

*Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom: Options and Opportunities*, by Anna Plemons. National Council of Teachers of English, 2019. 185 pp.

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“Post-colonial? There is nothing post about it. It has simply shape-shifted to fit the contemporary context.”

— Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*

“The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.”

— James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

Colonialist impulses—hierarchical forces that deliberately marginalize and impose their practices on others to correct perceived deficits—are poignantly present in prisons, a place that purposely dehumanizes incarcerated people (Plemons 13). Worse yet, even anticolonial and decolonial work is rooted in the thought framework of colonialism, and it is thus debatable whether such projects can break free of colonial impulses. In *Beyond Progress in the Prison Classroom*, Anna Plemons analyzes the success of an Arts in Corrections program in California’s New Folsom Prison and recommends that readers with colonialist concepts of progress let go of preoccupations with individual narratives. Instead, Plemons urges us to look to a relational methodology inspired by Indigenous theory (11). The book therefore disrupts the colonial thinking of “individual narratives of transformation” as assessment of the value of prison education systems and asks us to consider relationality instead (10).

Relationality is a concept rooted in Indigenous theory, and it states that all things are connected. It thereby directly challenges the idea, perpetuated by Cartesian dualism, that relatedness with the world is a choice. Plemons challenges readers to acknowledge the complicity that teachers of writing have had, from the beginning, in the prison system as an instrument of penance. She balances this difficult acknowledgement with the message of hope that does “not imagine that bureaucracies—of imprisonment or education—are too monolithic or too vast to be moved by increments” (30). To make good on this hope, the book moves beyond individual narratives (as a model of return on investment thinking) and engages understandings of relational value from Indigenous scholars that exist outside of colonial impulses. Plemons’s relational

methodology contributes to the pedagogical literature on prison programs with a very actionable—albeit incremental—book.

Plemons introduces us in chapter one to the problem of coloniality in the assessment of prison education. Colonialist ideologies revolve around the “obsession with transforming the moral and intellectual deficits of the Other and the use of economic rhetoric in that pursuit” (10). She identifies individual narratives as the economic capital in prison education assessment and presents data on recidivism to complicate oversimple ideas of individual progress as a valid measurement for prison education systems. Plemons successfully illustrates that recidivism is an inadequate measurement of the return on the investment of prison programs. For example, some individuals are serving life sentences; not only does a measure of recidivism not apply to them, but it also fails to capture the effects an individual has in their relationships with others. Plemons asks readers to reevaluate what we discern as valuable in prison programs because mainstream focus on individual progress misses positive relational value.

Plemons approaches relationality in the intellectual tradition of global decolonial scholars and Indigenous theory distinct from coloniality. In chapter two, Plemons celebrates the work of decolonial scholars Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Siphamandla Zondi who write about remembering as a decolonial movement of putting back together that which was violently and unnaturally separated through colonialist impulse. This violent and unnatural separation, Plemons argues, is manifest in the incarcerated individual. She describes the creation of her own relational methodology in the tradition of the work of Cora Weber-Pillwax, Shawn Wilson, especially, Margaret Kovach. Plemons successfully weaves together work by many more decolonial, anticolonial, and Indigenous scholars throughout the book to show us that this incremental work is worth doing.

Chapter three unveils a relational methodology that assesses the value of prison education systems. Plemons successfully argues that Western thought is insufficient for the space where “complicity with injustice is inescapable” and illuminates what is neglected in the return-on-investment methodologies: relationships (87). Plemons writes her relational methodology in line with Kovach’s work, “but with an audience of non-Indigenous prison program researchers and sponsors in mind” (102). Plemons instructs teacher-scholars to use her relational methodology as an interconnected whole and consider 1) decolonial intention and ethics, 2) researcher preparation, 3) community accountability, 4) reciprocity/community benefit, and 5) knowledge gathering/meaning making. For Plemons, relational accountability means, in part, that the texts written from the research should not benefit the scholar-teacher more than the scholar-teacher benefits the community (85). Students, scholar-teachers, researchers, and sponsors alike will benefit from the book’s detailed

description of her relational methodology and application to assess value in ongoing prison programs.

Plemons also introduces readers to a decolonial process called “re-mem-bering.” Incarceration “violently separates” or dis-members many things for incarcerated people, things that were once part of a whole, and now are not (40). Re-mem-bering is the act of putting these things back together. Plemons tells us that re-mem-bering is placing the incarcerated individual back into their relational contexts and challenging “narratives of erasure” that remove the incarcerated individual from everything to which they are, in fact, still connected (42). Though narratives of individual transformation continue to be circulated (because incarcerated people continue to write them), Plemons asks scholar-teachers to encourage an exploration of the relationality that is being edited out. According to Plemons, individual narratives afford only a limited range of meaning, whereas a broader approach to relationality in writing writing can facilitate re-mem-bering the connections that have been violently separated in the process of incarceration.

Though some readers may take issue with book’s discussion of Indigenous theory (given that Plemons is a white person), the book respectfully discusses relationality in critiquing the commodification of individual transformation stories in prison literacy work. The book’s relational methodology stands in opposition to colonial methodology by decentering the university on matters of what research is and whom it serves. This volume instead contributes a self-reflective relational methodology and corrects teacher-scholars on the temptation to think they must fix or save incarcerated people. It appropriately presents an alternative methodology rooted in Indigenous theory for prison scholar-teachers to evaluate projects involving incarcerated people.

Those interested in the question of who can and should use Indigenous theory will find great value in the foreword and concluding interview. Here, readers find an ongoing conversation between Plemons and Kristin Arola, an Indigenous scholar and Plemons’s colleague. Arola grapples with the acceptability of a “well-meaning white teacher-scholar” using Indigenous theory (ix). Ultimately, Arola provides a statement of support that Plemons, “who sees the structure for what it is, who knows it’s profoundly messed up, who sees possibilities, and who wants to rethink the work of composition” may productively engage with a model of relationality in Indigenous thinking—if done with care (ix).

Overall, the book does not presume to solve the problem of mass incarceration and provides only ways forward through incremental effort. Plemons wants readers to know that she fears most those who 1) might stop working in prisons due to our inescapable complicity with the coloniality of the institutions, or 2) might see this conversation as too disparate from our Western

intellectual traditions to be thoroughly considered. These concerns might be founded, but the book achieves her goal of starting a conversation that involves Indigenous scholars who disrupt colonialist impulses while assessing the value of prison education. In addition, the book urges readers to remain mindful of the colonial roots of American prison and education systems and leaves readers with a relational methodology to analyze prison education with a self-reflective lens. The volume speaks to writing teachers tempted to think that they must fix or change writing subjects and instructs them, instead to facilitate the relational processes that are already occurring. This, according to Plemons, is how we disrupt colonial impulses.

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### **Works Cited**

- Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. Vintage, 1993.
- Kovach, Margaret. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. U of Toronto P, 2021.
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