections with each other across prisons, rather than within just one institution. Family letters are most often addressed to other LGBTQ+ incarcerated people at large, revising a common representation in prison writing of the prisoner circulating textually to a world they cannot enter, while a primarily non-prisoner public audience reads, evaluates, teaches, or draws inspiration from that representative text. Rodriguez (2002) contends that “rendering such literatures of combat into realms of ‘genre,’ in spite of—or perhaps because of—the critical intent of professional (academic) intellectuals, is immediately an exercise of domestication, an immobilization of text that subjects it to a structure of enjoyment that thrives from the horror of an imprisoned Other’s suffering” (411). Letters that are by/for incarcerated writers repurpose the sharing of struggle and pain to a collective literacy practice. However, the potential for literacy connections among incarcerated people across prisons remains far more challenging than writing to or for those on the outside. In addition to prisoner-to-prisoner communication bans, incarcerated people cannot write to anyone on probation or parole in some states. Such isolating measures are deeply depoliticizing, and the moments in the family letters when incarcerated LGBTQ+ writers can connect over shared struggle subvert carceral logic. Establishing incarcerated people as members of their own readership facilitates a queer political community and is a literate act of abolitionist imagination, regardless of the political content or outcomes of those conversations.

In one example, TiffanyJoy writes explicitly to incarcerated LGBTQ+ people whose stories she has read in the newspaper: “I’m stricken with emotional pain when reading about how my brothers and sisters who are incarcerated suffer turmoil behind the walls of state prison.” Her words demonstrate an embodied empathy to others in captivity: “I cry and hurt with you,” she continues, “Trust and believe that.”

TiffanyJoy's identification with other LGBTQ+ prisoners is rooted in the common ground of incarceration, but as her letter proceeds, she notes the limits of an identification that figures difference as "glossed over" or "erased" (Ratcliffe 2005, 32). While she encourages others to continue to tell their stories, her letter regularly makes space for the varied risks inherent in writing while incarcerated. "I feel," she says, "as heart wrenching as yours/our personal stories are, it's important that you share. It's not healthy to harbor these emotions. And believe it or not what we share will help others in ways we may not understand." By using the "yours/our" pronouns, she departs from the use of "we" commonly seen in broader forms of address in the newspaper. Instead, "yours/our" closely connects her to the "turmoil" of other prisoners without taking full ownership over it, while still consciously aligning her letter to the letters of others. She suggests that an acknowledgement of differences in how each writer processes trauma is necessary for community-building. Though she ultimately believes that sharing stories is "healthy," not just for the storytellers, but for incarcerated listeners ("ways we may not understand" refrains from presuming the response of others), she balances this claim with an understanding that this action isn't for everyone. "Stories y'all share keep me motivated and give me reasons to continue being a voice for those incarcerated who choose to be silent due to the retaliation one may receive," she writes, linking those who share their stories to those who cannot. She addresses the "silent" population directly in affirmation by concluding, "That's ok, I hear you!" By indicating that she can "hear" the "silent" incarcerated readers, TiffanyJoy builds relationships among incarcerated audiences who have different aims and risks in speaking, including those who may only be reading along, rather than writing in response.

The premise that silence in the pages of the newspaper might indicate the risks incarcerated organizers bring to their writing practice persisted across letters and in the ways writers positioned themselves to each other. Ms. Bobbie, an incarcerated trans woman, discusses how silence might figure into networks where "everyone of us depend on the next sister and the information that she presents as news." She calls on writers who publish news of victories related to gender-affirmation in prison to be specific when sharing resources for incarcerated trans women. "We need more accurate information on where you come up with the information," she writes, "Like, who

did you talk to, where can they be written to, on what pages was this information? Please remember that you're addressing family that are across America and a lot of time very timid girls." Ms. Bobbie's emphasis on the reliability of sources, the "information on where you come up with the information," urges her readers to be more precise by naming the audience with parameters that indicate breadth ("family that are across America," demonstrating how universally that knowledge might be applied) and specificity ("a lot of the time very timid girls," demonstrating the unique rhetorical position trans women share in carceral facilities, where they are often housed in men's units). As an incarcerated trans woman, she notes the risks for trans women within a carceral binary-system of gender, using the word "timid" to remind readers that what is written on the page is not always enough to encourage others to speak up for themselves in the moment. "There are silent activists waiting on the information you send," she continues, "if you have information, please say something. As the poet once said, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.'" Here, Ms. Bobbie centers the work of incarcerated trans women in protecting and supporting each other, both by sharing information and, with her suggestions, improving the process by which it is shared. She hints at a wideness of the audience that exceeds what might be visible to other writers, concluding, "I assure everyone that in Texas Prisons, transgender women are very active in the cause and any help will be appreciated." Similar to TiffanyJoy's, Ms. Bobbie's letter not only writes to engage with other incarcerated people, but comments on how other writers might best respond to the dangers of writing and speaking in prison.

## **"FIRST OFF FAMILY...": SHOUT OUTS AND MUTUAL AID ACROSS PRISONS**

In addition to letters that address other prisoners directly, many letters also contain "shout outs"—brief asides to specific people, usually written in the second person. Overwhelmingly, shout outs are directed to other writer from the newspaper, though recipients can also include loved ones outside prison or in a different prison, or even fellow prisoners in the same institution. Similarly, writers would often cite another letter-writer as a reason for writing their own letter. Usually, writers did not call these motivations for writing shout outs, though occasionally a shout out would do the work of

both shouting out another writer and framing their original letter as an exigency for writing. While the shout outs varied widely in terms of timing, sometimes leaving a long gap between the publication date of the original letter and the publication of the shout out, their popularity has only persisted throughout the newspaper's publication history, indicating that the shout out is valued by incarcerated writers as a cultural practice, regardless of how sure they are that the original author hears it (newspapers might miss a reader for many reasons, especially if a change in the mailroom has occurred, the newspaper is rejected or banned, a prisoner's address changes, etc.). In a representative example of a shout out from 2017, two writers, Lance and Pretty Boi, have letters published with different objectives. Pretty Boi concludes his letter with a question: "Also does anyone know any addresses I can write to get free books or anything like LGBTQ+ self-help, educational, urban books?" In the same issue, Lance writes about recent deaths in their biological family:

Now I know I'm not the only one going through something but I really needed to vent to my LGBTQIA family about what I'm going through right now. First off I know it's hard for anybody from the LGBTQ+ to be locked up but it's really bad here in [state facility] but that's not why I need to vent. I just lost the two only people I LOVE in my family my MOM & my BROTHER and it really hurt to know I will never see them again but what is killing me right now is that I could not be there to say goodbye [...]

Lance goes on to express feelings of guilt, particularly over their brother's death, since they feel more responsibility for their sibling after the death of their parent. In a later issue, another writer, Sketch, responds to both writers via a shout out: "to Pretty Boi [...] I like what you wrote in the newsletter and I got a address that sends books to prisoners but it takes three months. And they will send you a booklet that has a lot of address for books or whatever. It even has LGBT stuff also. I hope this helps you out." In addition to supplying Pretty Boi with addresses to write for books and resources, Sketch goes on to address Lance:

Well this is my last shout out. This is to Lance S. First off family I want to say that I'm sorry to hear about your mom & brother. I

fully understand how you feel. I lost my dad to cancer and when he died I lost it. There's nothing that anyone can say at this time cause it's not of this time [...] don't blame yourself for your brother's death. It's not your fault. You know when we get busted it's hard on all our loved ones out there but it's not your fault.

Sketch's shout outs demonstrate some of the range of support I have observed incarcerated people give each other through writing. From avenues to specific items, like books and resource guides, to the response to Lance's grief, the shout out is both personal and public, a person-to-person exchange that can only exist in public form—if direct letters from one incarcerated person to another were published, the newspaper would risk being banned on a wide scale. Like TiffanyJoy, Sketch—though he says he “fully understand[s]” how Lance feels about family deaths—also acknowledges how limited understanding can be. “There's nothing anyone can say at this time cause it's not of this time” might refer to the challenge of speaking comfort to someone in mourning, but it also speaks to the out-of-time moment the shout out represents—the ability, both precious and precarious, to speak to another person who might understand. Lance writes that they need to vent specifically to “my LGBTQIA family” about biological family loss, signaling that a queer community will be able to hear their grief more intimately than others around them. Sketch affirms his own role in that community by using “first off family” in his response to Lance.

## CONCLUSION

Literacy scholarship has thoughtfully negotiated its place in carceral systems, framing some of the aims of prison literacy work as abolitionist in nature and acknowledging ways that curricular “complicity and regulation” affect the reading and writing experiences of incarcerated writers and students (Jacobi and Becker 2012, 36). For example, narratives of il/literacy map rather too neatly onto narratives of criminal rehabilitation and repair (Carter 2008; Branch 2007). While facilitating writing opportunities for prisoners, literacy scholars and teachers have seen abolitionist potential in prison writing workshops, classrooms, and community publications. Tobi Jacobi has theorized prison literacy endeavors as abolition work, citing university-prison partnerships as a potential “alternative

rhetorical platform for prison activists and radical prison abolitionist groups whose work and ideology remains valuable, but whose voices receive less attention in mainstream media, academic, and political landscapes” (2016, 111-2). I suggest that abolition work and ideology can also be located in ways in which relationships are formed and risked through literacy practice; I hope this contention might both reveal the ways some prison literacy practice is *already* abolition work even while it challenges me and other scholars to attend to the relationships we want—and ask—prison literacy and its circulations to build.

Black and Pink’s family letters offer insight into the possibility of LGBTQ+ abolitionist literacy practices and the tactical potential they represent in carceral systems, particularly in terms of community formations that rely on political power-building and its potential to create relationships through writing. Responding to Paula Mattieu’s contention that community partnerships disproportionately align with the university’s strategic values in engaging community spaces and populations, Paul Feigenbaum (2011) notes that prison-university partnerships “possess institutional prerogatives that also influence the work of community literacy” and that “concerns about exploitation” might focus on the ways prison institutions stand to prosper from literacy partnerships despite university representatives’ moral or political reservations (63). Feigenbaum gestures toward the conflicting political values that intersect in a university-prison partnership, but what precisely these conflicts are remains ambiguous. While the structural terms and politics of university-prison partnership may require a compromise in the values of university representatives, the practices within these partnerships can interrogate the politics of literacy practice. As prison literacy engagement becomes more prominent in public contexts, scholars of prison and community literacies might consider ways that prison-university partnerships position prisoners as a social group. How might we further position incarcerated people (across prisons) as a significant audience for prison writers? How does the circulation of writing by prisoners into free society build or foreclose on shared civic and political power?



We might continue to use our increased freedom of circulation on the outside to form relationships with each other, as scholars and practitioners of prison literacy, with the purpose of connecting not only over shared strategies and aims for effective work in and around prisons, but of connecting the incarcerated readers and writers with whom we work by exploring the prospects of writing exchanges among prisoners. We can ask incarcerated writers for their perspectives on what kinds of communication, relationship-building, and knowledge-sharing they wish to have with other prisoners, and build those perspectives into prison-based writing initiatives. Finally, we can critically examine what it means to include prisoners as members of a reading public for works by incarcerated writers. If we are motivated by a desire to adjust public misperceptions of incarcerated people, we might consider the potential for writing by/for prisoners as mediating internalized oppression or exceptionalism (a dominant narrative that prisoners capable of building community and writing literature are exceptions to a rule) among incarcerated people. If we are motivated by the hope that expanded circulation of prison writing might bring about change in the material realities of prisoners, whether by legal or social means, we might attune to the ways prisoners can and should be the recipients, as well as the purveyors, of political mobilization. Inside and out, our communities can thrive in a world without prisons only if we have a shared vision for transformed social relations produced by those most impacted.

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