Guest Editors' Introduction: In and Out, Fully Human and Not: The Borders and Limits of Community

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Guest Editors'

INTRODUCTION

In and Out, Fully Human and Not: The Borders and Limits of Community

In his 1996 study, "The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability," anthropologist R. P. McDermott describes a relationship between observation and absorption. The essay depicts two people—a new researcher and a young student—each practicing these roles in a school setting. The researcher watches and records, and the boy moves about his classroom, attending to various learning activities until, over and over again, he is caught by the category of learning disability. Or, no matter how creative or skillful his responses to the curriculum are, his teacher and classmates see the rough edges, loose ends, and fidgets before they see competence. The problem: crowding many classrooms are a myriad of categories, such as *gifted*, *smart*, *average*, and, of course, *learning disabled*, waiting to be occupied. The child wilts, entrapped by an institutional identity that frames and limits how completely he can be seen at school. He is fully absorbed by the school as institution, yet not really part of the community of the classroom, which needs outsiders to create insiders, bad students to delineate the good ones. "The community" acts; it defines accomplishment and assigns worth; it is in charge and it guards its borders. As much as we celebrate and often fetishize "community," in fact, "community" is often defined by who is out rather than who is in.

People in prison, for example, are rarely included in definitions of community. Uncounted, nonvoting, offline, hidden by anonymizing strings of letters and numbers, marked as *felons*, *inmates*, and *convicts*, they are even restatused—children are classified as adults and the ill are called offenders. Incarcerated people are surrounded by but always at a remove from the community. This distancing isolates people inside but also has a material impact on their communities of origin. A disproportionate number of the approximately 50,000 people in Illinois

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state prisons originate from Chicago's west-side Austin neighborhood—a community that is almost 100% African American. Each person locked behind bars costs the state money, and just one block in the Austin neighborhood—where Adams Street and Cicero Avenue intersect—"alone is costing an estimated $4 million" annually (Caputo 12): the total price tag to lock up people from the neighborhood of Austin from 2000 to 2011 was $644 million (Caputo 12). These tax dollars were not available to build up "free" communities—housing, health care, or education—and instead built up "million-dollar blocks" (Gonnerman), other neighborhoods with so many people locked up that the total cost of their incarceration exceeds $1 million. When the state divides and cages our communities (particularly those black and brown and poor), the consequences are affective (isolation and alienation) but also material (engineered racialized wealth disinvestment).

Seen as disposable and not quite human, people in prison are rendered invisible. Their deaths, too, are erased. This has wider consequences for our democratic practices. Whose lives matter, and by extension, whose deaths can be grieved, is significant. Why do we officially mourn for the lives lost in 9/11 but not for those killed by US drone strikes or those who experience "death by incarceration" and die in prison? How are the borders of our community drawn to exclude these people? Judith Butler analyzes how our capacity to mourn is "foreclosed by our failure to conceive of . . . lives as lives" (Butler 12). She asks, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? . . . What makes for a grievable life?" and proposes grieving as a way of going beyond "narcissistic melancholia" by contemplating the "vulnerability of others" (20, 30). Attention, mourning, and grief are all necessary to challenge systems of institutional and state violence. To start, we can enlarge *our community*.

In this political moment, claiming all as full members of *our community*, even in death, seems like a radical imperative. When the state seeks to police access to bathroom usage, build taller border walls, kill via drone strikes, and demonize and ban religions and reproductive rights, we resist by *teaching community*, extending and nurturing our circles of consideration and kinship. Young people in Yemen, transgender and gender nonconforming folks in Texas, and undocumented workers in Chicago are our sisters and kinfolk and, yes, our community. Further, we are *their* community. This demand for an expansive vision and practice of community is grounded in the belief that our lives and fates are linked: if one category of people can be judged to be less than fully human, so can—and will—others.

Classrooms have historically been one site where individuals are made socially legible in institutionalizing, confining, and often damaging ways, as in McDermott's description of the capturing of a child by learning disability. But teaching, at its best, is a project of humanization. Acknowledging that each of us has the capacity to learn and make meaning, and believing in our ability to

see ourselves and our students as completely and complexly human, creates the conditions to build the change we need in our schools and in society. On that foundation, perhaps openings and action are possible. This is the promise of an article in this issue, "Turning toward Mashapaug: Using Oral History to Teach about Place and Community in Providence, Rhode Island," by Anne Valk and Holly Ewald, which seeks to use stories from people about place and land, and particularly a local body of water, to knit together a historically fraught relationship between a university and the surrounding community. The university and community engage, too, through tours of the university offered by students who explicitly trace a university's activist history of organizing for justice, bringing it into the present-day community of students, community members, and prospective students in Emese Toth's "Teaching Contested University Histories through Campus" tours.

This example, and others included in this issue, illustrates that embracing flat and ultimately empty narratives of "valuing community" is inadequate. The fault lines and trip wires surrounding the concept abound, shaping our headlines, voting districts, school systems, social media feeds, and more. Instead of claiming to value community, we must continue asking what and who community works for, and what and who it can work against. As we count more in, how do we not rule others out? Who is made more comfortable by the use of this term, and who is alienated, or whitewashed? For example, the collectively authored visual essay in this issue, "Dissenting Images: Engaging the Pedagogy of Protest," explores with images and texts the challenge and the possibilities of community mobilized by the January 21, 2017, Women's March. Yet we also want to remember that these struggles are variations on themes raised many times before: Sojourner Truth's galvanizing speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, "Ain't I a Woman," and the 1993 black feminist reader, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, are two examples that address the contradictions and conflicts entrenched in assumptions of shared experiences and goals. Old tensions, new contexts: what we learn from studying these histories of exclusion and struggles for inclusion—in our classrooms, neighborhoods, and movements for justice—is essential to moving forward, together.

Therese Quinn and Erica R. Meiners,
guest editors

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