A World without Prisons: Teaching Confinement Literature and the Promise of Prison Abolition

In this article, I show how confinement literature serves as a site of possibility for reimagining the role, purpose, and function of prisons in our society. Confinement literature refers to any work of fiction or nonfiction that deals with the fundamental issue of human captivity. While this often refers to the writing of individuals living within the modern-day prison system, it also encompasses other sites of containment such as slave plantations and concentration camps, as well as allegorical and fictive spaces such as Jonah’s whale and Plato’s cave. By drawing on a more expansive notion of confinement, English educators are able to address not only the specific issues related to the modern-day prison but also broader social, emotional, cultural, and intellectual dilemmas that emerge out of forced confinement.

This article, like all my research, teaching, and writing, is informed by the belief that mass incarceration is a crisis that must be immediately addressed. I am not, however, an advocate of prison reform. Rather, I have a longstanding ideological and political commitment to the project of prison abolition.

Prison abolition has often been misrepresented, and caricatured, as the belief that our society should immediately open the doors to prisoners and release all criminals into society. In truth, abolitionists believe in the construction of a world in which the prison is not the primary mechanism of punishment. Abolitionists believe in the construction of a world that no longer equates punishment with justice. Abolitionists desire a world that addresses the root causes of crime—such as poverty, educational inequality, and mental illness—rather than embracing imprisonment as a simple and reactionary solution. Finally, abolitionists view our project as a long-term process that may not ever be fully realized, but nonetheless governs our collective decision-making in ways that lead to a more fair, just, and humane society (Abu-Jamal and Hill; Davis).

To create a world where abolition is both possible and prudent, we must begin to challenge our individual and collective conceptions of fairness, justice, punishment, and power. We must also reconsider the role of our most coveted and taken-for-granted social institutions, such as courts, law enforcement, and even the government itself. In addition, we must reconsider and reaffirm the humanity of those currently incarcerated. Such work speaks to the fundamental purpose of humanistic education in general, and English education in particular. Through our English curriculum and pedagogy, we have the ability to create room for a new intellectual, social, moral, and civic agenda.

I fully recognize that an abolitionist stance places me in the political and intellectual minority among most citizens, and possibly among English Journal readers. For this reason, I must stress that one does not have to believe in prison abolition to find value in this article. Even if an individual believes that prisons are a necessary evil, or even a societal good, a serious engagement with confinement literature nonetheless provides a critical space for

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Exposing students to canonical and contemporary slave, political, personal, and non-carceral confinement literatures provides a fecund space for discussing important issues of social justice and analyzing literature through new lenses.
examining the social, moral, and legal challenges of imprisonment, complicating our unexamined assumptions about crime, and more fully appreciating the complexities of the human condition when held in captivity.

By engaging a range of confinement literature, including some that are staples of the American literary canon and others that are important additions, English educators are able to create room for imagining a world without prisons.

In the sections below, I present several strands of confinement literature that can be effectively used in the English classroom.

**Slave Confinement Literature**

One of the most powerful examples of confinement literature comes in the form of slave narratives. Through these narratives, students can learn about the lives of individual slaves, but also the unique forms of dehumanization, exploitation, and abuse that accompanied the institution of North American slavery. While many contemporary English curricula include slave narratives within broader units, it is also important to teach them as a unique and quintessential genre of American literature.

Books such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* provide both classic and accessible examples of slave confinement literature. In *Incidents*, Jacobs details the unique plight of female slaves with regard to the loss of family, physical and verbal abuse by slave mistresses, and sexual violence by slave masters. In the narratives of Equiano and Douglass, both men detail the horrors of slavery and the importance of literacy in their journeys to freedom.

In addition to these classic texts, collections such as *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938* offer more than 2,300 first-person accounts and 500 photographs from former slaves. These texts provide insight into the nature of state-sponsored confinement on the structural and human levels. They also model the importance of autobiographical writing as a means by which to preserve history, share individual and collective experience, and challenge the prevailing notion that people in captivity are unwilling or unable to tell their own stories.

Slave confinement literature serves as a springboard for drawing parallels between slavery and modern-day imprisonment. As Michelle Alexander argues, the current number of prisoners of color in the United States is growing at a rate that eclipses the number of blacks enslaved in 1850. Also, the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution abolished forced servitude in the United States except in the case of prisoners, effectively allowing forms of slavery to remain legal within prison (Davis). In addition, we can point to the high incidents of physical abuse, sexual assault, and denial of educational opportunities within modern prisons as further examples of the similarities between slavery and mass incarceration. Such comparisons create space for rich classroom dialogues and engaged writing activities in which students can make their own determinations about the ethical and moral similarities and differences between slavery and prison.

Slave narratives also offer a tool for raising critical questions about the theme of confinement within the English literary canon. By spotlighting the fact that slave narratives were the first American literary genre, teachers can show how issues of confinement have always been central to American culture and society. As Toni Morrison argues, these concerns are not only evident in the work of black writers but also haunt the “literary imagination” of white writers such as Poe, Melville, and Hemingway. For these writers, she argues, American literary themes of individualism, innocence, and freedom can only be fully understood against the backdrop
of the experiences of black slaves who were unable to access them. Such dialogues will help students see how the writing and experiences of black people in captivity not only constitutes its own literary category but is also central to the broader American literary experience.

Political Confinement Literature

Political confinement literature is largely comprised of the writing of political prisoners. Although the term political prisoner can be defined in a wide variety of ways, I use the term to refer to anyone placed into confinement for their beliefs or identity. Some texts within this genre focus on the reasons for the individual’s confinement, while others focus on the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the individual held captive.

The writing of political prisoners includes texts such as “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” written by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. immediately after being arrested for protesting racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Other examples include Long Walk to Freedom, the autobiography of South African political prisoner Nelson Mandela after his 27 years of incarceration for protesting apartheid (legalized racial segregation) in his country. Students can also read more controversial texts such as Assata, the autobiography of former Black Panther Party member Assata Shakur who escaped prison and received political asylum in Cuba; or Soledad Brother, a collection of letters written by George Jackson, a Black Panther killed by prison guards during an escape from San Quentin Prison.

A range of religious and philosophical texts can be used to expand students’ understanding of political confinement. For example, units could also include the New Testament story of Jesus or the Book of Revelations, which is written by the Apostle John as a prisoner of Rome on the island of Patmos. While these texts (even when presented as literature rather than religious doctrine) will most likely be permitted only in private, religious, or homeschooling contexts, they have the potential to provide students with an even richer body of political writing. Students can also read Plato’s Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Phaedo, which detail the trial, prosecution, and execution of Socrates for his unconventional beliefs. Such texts remind students about the danger of powerful and unconventional ideas, as well as the State’s response to it.

By introducing the writing of political prisoners, teachers help students develop richer and more nuanced understandings of the role of and interplay among “the law,” “the criminal,” and “the State.” While we are generally taught to regard laws with almost religious reverence, the narratives of political prisoners point out moments when the laws of the day violated a broader sense of fairness and justice. By seeing figures generally regarded as heroes such as King and Mandela within the context of the prison, students are able to reframe the prison as a space not only for ostensibly “lawless villains” of society, but also for those who fight against the dominant ideas of the day.

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legal and moral innocence, as well as whether her decision to escape the Clinton Correctional Facility and locate political asylum in Cuba, was a just response to her circumstance.

Teachers can also pair the writing of political confinement literature with traditional Western canonical texts to explore literary themes of fairness and justice. Texts such as Shakespeare’s King Lear, Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, or Homer’s The Odyssey allow students to explore the fundamental nature of justice, whether or not individuals (rather than governments or divine powers) are responsible for dispensing justice, and whether or not the existence of a just world is a real possibility.

**Personal Confinement Literature**

Personal confinement literature provides another important strand for English educators, as these texts provide insider accounts of individuals who are negotiating confinement. Unlike the narratives of political prisoners, these narratives are not written by individuals directly incarcerated for their identity or politics. This does not mean that everyone who writes personal confinement literature is guilty; many of the writers maintain that they were wrongfully convicted. It also does not mean that personal confinement narratives are apolitical; indeed, laws, incarceration, and the notion of crime itself are political constructs. Rather, the incarceration experiences of the writers are not a function of their politics per se.

Many popular literary works provide effective examples of personal confinement literature. For example, “De Profundis,” written by Oscar Wilde during his stint in Reading Gaol, reflects on the experiences that led to Wilde’s incarceration. The text also offers a deep analysis of the physical, spiritual, and psychological toll that prison took on him, as well as his own path of development.

Examples of personal confinement literature also include “conversion narratives” such as the Autobiography of Malcolm X and Makes Me Wanna Holler by Nathan McCall, in which the prison serves as a site for personal crisis and change. In the Autobiography of Malcolm X, prison becomes the space where X is introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, after which he performs deep literacy engagement and self-study. In Makes Me Wanna Holler, McCall tells the story of his incarceration and the mentors (Dr. Naim Akbar) and activities (chess and reading) that enable his return to society as a productive citizen. Although, as an abolitionist, I would argue that these are extraordinary examples that are not indicative of the rehabilitative capacity of the modern prison system, they nonetheless create space for discussion about the role of prison in changing individual lives. They also enable students to discuss issues of transformation, conversion, purification, and personal responsibility within the texts.

Hip-hop culture also provides a wide range of narratives of personal confinement. Songs such as “What Your Life Like” by Beanie Sigel detail the day-to-day horrors of prison life. Such texts can be juxtaposed with classic muckraking fiction such as Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, which exposed the unhealthy conditions of the American meatpacking industry. Songs such as “I Refuse Limitations” by Goodie M.O.B., particularly the last verse, offer a rich analysis of how poverty and shrinking labor markets contribute to mass incarceration. “One Love” by Nas is a series of letters written to his incarcerated friends about life outside of prison, as well as information that he has heard about their prison experiences. The text allows readers to explore complex notions of loyalty, honesty, and courage. In addition, the Nas text serves as an excellent introduction to the genre of epistolary writing and can be juxtaposed to other works such as Bram Stoker’s Dracula or Alice Walker’s The Color Purple.

More broadly, hip-hop based texts serve as a window into the experiences of confinement for black youth within postindustrial urban spaces.

Personal narratives create space for expanding the reader’s conception of prisoners. This is largely because, as opposed to the other strands, authors of personal confinement literature often acknowledge (or at least do not contest) their guilt. This creates space to understand prisoners within a framework of moral complexity. Unlike dominant societal narratives that construct prisoners as “bad people” who
are largely reducible to the crimes they committed, or political confinement narratives that construct prisoners as innocent victims of a broken system, personal narratives create room for more complex understandings of individuals within the criminal justice system. By engaging writers whose feelings, desires, interests, and experiences are often similar to themselves, students are better able to see and acknowledge the fundamental humanity of the prisoner. Also, by hearing their accounts of how they became incarcerated, even those who admit their guilt, we can develop a more complex understanding of the factors that lead to crime and incarceration.

Non-carceral Confinement Literature

Students can also use “non-carceral” literature as a means of engaging notions of confinement. By non-carceral literature, I refer to texts that directly or indirectly address issues of captivity without explicitly referencing prison, jail, or other spaces of criminal incarceration. Non-carceral texts include works that address abstract notions of confinement. For example, poems such as Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” allow students to view issues of captivity and unfreedom outside of the prison context and through the lens of the bird. Works such as Amy Levy’s “Captivity” prompt rich discussions about dislocation and loss through the characters of bird and lion. While both of these texts can be linked to broader discussions (in this case, slavery and the loss of the Jewish nation-state), they allow students to explore many of the existential issues related to confinement outside of a political context.

Students can also read texts written by incarcerated individuals that are not directly related to their incarceration. For example, Don Quixote was inspired by Miguel de Cervantes’ time in a Sevillian debtor’s prison. The Pisan Cantos (LXXIV-LXXXIV) of Ezra Pound were written during Pound’s time as a military prisoner in Pisa. After being informed of the authors’ incarceration, students can reexamine the texts and reflect on how incarceration may have informed their work. As mentioned above, such an activity allows students to broaden their understanding of prisoners. Also, by choosing classic canonical texts that were written in prison, but are largely unrelated to prison life, students are better able to recognize the creative and intellectual capacity of the prisoner.

Teaching toward Abolition

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I believe in the possibility of a world without prisons. In the more immediate future, I believe in the possibility that we can prioritize restoration over retribution, investment over punishment, and humanization over criminalization. A deep engagement with the confinement literature outlined in this article can help us to make those possibilities a reality. Even if we fall short of the lofty goal of abolition, confinement literature can help students to raise critical questions about the nature of prisoners and prisoners in society. Confinement literature also provides a rich space for analyzing literature through new lenses. Regardless of our individual politics and priorities, these serve as important and necessary goals for English educators around the world.

Works Cited


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