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The Art of Liberating Humanity

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Critical Education Special Series

Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison

Abstract

*This essay engages the question of higher education in prisons through the lens of abolitionist prison reform, and further, within a larger revolutionary framework. Drawing heavily on Herbert Marcuse's essay, *On Liberation* (1969), and inspired by tradition of radical pedagogy- and the likes of Paolo Freire and bell hooks- this essay undertakes the prison classroom as a space of resistance with radical potential. Accordingly, the essay makes a case for offering incarcerated students a liberal arts curriculum, particularly strong in the humanities, because of its revolutionary potential, premised on its accessibility, aesthetic sensibility, and the exercise of the imagination.*



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This series on higher education in prison comes at a crucial time. In the past few years, there's been a significant expansion of access to higher education in federal and state prisons in the U.S. I've witnessed this first hand in my home state of New Jersey. The NJ-STEP (Scholastic & Transformative Education in Prisons) program began as a degree bearing program at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for women, the sole women's prison in New Jersey, and was green-lit to expand to every prison in the state. As a result of teaching in the NJ-STEP program, I was invited to attend a meeting facilitated by the former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, at the Department of Education in Washington D.C., where a small group of educators and administrators involved in successful higher-education programs in prisons met to offer advice for the Obama administration's planned roll out of the re-implementation of access to Pell grants for incarcerated students. Of course, those who regard education as inherently "good" would immediately see this as progress. And yet, when looking through a critical lens, such a judgement must be withheld upon further review of the kind of education being offered. As Freire was wise to caution, education- whether explicitly or implicitly stated, is always education "for" some end or purpose. In view of this, education that teaches one to become a passive consumer may be good for business and bottom lines but harmful to workers, the environment, and/or the greater society. And yet, this is exactly the kind of education that capitalism requires. Moreover, this is the type of education which both supports and is supported by the prevailing systems of inequity- i.e. systemic racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and so forth. So, in this crucial moment at which we are witnessing a rapid expansion of higher education in prisons, progress that may be halted, recede, or even evaporate under the current administration, it's a crucial time to reflect on the role of the academy in providing higher education in prisons. In this essay, I will engage the question of higher education in prisons through the lens of abolitionist prison reform, and further, within a larger revolutionary framework. In so doing, I will make a case for offering incarcerated students a liberal arts curriculum, particularly strong in the humanities, because of its revolutionary potential, premised on its accessibility, aesthetic sensibility, and exercise of the imagination.

Situating The Argument

Reform movements are commonly understood to be more liberal, by which I simply mean that they work within the system in order to fix or change a particular aspect of the system without necessarily challenging the structure of that larger system. In short, they seek to ameliorate problems in a given system. Abolitionist prison reform is, however, situated in a more radical, revolutionary framework that foregrounds prescriptions that seek not only to ameliorate, but also eliminate the carceral system. This is the spirit of abolitionist reform. I anticipate that some may dismiss the project of eliminating the carceral system as an impossibly lofty and unrealistic goal. Anticipating such criticisms, I fully admit this project is unabashedly and undeniably utopian, and yet, I refuse to allow such a designation to dismiss such a worthy project. I want to reclaim the concept of utopian and deprive it of any "unreal" content. As critical theorist Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School argues in his essay *On Liberation* (1969), "What is denounced as 'utopian' is no longer that which has 'no place' and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies" (p.3-4). Many of us doing this work do so with what I would describe as a "sacred" sense of purpose. I do not use the word "sacred" lightly, nor theologically. By sacred, I mean that abolitionist prison reform is a utopian project with a transcendent sense of purpose; that despite the articulated learning outcomes of any given course, or the reality of the oppressive nature of the deadly systems we navigate, there is simultaneously an adherence to a call that transcends the immediacy of

the situation. Our work is both here and into the future, a future free of carceral logics and systems.

So again, this essay is written through a lens of abolitionist prison reform within a larger revolutionary framework. In this way, part of the work of this essay is to demythologize the undertheorized notion of revolution and offer a clear articulation of what revolutionary activism looks like in practice. Moreover, this essay is not a (neo) Marxist rumination on revolution. As Marx himself would recognize, the historical conditions have changed requiring new theory appropriate for the times. In light of this, we must carefully move beyond Marxist theory in such a way that does not leave behind relevant class critiques and other insights. Furthermore, the work of demythologizing revolution requires dispelling fantastical notions of revolution, especially popular representations in television and film. Despite these romantic fictions, revolution is not a one-time event, nor does it necessitate the perpetration of theatrical violence. Following romanticized notions of revolution is how many rebellions have met an untimely fate. When we look to historical precedent, revolutions have historically been informed by theory, which was itself informed by practice. Theory-informing-practice-informing-theory is a reciprocal process that must be refreshed and renewed time and again, dispelling any notions of overnight revolution. Furthermore, revolution is a project of freedom which requires people that are ready to assume full ownership and agency of their freedom. This only underscores the point that revolution takes time. But this demythologized, un-romanticized notion of revolution allows us to see our work within the carceral system as part of the larger work of revolution. It allows us to recast ourselves as revolutionists on the front lines.

However, if this is indeed a revolutionary project, one might wonder why my argument for abolitionist prison reform, which seeks to eliminate the carceral system, is advocating working with and within the carceral system. Further complicating the matter, I also must acknowledge that my argument remains firmly within the confines of the liberal university, which is also complicit in creating the current state of affairs. However, one benefit of taking a starting point from within the dual confines of the carceral system and the liberal university is that it allows for immanent critique. By immanent critique, I simply mean a critique from within as opposed to from the outside. Immanent critique allows us to begin from exactly where we are, in the *belly of the beast*. Locating my argument within the dual confines of the liberal university and the carceral system allows us to pursue a space within the dominant structures that can serve as a possible location of resistance. Furthermore, serves as a limiting condition so that our theorizing does not become severed from our practical reality.

So beginning from exactly where we are, within the dual confines of both the liberal university and the carceral system, I will make the case that a liberal arts curriculum, deeply rooted in the humanities, offers the most revolutionary potential for incarcerated students. Revolution, however, is a word that is frequently used and rarely defined. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's work, *On Revolution* (1963), revolution is a project that entails two types of freedom. Revolution first requires a negative freedom, or freedom-from, what might be described as liberation. Before establishing one's own freedom, one must find a way to get free from whatever condition of slavery or oppression in which they find themselves. Yet, even then, not all successful liberatory efforts are revolutionary. Sometimes you find your way out of the frying pan and into the proverbial fire. Therefore, the second type of revolutionary freedom entails the establishment of a new system, a positive freedom or freedom-for. As a consequence, by creating a new way of living and being in the world, a revolutionary framework is one that ultimately aims at the wholesale dismantling of current systems, particularly oppressive systems such as the carceral system. Therefore, by

understanding revolution as being predicated upon two types of freedom, when I say that this essay is written through an abolitionist prison reform lens within a larger revolutionary framework, this means we must seek a curriculum that can support “education as the practice of freedom,” in the tradition of Freire and hooks. This requires a curriculum that does not reinscribe students into larger systems that support and perpetuate the carceral system. This requires a curriculum with the most potential to transform both the individual and the society which they navigate.

Why A Liberal Arts Curriculum?

It should be noted with good reason that the liberal university, home of the liberal arts, is complicit in creating the current conditions. Therefore, I must posit one caveat to my argument before I commence. Despite my argument in favor of a liberal arts curriculum for incarcerated students, a liberal arts curriculum alone will not suffice. The realization of education as the practice of freedom also requires creative pedagogies delivered by competent, well trained pedagogues willing to seek radical, critical content in an effort to engage students in democratic, humanitarian, and (dare I say) pleasurable ways, all while navigating the complexities of the carceral system. No small task, especially when considering the difficult her/histories that incarcerated students have faced, not to mention the difficult futures they will face. This is why there is an even greater need to offer them the most holistic and dynamic curriculum that allows incarcerated students to address their humanity as well as their employment status. In light of this caveat, when applying the lens of abolitionist prison reform to higher education in prisons, there are three aspects of the liberal arts humanities curriculum that I want to highlight for their revolutionary potential: accessibility, aesthetic sensibility, and the exercise of the imagination. Let’s begin by examining the question of accessibility.

Accessibility

By accessibility, I’m particularly interested in determining the best curriculum to offer incarcerated students in view of what is available, permissible, and yet, also offers the most revolutionary potential. A curriculum that students have no access to offers no revolutionary potential. So before we address the revolutionary potential of a curriculum, we must address the practical issues of its availability and permissibility. In terms of availability, because our immanent critique requires us to begin from where we are, it is important that we seek a curriculum that will be widely accessible for incarcerated students. This means choosing from the more common degree programs currently offered in higher education. Though it would be wonderful if incarcerated students could major in critical theory or peace and justice studies, these types of offerings are not going to be widely available for the majority of incarcerated students.

Further, permissibility also comes into play. Most prisons have semi-strict rules regarding the types of texts and learning materials they will allow. In my personal experience, prisons do not tend to be overly nuanced when it comes to the types of materials they will allow. For instance, I have taught in a prison that would not allow Nietzsche, presumably because of his misinterpreted relations to the Nazis and Hitlerism, whereas the same prison would allow a Feminist Philosophy Reader, which contains Angela Davis’ *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, and *The Prison Industrial Complex*, among other anti-capitalist, anti-white-supremacist, and of course, anti-patriarchal readings. Widening our lens, though courses rich in Marxist theory might arguably support a greater vision of revolution, they are far less likely to evade scrutiny and censure. Strategically, it is important to offer a curriculum which

incarcerated students can readily access, both because it is widely available by college and university partners, while also being permitted into prisons by prison authorities and administrators. Although courses rich with Nietzsche and Marx may not be permitted, a more general liberal arts humanities curriculum allows for courses like cultural anthropology, feminist philosophy, literature, social problems, and so on. Of course, the content ultimately depends on the selections chosen by the professor, but these are the types of general education courses offered in a liberal arts curriculum which will receive little scrutiny from the prison system while at the same time having the potential to expose students to radical ideas that fundamentally challenge the dominant systems and exercise the radical imagination.

Of course, one might question the revolutionary potential of a curriculum that needs the approval of the very system it seeks to dismantle. Recommendations based purely on availability and permissibility would remain within a liberal reformist framework. I should make it clear that deeming something as lacking revolutionary potential does not mean that it is *necessarily* bad or morally suspect. It is, however, a way of discerning the type of activism that challenge the underlying systems, and moreover, seek to cultivate the type of revolutionary consciousness necessary for collective action and resistance. Therefore, while it is important in practice to select a curriculum that will be accessible to incarcerated students, as an abolitionist prison reform project, it is also necessary to offer a curriculum that can support the notion of education as the practice of freedom.

In view of this, my argument in favor of the liberal arts is by no means an implicit or explicit rejection of things such as, for instance, vocational training for incarcerated students. I am simply restricting my analysis to the liberal university as currently constructed and seeking the curriculum that will provide the most revolutionary potential. I'm also not making an argument that incarcerated students should exclusively be exposed to liberal arts and humanities courses. As it is, far too few have the opportunity to take higher education courses in prison, and those that do usually take them "à la carte," often attached to a specific initiative. As a result, few incarcerated students are enrolled in degree bearing programs. Furthermore, even when degree programs are accessible, incarcerated students often lack the needed support and guidance that traditional college students receive in order to navigate the complexities of degree programs. Therefore, doing whatever we can to assist, encourage, and support the work of creating degree-bearing programs with an academic infrastructure charged with supporting the needs of incarcerated students in the same way that we attempt to support our traditional students is one of the most radical, revolutionary things we can do.

Again, however, pushing against the common sense perception that education is intrinsically good, what about the content and curriculum of these courses and programs? Viewed through the lens of abolitionist prison reform within a larger framework of revolution, we do not want to simply reinscribe our students back into the oppressive systems that have fueled forces, such as mass incarceration and the prison-industry complex, which have ensnared these students and many others like them. In this regard, I am arguing that there is no need to blindly direct, let alone force, incarcerated students into programs that offer little to no revolutionary potential (read: business) purely based on specious arguments of practicality. When compared to degrees in STEM, business, and even the fine arts, the liberal arts and humanities offer more revolutionary potential because of their ability to nurture a revolutionary consciousness and to exercise the radical imagination.

Aesthetic Sensibility

The next aspect of a liberal arts humanities curriculum that I would like to highlight is its ability to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility. As Marcuse (1969) points out, “If this deadly system of life is to be changed without being replaced by another deadly one, men must learn to develop the new sensibility of life- of their own life and that of things” (p.40). Marcuse (1969) contends, “The new sensibility, which expresses the ascent of the life instincts over aggressiveness and guilt, would foster, on a social scale, the vital need for the abolition of injustice and misery and would shape the further evolution of the ‘standard of living’” (p.24). Marcuse (1969) goes on to say, Marcuse (1969) goes on to say, “This would be the sensibility of men and women who do not have to be ashamed of themselves anymore because they have overcome their sense of guilt: they have learned not to identify themselves with the false fathers who have built and tolerated and forgotten the Auschwitzs and Vietnams of history” (p.24-25). It is important to note the sex/gender binary littered in Marcuse’s essay and placed front and center here.

It is important to note the sex/gender binary littered in Marcuse’s essay and placed front and center here. It’s not something that I am able to fully think through in this essay, but it is certainly a problem that needs to be addressed. What ways might it limit the radical potential of Marcuse’s notion of liberation? Can we fully redeem this notion of liberation as a radical one? Something I think we must take from Marcuse’s notion of liberation is that it is predicated on developing and nurturing the revolutionary conditions within humankind itself. This means that our work today includes providing a pedagogy in which incarcerated students learn not to identify with the powers that have given us Abu Ghraib, an unending war on terror, featuring indiscriminate drone bombings, black site prisons, mass incarceration, and so on and so forth. Since revolution is a project of freedom, we must facilitate learning that, as Marcuse urges, breaks the chain which links students to “false fathers”, and instead teaches incarcerated students “to act and think free from this identification,” so that they are able to assume their freedom and help shape a new, free society. A pedagogy that radically transforms the sensibility of its students from shame to empowerment is one that flies directly in the face of our current sham of criminal justice. As Marcuse states in the above excerpt, “If and when men and women act and think free from this identification, they will have broken the chain which linked the fathers and the sons from generation to generation. They will not have redeemed the crimes against humanity, but they will have become free to stop them and to prevent their recommencement.” This underscores the necessity of education as the practice of freedom. Understanding that all education is for some purpose or end, this is the type of education that not only helps to liberate individuals, but moreover, enlist them in the work of creating a free society.

So what does all of this have to do with the liberal arts? Marcuse argues that our needed new sensibility, which would manifest as a praxis, would be motivated by what he describes as a new *aesthetic ethos*. According to Marcuse (1969), an aesthetic ethos would be one in which,

The life instincts would find rational expression (sublimation) in planning the distribution of the socially necessary labor time within and among the various branches of production, this setting priorities of goals and choices: not only what to produce but also the ‘form’ of the product. The liberated consciousness would promote the development of a science and technology free to discover and realize the possibilities of things and men in the protection and gratification of life, playing with the potentialities of form and matter for the attainment of this goal (p.24).

Although the liberal arts and humanities are not necessarily revolutionary, this allows us to realize and reclaim the radical potential of the liberal arts and humanities as the art of liberating humanity. In the liberal university as currently constructed, it is only liberal arts humanities courses like philosophy, ethics, and political science that specialize in exploring “the possibilities of things and men in the protection and gratification of life.” It is in liberal arts humanities courses like English, literature, and creative writing that allow for play “with the potentialities of form and matter for the attainment of this goal.”

Marcuse’s call for a renewed “aesthetic ethos” affords us the opportunity to reflect on the “aesthetic” nature of the liberal “arts.” What is the “art” of the liberal arts? Clearly, the liberal arts are vastly different than fine arts. Marcuse (1969) makes use of the term aesthetic “in its dual connotation of ‘pertaining to the senses’ and ‘pertaining to art’” (p.24). This twofold understanding of aesthetic can help to illuminate the nature of the “arts” at the core of the liberal arts. In the artistic sense of the aesthetic, Marcuse notes that the analysis of the aesthetic has historically focused on the beautiful, and it is here that it finds its common ground with ethics and politics. “The classical aesthetic, while insisting on the harmonious union of sensuousness, imagination, and reason in the beautiful, equally insisted on the objective (ontological) character of the beautiful, as the Form in which man and nature come into their own: fulfillment” (Marcuse, 1969, p.27). This begins to outline the content of the artistic sense of Marcuse’s aesthetic ethos, but also the nature of the “arts” at the core of the liberal arts. Marcuse’s aesthetic ethos is predicated on a radical transformation that takes seriously a desire for the beautiful as human fulfillment and harmony; with ourselves, with one another, and with our environment. In this way, “The beautiful has the ‘biological value’ of that which is ‘useful, beneficial, enhancing life’” (Marcuse, 1969, p.27). Moreover, Marcuse (1969) notes, “For the artist, the beautiful is mastery of opposites ‘without tension, so that violence is no longer needed’” (p.27). It is in the liberal arts and humanities that students can begin to think about the beautiful in terms of the ethical, political, and the social, as opposed to just the particular or individual. It is in the liberal arts and humanities that students can explore life not just quantitatively, as in the sciences, but qualitatively, or aesthetically.

Marcuse also, however, uses the term “aesthetic ethos” because it refers back to the notion of sensibility in its more literal sense, as in “of the senses.” Marcuse’s notion of an aesthetic ethos, meaning having to do with the senses, would be driven by the fulfillment of life instincts, what he here describes as “sensuous needs.” In other words, an aesthetic ethos would be one that rejects the dualistic disembodied rational mind of the modern Western world and instead gets us back into our bodies. Keeping with the notion of the beautiful as the “mastery of opposites,” an aesthetic ethos would not be the rejection of the rational, but more so of the dualistic disembodiment that severs the mind from the body. Once we allow ourselves to get back into our bodies, we can begin to understand how our aesthetic needs have their own radical social content. Marcuse describes it this way:

The radical social content of the aesthetic needs becomes evident as the demands for the most elementary satisfaction is translated into group action on an enlarged scale. From the harmless drive for better zoning regulations and a modicum of protection from noise and dirt to the pressure for closing of whole city areas to automobiles, prohibition of transistor radios in all public places, decommercialization of nature, total urban reconstruction, control of the birth rate- such action would become increasingly subversive of the institutions of capitalism and of their morality (Marcuse, 1969, p.27-28).

To get back into our bodies and to allow ourselves to feel again, shifting from our current dualistic disembodied unconscious behavior to an aesthetic sensibility, would indeed be revolutionary because it would reveal an ethos that demands a new and better quality of life than what we allow for ourselves now. This type of aesthetic morality would not be a puritanical politics of respectability that polices dress codes or grammar, but instead, reorients our understanding of what is obscene to that which perverts and prohibits the health and growth of human life. As Marcuse (1969) argues, “Obscene is not the picture of a naked woman exposes her pubic hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression” (p.4).

In this way, the liberal arts and humanities offer a space in the academy where students are able to learn how to critically think about how meaning is constructed, and likewise, deconstructed and reconstructed. It is in the liberal arts and humanities where students can undertake the project of exploring the body’s role in epistemology as well as reorienting our epistemology of the body. Only the dualistic, disembodied rational mind of the Western world could so successfully sever the body from the mind and project its darkest fantasies upon it in ways that affect us to this day. A revolutionary pedagogy must be an embodied pedagogy, one that embraces both mind and body and therefore combines both theory and practice. The liberal arts and humanities help to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility, which is able to integrate the experience of the body and bodies, thereby uniting the objective and the subjective, the quantitative and the qualitative.

The Exercise of the Imagination

This leads to the third aspect of the liberal arts humanities curriculum that I would like to highlight for its revolutionary potential: the exercise of the imagination. As Marcuse (1969) powerfully asks, “When the horror of reality tends to become total and blocks political action, where else than in the radical imagination, as refusal of reality, can the rebellion, and its uncompromised goals, be remembered” (p.44-45)? Accordingly, a revolutionary pedagogy deeply rooted in the liberal arts and humanities can help to facilitate such a transformation in the self and society by exercising the radical imagination. It is imperative that we free the imagination to be able to envision a truly new form of freedom which does not reinscribe our students, nor ourselves, back into *involuntary* servitude on the current deadly system. This is why we need a curriculum that attempts to free the creative power of the imagination in the service of revolutionary liberation. Citing a successful precedent to build upon, Marcuse (1969) asserts, “In the great historical revolutions, the imagination was, for a short period, released and free to enter into the projects of a new social morality and of new institutions of freedom” (p.29- 30). Aside from this, the domination of class society has, for the most part, only allowed the power of the imagination to be temporarily unleashed in order become practical; and thereby to become instrumentalized. The powers of our very own imaginations have been colonized and turned against us, inducing us into participating in our own alienation and exploitation. *How sick is that?*

For Marcuse (1969), the only possibility for cultivating a mass rejection of the current order, as well as the affirmation of a new freedom, is predicated on liberating the “sensuous power of the imagination” (p.30). Therefore, building on Marcuse, a new reality can only be constructed through the play of a radically new sensibility, merged with a liberated rationality, and directed by the productive imagination. He states,

“The imagination, unifying sensibility and reason, becomes ‘productive’ as it becomes practical: a guiding force in the reconstruction of reality-reconstruction with the help of a *gaya scienza*, a science and technology

released from their service to destruction and exploitation, and thus free for the liberating exigencies of the imagination” (Marcuse, 1969, p.30-31).

Under the current dominant systems, science has largely been enlisted in the service of destruction and exploitation. The antidote to this is the productive imagination. It is in the liberal arts and humanities where the imagination is freed from its service to destruction and exploitation and enlisted in the work of imagining new and better futures. Accordingly, the liberal arts and humanities are some of the few spaces in the academy that seriously engage the imagination. It is only in the liberal arts and humanities that things like fiction and poetry, tools that are particularly useful for exercising the imagination, are used to distill truth and meaning.

Ultimately, there is no better location in the academy to cultivate this cross pollination of sensibility, rationality, and imagination than in the liberal arts and humanities. Certainly, disciplines in the fine arts, for example, require creativity and imagination, however the liberal arts and humanities explicitly direct the imagination toward questions of the human condition, i.e. questions of identity, the meaning of self, and its relation to society. For example, in the quote above, Marcuse specifically describes how “history enters into projects of the imagination.” This is because, as mentioned previously, the liberal arts and humanities provide locations in academy where one can explore the “possibilities of things and men in the protection and gratification of life, playing with the potentialities of form and matter for the attainment of this goal” (Marcuse, 1969, p.24). Whereas STEM fields, and even business courses, can sharpen a student’s critical thinking, this critical thinking isn’t necessarily directed at one’s self or society, as in the liberal arts offerings, such as anthropology, history, psychology, and sociology. It is in this way that the liberal arts and humanities are by nature also interdisciplinary. The courses within these fields heavily draw on one another in order to construct meaning. Composition, history, literature, philosophy, and political science all inform one another and become each other’s content. None can be done in a vacuum. Accordingly, directing the creative, productive imagination at self and society helps to develop a critical consciousness that can foster a revolutionary consciousness.

Conclusion

I realize that for some, this may read like “the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer.” And yet for others, by remaining within the dual confines of the liberal university and the carceral system, my apology for a liberal arts curriculum for incarcerated students will not be radical enough. There are those who will dismiss liberal arts education as bourgeois escapism, of which at times it is certainly guilty. Nevertheless, the empirical and anecdotal evidence supports the success and effectiveness of liberal arts education for incarcerated students, not to mention the students own expressions of satisfaction and fulfillment. I challenge those that dismiss liberal arts education as bourgeois escapism to tell that to the Dameion Brown and the hundreds of incarcerated students in the Shakespeare program in California prisons that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation credits with a drop in prison violence as well as contributing to the lower recidivism (Tan, 2016). After participating in the Shakespeare program, Damien was cast as the lead in the Marin Shakespeare Company’s production of Othello. I challenge those that dismiss liberal arts education as bourgeois escapism tell that to the students in the META Theatre program in prisons in New Jersey that were able to develop their original monologues in the spirit of Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues, loosely based on their life experiences, and performed for the community in 2016. I am by no means naïve enough to believe that a liberal arts curriculum is a panacea for the oppressive nature of the prison system, or that a cure-all even exists. Yet,

while acutely aware of the problematic history of liberal arts education, it still offers great possibility as a location of resistance because of its ability to unleash the power of the productive imagination; the radical imagination. As bell hooks (1994) famously argues,

... the academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education is the practice of freedom (p.207).

There are certainly better and worse tools for tilling the field of possibility we call the classroom. The liberal arts and humanities are not necessarily liberatory, radical, or revolutionary, but certainly have the power and potential to be so when we demand this of them, and certainly more than other disciplines. Though not necessarily, in the liberal university as currently constructed, it is the liberal arts and humanities that teach the art of liberating our humanity. It is the liberal arts and humanities which help to nurture the radical potential of the prison classroom as a space of resistance, and therefore offer the greatest hope of personal and collective liberation.

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