

# Breaking Free While Locked Up:

## Rewriting Narratives of Authority, Addiction, and Recovery via University-Community Partnership

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*This article shares first-hand experiences and reflections of individuals who participated in a community writing project between university students and women incarcerated and participating in a therapeutic community (TC) in Washington state. Together, the students and women explored the causes, impacts, and treatment of addiction and designed an online platform to share their writing, artwork, and research about the issues that have shaped their lives. Through the reflections of the participants and sponsors, common themes—such as navigating dynamics of stereotypes and authority, reframing narratives of transformation, and building connections through both empathy and alterity—emerge. This article explores the opportunities and complexities that emerge when unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers collaborate to create a project to help reshape rhetorics not only about addiction and recovery within a carceral setting but also about the potential of a liberatory experience within such a setting.*

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*It is easy for people to stereotype and make assumptions about things that are generally seen as negative. Society has a way of viewing*

*criminals as criminals and not the people they are before and after they committed a crime. I want my story to be about me as me, not me the drug dealer but me the mom, the daughter, me the strong woman who has suffered many traumatic experiences but was able to make it through with my head held high. If my story can show that not all people are the things they've done, maybe, just maybe, the stereotypes won't be so strong.*

—Ms. Steeple, TC author

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

In spring 2018, Felice Davis, former associate superintendent of programs at the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) invited students enrolled in an honors class<sup>1</sup> taught by Dr. Jennifer Smith at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) into the facility to work on a collaborative project. Specifically, Felice wanted to connect the students to the therapeutic community (TC). The TC is a recovery program housed within the minimum-security section of the facility that provides participants with structure, support, and skills to come to terms with the factors and decisions that led to their addiction and incarceration and develop habits for a successful recovery. Five PLU students entered the facility three times and participated alongside the women in TC in writing workshops facilitated by Seattle-based performance artist and educator Taryn Collis.<sup>2</sup> The remaining fifteen students created a website and wrote articles to provide context. The result of this partnership is “Breaking Free While Locked Up,” (<http://scalar.pludhlab.org/wccw-project/index>) a multimodal platform including text, audio, and image that provides a portrait of women working towards their recovery while incarcerated and research about the various issues related to their experiences, such as mental illness, prison programs, and trauma-informed treatments.

- 1 The title of the class is IHON 253: Gender, Sexuality, and Culture. Using feminist, queer, and critical race theories, some of the specific issues that the class examined that semester included incarceration, intersectionality, and revolution and social change in the United States.
- 2 Jennifer and Felice knew each other because of Jennifer's role as a faculty member in the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound, which provides college-level courses within WCCW, and Taryn has been a long-time collaborator with WCCW via various theater projects.

While engaging university students in such interactions can be a transformative experience for them, doing so may inadvertently objectify the incarcerated participants. In “What is Higher Education in Prison?” Erin L. Castro and Mary R. Gould (2018) observe that, at times, “[t]he prison classroom is framed as providing a positive and unique experience for unincarcerated university students with little to no regard for the desires, needs [. . . and], dignity of incarcerated people” (8). With this in mind, the sponsors entered into this partnership with the intention of creating an equitable and mutually beneficial experience for all participants. More broadly, we sought to establish an authentic partnership between university students and incarcerated writers so as to imagine the liberatory space that bell hooks (1994) describes in *Teaching to Transgress*:

The classroom, with all of 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 as the practice of freedom (207).

To “face reality” in this particular project joining unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers is to acknowledge similarities and differences, to wonder at our shared sameness and distinct otherness so that the “breaking free” is a mutual undertaking of responsibility, both to self and others and within individual and structural contexts.

Accordingly, a central goal was to confront stereotypes between unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers via mutual writing activities. By having both groups write and share stories related to addiction and recovery (sample prompt: “What does recovery taste like? What does recovery sound like?” etc.) as well as about how others may misperceive them (sample prompt: “When you look at me, what you do not see is . . .”), we intended to surface commonalities in light of surface-level differences. Another shared goal was to collectively create a platform that would educate a general audience about the experiences of the women in the TC. To be successful, the platform needed to provide the women in TC with

an opportunity to construct their own stories so as to “speak back” against the stereotypes applied to them, while simultaneously enabling the PLU students to use the skills and resources available to them to amplify the women’s voices and provide readers with information about issues surrounding women, addiction, and incarceration. Combining the women’s creative pieces with the expository articles written by the students provided a more complete portrait of the causes and consequences of addiction and incarceration, framing both within a micro and macro-analytic context.

As this project was an assignment for the PLU students, Jennifer outlined several objectives that were unique to them in an attempt to create opportunities to “imagine ways to move beyond boundaries” within their context as university students: to apply the theory read and discussed in class to the design and execution of this project and to examine and reflect upon the boundaries and connections between universities and prisons as well as the general population and people who are incarcerated. To assist students in meeting these goals, Jennifer briefly lectured on excerpts from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* as well as assigned articles about total institutions<sup>3</sup> and how gender shapes the practices and experiences of incarceration.

For Taryn, making this project a “practice of freedom” required shared creative activities; for Felice, this would be achieved by bringing together two vastly different communities; while for Jennifer, drawing out the parallels between prisons and universities set the foundation for the transgression described above by hooks.

This article examines the extent to which the project achieved its aim of providing a transgressive learning experience for unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers as they worked together to reshape stereotypes about incarceration, addiction, and recovery. The article’s structure attempts to reflect the dynamic created by the project sponsors, in which the voices of the incarcerated writers and PLU students direct the content and structure as much

3 Total institutions, as defined by Erving Goffman (1961), are “places of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life” (492).

as possible within the mediated contexts of being in a prison or a university class.<sup>4</sup> Through their reflections, common themes—such as navigating stereotypes and dynamics of authority, reframing narratives of transformation, and building connections through empathy and alterity—emerge and reveal the extent to which the project achieved its overall aim of creating a mutually liberatory space.

## **MISCONCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES: “WORTH GETTING A SECOND CHANCE”**

While one of the primary objectives of this project was to provide the TC authors with a platform to represent themselves and confront stereotypes that the general public has about women, addiction, and incarceration, the PLU students needed to reflect on the stereotypes they held as well as place those stereotypes within broader ideologies of privilege and oppression and recognize how this dynamic shaped their partnership with the TC writers. Only then could they confront “important questions about how to support incarcerated women’s self-representation and critical literacy in ways that more directly effect redistributions around power over writing and representation and that build solidarity between prison insiders and outsiders” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 70).

Before entering WCCW for the first time, the PLU students listed the stereotypes about addicts and incarcerated individuals that came to mind. These included the following: the crimes that people who are sent to prison commit are really severe; a person in prison doesn’t have any ties to the outside world; people with addictions who go to prison just go through the motions and want to get out and not recover; and addicts started using recreationally and not as a reaction to trauma or recovery from injury. They then reflected on the sources of such assumptions, since none of them had had direct experience with incarceration, and it became clear how popular culture shaped their perceptions of incarceration and addiction. Even the students who had some experience with addiction admitted that they too felt that the stereotypes carried a kernel of truth. The statements below reflect how the PLU students and the TC writers understand

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<sup>4</sup> The TC authors’ and PLU students’ quotes are included with their permission. Also, some of the TC authors chose to use pseudonyms.”

these stereotypes, their relationship to them, and how individual stories have the ability to reshape the boundaries between powerful/powerless, worthy/unworthy, and authority/novice—among many others—that stereotypes are meant to build and maintain.

I held some preconceived notions before entering WCCW and meeting the women of the TC program. I expected cold and callous attitudes, products of the loss of autonomy and freedom while in prison, and a distance between “us” and “them” that no amount of scholarly articles and conversation could cross.

—Tess Olson, PLU student

[A]ddicts and addiction are still viewed negatively, and in my opinion, addicts are viewed as people who are no longer worth anyone’s effort, time, or money because they are never going to change and are nothing more than a thief, an uneducated, unemployed individual, instead of the truth—that most addicts suffer from extreme amounts of trauma and abuse and are worth getting a second chance.

—Missy Dee, TC author

To me, the authors’ identities are found in their stories. One thing that is interesting about being in the website group was that I never got to see the authors. All I had to go off of was their words. Yet their identity was clear to me; the love or ferocity or forgiveness that they shared was who they were and I needed nothing else. Their identities became something new, they left the old categories behind.

—Kristin Ringstad, PLU student

To me, sharing my story with PLU made me think that no matter what I said, or how I explained it, I wasn’t getting judged or looked at funny. It made me feel comfortable as well hearing some of their stories; it was inspiring because I was able to hear that how they thought of incarcerated people was really how they looked at it before, and now they have a better look and are wanting to change their way of thinking.

—Ms. Campos, TC author

Thus, having PLU students explore such stereotypes and reflect on how they inform their perceptions of the women with whom they were about to collaborate as well as having the women reflect on what the PLU students may be thinking about them were both essential to setting the stage for an ethical partnership. After doing such work, the participants were primed to potentially “effect redistributions around power over writing and representation and [...] build solidarity between prison insiders and outsiders,” as described previously by Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015).

## **AUTHORITY, SELF-REPRESENTATION, AND ADVOCACY: “TELLING STORIES, NOT STATISTICS”**

Prison writing programs, specifically those that bring university students into the facility, must facilitate the act of authorship within complex and variable power dynamics, where incarcerated writers have limited authority and university students carry significant privileges in with them. As Plemons (2013) describes, while “[t]he rules of the PIC [prison industrial complex] may, over time, be negotiated, [...] they cannot be ignored, because when they are, the punishment comes back—every time—on the incarcerated men and women who choose to risk community partnership” (45). Still, such writing programs can be powerful tools for enabling incarcerated individuals the opportunity to speak back against stereotypes; they can also provide unincarcerated university students an opportunity to critically explore the power dynamics of advocacy. Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) suggest four practices to guide literacy work within prisons that reflect a feminist ethic, so as to navigate the complex and compromised context of collaborating with a prison: “support and sponsor women’s contributions to their own self-representation” (70), “build critical literacy about US prison conditions and policy both inside and outside” (76), “accelerate tactical redistributions of power” (79), and “mak[e] space for solidarities” (81). In our attempt to practice this ethic, we directly addressed questions of authority with the PLU students. Felice visited the students before they entered WCCW and shared with them how—despite the fact that they would likely be younger than most of the women they met—they carried significant authority into the space. For instance, how the women moved about was restricted according to where we moved because they were not permitted to walk directly behind us.

While mutuality was a central goal, given the stark differences between incarcerated and unincarcerated individuals, the sponsors sought to establish the incarcerated writers as the teachers—where they were not the object of study but rather were granted authority to speak as experts on their own lives as well as to direct the learning that was occurring. Within this context, the sponsors’ aim was to have the incarcerated writers’ desires to write their own stories and share them broadly shape the project from the beginning—when Felice asked the women if they would be willing to work with PLU students—and continue to do so throughout, while also providing them with “the infrastructure to support publication, to which many incarcerated authors do not have access” (Castro and Gould 2018, 9-10). The sponsors created a consent form for the TC writers to complete and sign that outlined their agreement to have their work published online; it also enabled them to articulate how they wanted their work presented and the name under which they would like to publish. We talked through this consent form with the women and PLU students so that all involved were aware that the TC writers determined the parameters of this collaboration and their self-representation. As Plemons (2014) notes, agency in a prison-education context “rarely takes the form of emancipation, rarely gets to tell grand narratives of victory. [. . .] sometimes it looks like the penning of a political essay for independent Bay area newspaper, but most days it looks like fifteen men in blue shirts sitting around a table writing as fast as they can” (18). Or, in the case of this project, it looks like the TC writers approving the list of topic articles prior to the students writing them, determining the title of the project, reviewing and providing feedback on the draft of the website as well as on their own individual author pages,<sup>5</sup> and outlining who they would like to read their work so that the PLU students could promote it accordingly:

I feel that adolescent youth would be the primary audience that I would like to hear our stories of addiction and incarceration, both for those children who are starting to get in trouble or even as presentation in schools or treatment centers. I would also like to see our stories teach the government and legislators for DOC to

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5 Because we were in the minimum-security portion of the facility, we had access to a computer connected to the Internet and a smartboard and could thus show the women the website as it was under construction.



see that TC does work and is worth spending the money to make happen, as well as employers who may make hiring decisions based on criminal history. Also, family members who are affected by addiction, to understand the disease and what their loved ones are going through.

—Ms. Gee, TC author

To people who are hurting and don't know that they are *not alone*. Even if my story could save a lost soul or help someone that sees no future, no hope, or worse, no love. Opening up to strangers whom I don't know might open up a door to recovery or better a hope, a wish, or a dream. I also hope that most who need to know are people who were victims of crimes.

—Ms. Griese, TC author

Additionally, during the first meeting, the women in TC told the PLU students that one of the most important actions they could take for them is to serve as advocates. The PLU students discovered a sense of purpose within the project once they were assigned this role, learning that—despite their privileges and status—they were not in the WCCW to “teach” or “help.” Rather, they were given a charge to complete on behalf of the TC writers. In this way, the project sought to push against the boundaries delineating teacher/student and authority/apprentice and thus reconfigure the unincarcerated university students’ engagement with incarcerated individuals so as not to solely be siphons but to create a university-community writing partnership that becomes a kind of “creative resistance [. . . because] the resistor retain[s] ownership of—or agency—over the program” (Plemons 2013, 40).

This call to action helped me understand my role in this project not as someone whose voice needs to be heard, but as someone who needs to acknowledge my place within a system of oppression and start actively working to change the system, to no longer remain simply an observer and to help those whose voices have been kept hidden be heard.

—Isabel LaRue, PLU student

After our free-write time, we asked the women what they hoped to get out of this project and one of the words used was “advocacy.” This term resonated with me a lot because I felt like this project had a central purpose: to get these women’s stories out. For them to have a platform and be able to reach those that are struggling with addiction or have been tempted by addiction, and say, “there is hope; there is recovery.” They want their opinions and voices to be heard out from under a society that oppresses them.

—Annabelle Falloria, PLU student

Yet the extent to which we achieved such “creative resistance” remains unclear. “[T]he unstable notion of ‘consent’ within carceral facilities” (75) described by Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) inevitably remained by virtue of the setting. The sponsors created the schedule for the project, set a loose agenda, and crafted prompts; while we sometimes created the prompts in collaboration with the PLU students or TC writers, we still selected which were ultimately used to generate writing. Additionally, the PLU students were participating in this project by virtue of completing an assignment, so their ability to “consent” was also mediated.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the issue of who held ownership or agency over the program—between the sponsors, PLU students, and TC writers—remained murky even as it sought “tactical redistributions of power” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 79).

## **NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: “I BEGAN TO TAKE OFF MASKS OF SORROW, REGRET, GUILT, AND SHAME”**

Because narratives of transformation written by incarcerated authors can both fulfill expectations of “prison writing” and carry the seeds of resistance and critique, they provided a starting point for project sponsors to introduce occasions for reflection on structural inequities. Erica Meiners (2007) summarizes such stories in *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*: “I was born; I had problems; I made the wrong choices; I was apprehended by the police; I was incarcerated; I found God and He helped me. And . . . my life is now on a better track” (139). This narrative is well-worn as it fulfills the broader public’s expectations of what should be happening inside

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6 Unlike the women in TC, they were not asked if they were willing to participate in the project. Rather, their consent was assumed when they enrolled in the course.

of “correctional” facilities, thus justifying not only their continued existence but also their proliferation. Yet, such a narrative may be what incarcerated authors want to communicate, particularly to their families, friends, loved ones, or the people harmed by their actions. This story of transformation may be, as some would say, the author’s “truth.” Many of the stories shared by the TC authors echo the narrative of transformation. As Taryn notes: “What has always struck me about the members of the TC is their desire to have others learn from their mistakes, to have the cycle of addiction stop with them. They know that numbers are only a portion of their story and that narrative and creative expression are necessary to put a face to the numbers.” The TC members chose to write these narratives because they reflected the work in which they were embedded on a daily basis. The TC program involved significant writing and reflection, so completing such activities with the PLU students came easily to them. Plus, they were proud of the work they were doing to change their behaviors and wanted to share those stories not only with loved ones but also with politicians and policymakers who could support such recovery programs.

Plemons (2013) offers a way for literacy program sponsors to think about such narratives: “For me, however, narratives like that of Jackson [transformation narratives] significantly complicate the genre, calling for a ‘both/and’ space where incarcerated writers have the freedom to tell their stories as they see it, even when those tellings seem to come back around to worn out myths” (46). Part of engaging incarcerated authors is enabling them to write what they wish to write, to have the choice in an often choiceless living circumstance to express what they need and want to express.

However, because the women’s stories were framed on the website alongside articles about trauma, mental illness, addiction, etc., the intention was to communicate that these authors did not find themselves in TC solely because of their individual character. Rather, the audience is invited to consider how a complex combination of individual and social factors shaped the trajectory of their lives. The intention of such contextualization was to mitigate the impact of an “individualized ethic that focuses on the women themselves, who are in need of either therapeutic or rehabilitative transformation, rather than on broader social or systemic analysis” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 74).

I came into prison scared of what I was about to experience. By the grace of God and the stipulations of my sentence, I was placed in Serenity TC treatment program. During my time so far, I have had the chance to let go of all that had been weighing me down. Slowly, I began to take off masks of sorrow, regret, guilt, and shame. Also, unload the baggage of past traumas. Because of this, I was left raw, not knowing who I was anymore, not even what my likes and interests, goals, and dreams for the future were.

—Ms. Gee, TC author

What you don't see is my hope, my ambition, goals, and dreams.  
The blueprint in my mind to execute all of those things.  
It's hard to see the light in the dark  
when you're crying alone and can't find the spark  
that life requires.  
You need that hope,  
clean the grime from the lens of my life  
a telescope.  
My future is not made in the silhouette of my past.  
Failure will not pervade tomorrow's forecast.  
This forward step is the first  
not the last.

—Ms. Moses, TC author

Further, more often than not, the TC writers framed themselves and their peers as the vehicles of recovery and redemption rather than the institution itself, thus reframing readers' expectations of such narratives of transformation.

Here I am. I'm sober, my mind is able to function a lot more, I'm happy, [and] I always have a smile on my face. My family is back in my life [and] I feel so much more complete. [. . .] With the help of my sisters, their stories have changed me and my fight to want this more than ever because I have grown to be someone completely different. I am gonna fight my addiction to stay sober and have a beautiful life clean.

—Ms. Campos, TC writer

We are all brave, courageous women, pushing through our pain toward recovery. We are all stronger than we think. [. . .] To every single woman in this community, I believe in you.

—Ms. Beaumont, TC writer

This was an important feature not only of their own self-representation but also of how they represented their peers, presenting them as women who have navigated various traumas and experiences of oppression to possess power, strength, and positive influence over others.

## **BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH EMPATHY AND ALTERITY: “COMPASSION MIXED WITH CURIOSITY”**

Finally, another dynamic of prison writing projects that warrants examination is the role of writing in cultivating empathy as a foundation for community. Each of the sponsors sought to create such a program because texts are valued, in part, due to their capacity to enable readers to connect with the experiences of people who are different from them. Yet, Jennifer in particular wanted the PLU students to contemplate the limits of empathy, given their privileged position in relation to the TC writers. As Traci Brimhall (2015) notes, “[I]t feels like a form of emotional tourism that lets someone understand another lived experience [yet] it cost us nothing.” Empathy can rely too much on comfort and connection in engaging across difference. This begs the question of empathy’s use when readers are discomfited by a text because it may implicate them in “unpleasant truths.” Paul Burcher (2018), who is a clinician-educator, recommends that alterity be valued as a skill alongside empathy for future doctors. Burcher asserts “that recognition of difference in other people opens me to a world infinitely larger than my own selfish needs, and that this is the ground of my sense of responsibility” (19). Rather than seeking a mirror of one’s self upon which to build a connection, acknowledging another person’s difference provides the opportunity for “appreciation, even awe at the incommensurability of the life of a patient [or person] with my own” (18). Although our article is exploring a different context than that of patient-doctor,

Burcher's argument remains useful in identifying avenues that center difference as a way for unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers to build community—to “face reality,” according to hooks—as well as a sense of responsibility to each other.

The similarities between the participants—such as having some connection to addiction (whether directly or indirectly), experiences of trauma, complicated relationships with family members, and living with and being surrounded by many of the same people day after day—helped to create a sense of comfort, ease, and connection, which was a goal of the project.

The TC and PLU community was compassion mixed with curiosity. Being a part of it definitely empowered me in such a positive way. It gave my struggles a way to become strengths. It has helped me to see that even though we (TC and PLU students) are in two completely different institutions, we are still the same. The compassion and understanding the students radiated was so unexpected and refreshing, it was such a great experience to feel listened to and like I mattered.

—Ms. Skinner, TC author

I believe that the mix between the PLU college students and us as incarcerated individuals is so important to find out how alike we really are. Before being involved in this I thought that I would never relate to a college student or have them be compassionate when hearing my story. I think we created a community of mutual understanding that we are all human and have different experiences but also a lot of the same as well. We have been through some kind of struggles in our lives that make us who we are today.

—Ms. Beaumont, TC author

Yet, the differences remained obvious, if not overtly stated. The TC writers all wore the same clothing; they lived behind barbed wire; they had scheduled wake-up and eating times; their movement between buildings was regulated. The PLU students could leave the gates behind and drive down the road; they could set their own schedules; they could see and communicate with their loved ones

whenever they wanted. While everyone existed within the same systems of privilege and oppression, how these systems demarcated their identities and experiences were unavoidably different and could not—and should not—be erased.

The disturbing reality of the criminalization of mental illness struck me hard and made me reflect upon and be grateful for my privilege to be raised in an upper-middle-class environment where my addictive behavior was able to be addressed by the mental health system through insurance. The uneasy feeling of seeing myself in some of the women I conversed with does not come from a rejection of myself in them and them in me, but rather the acceptance of bits of the women I saw in myself and the fact that, had I not been raised in the environment I had been, I could have likely been on the opposite side of the fence.

—Tess Olson, PLU

Discomfort was ever-present, even if not pronounced. The source of this discomfort, in part, resides in the recognition of irreconcilable differences, which in this instance was “an encounter with someone who shatters the comfortable world that appears to serve only us” (Burcher 2018, 20). Such shattering is necessary to achieve the transgression hooks sees as a potential of education, and engaging differences between us can thus be productive without compromising the connections built through story.

## **HOPE: “A FUTURE THAT ISN’T AS UNATTAINABLE AS WE THOUGHT”**

In concluding this article, we continue to reflect on hooks’s (1994) vision of a liberatory classroom:

The classroom, with all of 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 as the practice of freedom (207).

The title that the TC authors came up with for this project—"Breaking Free While Locked Up"—captures the paradoxical potential of recovery and writing programs that occur behind bars.

The participants' reflections indicate that the project achieved some of its goals, with one of its strengths being the impact it had on students' perceptions of incarcerated individuals and people struggling with addiction. As Taryn describes:

We see students walk through the gates and barbed wire fences with wide eyes hiding their fear behind their curiosity, we see them share and ask questions out of a sense of obligation, we see them struggling to find their role in a classroom among women with long lives full of events that were previously unimaginable. But in the course of only a couple classes, they are drawing parallels to their own lives, seeing their fellow classmates as "writers, authors, mothers" instead of "criminals, addicts, felons." They are looking at events from their own lives that are addictive, but not criminal; dangerous, but that found a stopping point; could have ended them up "inside," but didn't. Seeing your lofty goals of changing the context in which society and those in power view incarceration and addiction change on a small, individual scale makes that goal suddenly not seem so lofty. As I see the incremental change in my students, myself, and those I share my work and these stories with—it seems so very tangible.

Similarly, Felice notes how the women of TC benefited from hearing the students' stories as well:

What came out of that was real, genuine, collaborative learning and conversation. Students spoke about their family experience with addiction or what they had seen in the community around addiction, and incarcerated women talked about their pathways to incarceration and the role that addiction played in those pathways. This is why it is so important to get drastically different types of communities together, to reflect on how easy it is to stick to one community when you are not required to see, meet, or speak to others.



In this way, stereotypes were directly countered, and participants recognized experiences—whether shared trauma or a love of Cheetos—that served as humanizing points of connection. Also, the participants achieved the aim of collectively creating a platform that could educate a general audience about the experiences of the women in the TC. Given the positive experiences of the participants, we are currently in the midst of adding to this project with a new group of TC writers and PLU students. Before the new PLU students entered WCCW for the first time, the women in TC looked through the “Breaking Free While Locked Up” website and provided suggestions for how it could be more dynamic and engaging, which directed the work of the students charged with updating and adding to the site. Additionally, we were granted permission to record two podcasts; the subjects of these podcasts—again determined by the TC authors—are “Stereotypes” and “Favorite Moments & Motivation.”<sup>7</sup> Students interviewed the TC authors, using questions developed by the women, as well as recorded and edited the podcasts. Additionally, a resources page was added to the site, with the TC writers reviewing and approving it before being posted.

While these strengths are significant, questions remain. For one, we have not assessed the impact of the platform on audience. While we assume that the experience of reading about and hearing the women’s stories positively impacted people’s perceptions of addiction and incarceration, we do not have evidence to confirm that assumption. Also, there are questions lingering about the silences within TC. While some women actively seek to be placed within TC, some are involuntarily assigned to the program via the Drug Offender Sentencing Alternative (DOSA). How do the women who did not actively seek DOSA experience TC? Another silence exists in regards to the TC writers who have since left WCCW. We have not heard from those TC writers to know about the impact of having their stories broadly and publicly available. For Jennifer and her role, questions arise about the possibility of being seen as “promoting” or “supporting” the PIC via a classroom assignment. While it is beneficial to have students draw parallels between the total institutions of prison and universities and think specifically

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7 According to Felice, these podcasts are the first to be recorded within a Washington state prison.

about how the concept of discipline interacts in both, conversations about justice, complicity, and power must remain active.

Yet, despite the contradictions of finding a path to recovery within a carceral setting and the complexity in providing a university-affiliated writing program within the walls of a prison, there is also the potential to find communion, to be awed by difference, to heal, to find a measure of freedom, and thus approach the liberatory space that hooks imagines, seeing that such a space might not be, in the words of a TC author, “as unattainable as we thought.”

As this article begins with the words of one of the TC authors, it is only fitting that it concludes with the words of two of the participants on hope and what it means to them and their community.

Today, I really feel true hope that I can escape that vicious guilty cycle of addiction. That unrealistic belief that the relief you seek from your pain will come with that next hit. I feel that relief only when I am honest, when I can ask for help, admit my faults, and be surrounded by my TC sisters who are all doing the same. Fighting for our lives and a future that isn't as unattainable as we thought.

—Ms. Evans, TC author

Pain is growth. I must learn to embrace the pain. Learn from being caught up and released. Release feels like freedom. Freedom is not just a thing when I get out of prison. Freedom, TRUE freedom is found within my heart, my mind, my soul. Only then are the chains broken.

—Ms. Skinner, TC author

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**Taryn Collis** is a Seattle-based performer and teaching artist whose work focuses primarily on social justice and communities who lack access to the arts. Taryn dove into community-driven art when she began touring with Bread and Puppet Theatre and was invited to the Middle East to teach at AlRowwad Cultural Center in Aida Refugee Camp. For the past decade, she has been teaching at Washington Corrections Center for Women, creating original theatrical and written work with incarcerated persons. Taryn has performed and taught with AJnC Dance-Theater, Theater for the New City, the Lincoln Center, Seattle Children's Theater, the Organization for Prostitution Survivors, Jack Straw Cultural Center, and The If Project. She believes that all people, no matter their background or abilities, should have access to the transformative power of the arts and to a community that addresses their needs and highlights their voices. Taryn regularly depletes her bank account buying tickets to *Hamilton*, and considers this vital professional development.

**Felice Davis** is the Chief Program Officer for the Metropolitan Development Council in Tacoma, WA and is dedicated to programmatic excellence. She consistently looks to build stakeholder relationships and to learn about initiatives globally that are working well. Davis worked at the Washington State Department of Corrections in a wide range of roles and last held the role of Associate Superintendent of Programs at the Washington Corrections Center for Women. Davis has worked in both sexual assault and domestic violence advocacy and has well-established connections with stakeholders in the Tacoma and Pierce County area, including non-profit organizations, law enforcement, other government agencies and private businesses. Her drive to help at-risk populations extends to her volunteer activities as well. Davis is an active community volunteer who is currently serving as the Board Chair for Rebuilding Hope: The Sexual Assault Center of Pierce County as well as being the Vice-Chair of the board for the Social Work and Criminal Justice program at the University of Washington. Davis is also a University of Washington Husky alum and a proud mom.

**Jennifer A. Smith** is the Dean of Inclusive Excellence and an affiliate faculty member in the Women's and Gender Studies Program at Pacific Lutheran University, where she coordinates diversity and inclusion efforts within the Academic Division and teaches courses on feminist and queer theories and transgender studies. She has also served as a faculty member for the Freedom Education Project Puget Sound since 2016, co-teaching the first Introduction to Women's Studies course within the Washington Corrections Center for Women and regularly providing workshops on gender and sexuality. She will be presenting her article "'Only to Discover the Encounter to Be Alien': Resisting Identificatory Paradigms with Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*" at the 2019 National Women's Studies Association Annual Conference. This article examines teaching against the literature-as-representation paradigm in a prison college course and how students challenged empathy as a neoliberal, individualistic orientation that eschews one's complicity in structural inequities. When not working, she enjoys trekking around mountains.

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