

# PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

## Str8UP Inspired: Creating Community and Art at the Intersection of Parenthood and Incarceration

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### INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, *Maclean's* magazine published an article stating that Canada's prisons are the "new residential schools" (MacDonald, 2016). This claim, along with the generational impacts regarding the effects of incarceration on Indigenous people, were brought to life in a series of creative writing workshops in the Saskatoon Correctional Centre (SCC). The artists were tasked with producing works of art that ruminated on their personal experience in the carceral space. The prairie provinces stand as startling examples of some of the highest rates of incarceration of Indigenous men and women in Canada (see Malakieh, 2019). This makes the prairies particularly well-suited spaces for culturally specific creative art programs aimed at addressing the colonial legacy that our contemporary prison system represents. In this paper, I outline an artistic initiative that was undertaken in 2017 that enabled and encouraged predominantly Indigenous incarcerated men to reflect upon their present reality of the prison serving as an expression of residential schools and their wider implications for themselves as parents.

As an advocate who has neither been incarcerated or endured systemic racism and criminalization as have the artists in the workshop, I attempt to navigate my role as settler-scholar, facilitator, and editor with particular ethical and methodological approaches that support the artists' autonomy in the process of creating and sharing their work in public space. For example, the creative outcome of these workshops, whether it be a publication, a bedtime storybook for their children or public art display, is directed and shaped by the artists. This initiative was a collaboration between *Str8UP* – an external community program aimed at supporting the well-being of former gang members in Saskatoon – and *Inspired Minds* – an all-nations creative writing program for incarcerated men and women – as a way of creating community within the prison space and providing opportunity for familial interactions, which have been proven to positively influence people experiencing imprisonment. Through an exploration of the process that

birthed the creative writing workshops, the creative pieces, and the public viewing, not only did this initiative have immeasurable value to the artists, but also immense transformative and decolonial potential for the audience that viewed them.

### **PROGRAMMING COLLECTIVES: *STR8UP AND INSPIRED MINDS***

*Str8UP* is a program that began in the 1990's with Father André Poilièvre who was the Lead Chaplain at the SCC. The program grew from a small group of men hoping to change their lives by voluntarily exiting the gang lifestyle, to an intricate community support system for gang-involved men and women, both in and out of correctional institutions in Saskatoon. A key aspect of membership in the program is the sharing of one's story through forums such as written publications, public presentations, creative writing workshops and other similar opportunities. *Inspired Minds*, which began in 2011 as a collaboration between the University of Saskatchewan and the SCC, similarly offers creative writing workshops to incarcerated men as a way to facilitate creative expression and critically reflect upon their circumstances, along with socio-politics both inside and outside of the carceral space. *Str8UP* and *Inspired Minds* came together to collaborate on this and other projects, pooling resources and facilitators to create a greater potential for the workshop and artists.

### **CONTESTED SPACES AND EDITORIAL PRACTICE**

In April 2017, a group of approximately twenty men – both in and outside of the SCC – gathered to create a collection of art that reflected upon the intersection of fatherhood and incarceration. The first few weeks of workshops were spent brainstorming ideas for potential projects and establishing community agreements within the classroom space to ensure that it remained one wherein the men felt they could comfortably and safely share intimate stories about their personal experiences with fatherhood. Allison Piché, in her work regarding *Inspired Minds* and the unpacking of toxic masculinity in carceral spaces, invokes Ludlow's (2004) concept of "contested space" to describe the educational dynamic of the workshops. Contested space is positioned as "a space that is not necessarily defined

by conflict, but which includes room for conflict” (ibid, p. 5). This means that the space provides room to challenge and encourage individual ideas and understandings of the world, which constitute key elements of a transformative learning paradigm (ibid).

In this space, the claim that Canada’s prisons are the “new residential schools” was raised to prompt discussion about the complexities of familial relationships while incarcerated. The men acknowledged the effects that both residential schools and prisons have had on intergenerational knowledge and cultural transmission, familial relationships, power structures and abuses of power, social imbalances, and even language acquisition. The group reached the consensus that they wanted their work to be displayed at an art show that could be viewed by both the general public and potentially their own family members, which informed the basis of the pieces they had produced. Within this understanding, the men created pieces of work ranging from short poems and stories, to songs and sound-bites, to beading and pieces of visual art. Taking these consciously constructed pieces into the public eye, however, was complicated by a number of factors, particularly that the artists would be unable to be present their own work when the gallery space opened to the public. Couser (2004, p. 336), in his discussion of the ethics of collaborative life writing, points out that “the inherent imbalance between the partners contributions may be complicated by a political imbalance between them, often collaborations involve partners whose relation is hierarchized by some difference – in race, culture, gender and class”. Scholar Deena Ryhms (2008, p. 53) adds that this is also due to “the physical and ideological limitations the prison places on the incarcerated writer”.

To address this shortcoming, a collaborative editorial process was implemented that consisted of proofreading, editing, and confirming with the artists that their work was true to their original vision, while taking into account my own position in relation to the creator of the works. For this particular project, an ethical editorial process was as non-intrusive as possible, with few alterations being made and always with the expressed consent of the artist.

## **AN ETHICS OF CURATION**

Once the pieces had been finalized, and consent forms discussed and signed, the final step was the selection of the gallery space and the curation of the

works. The pieces were put on display at Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Programming (SCYAP), which seeks to “offer street-level, youth-centered solutions to crime, unemployment, and youth homelessness by using the artistic interest and inclination of youth as a tool for personal development and redirection toward healthier, happier and more productive lives” (SCYAP, 2011). As a space that functions at a community level to provide opportunities to Indigenous artists and youth across the city, we were able to address the concern, as noted by scholar Andrea Walsh (2008, p. 250), that “before any kind of meaningful visual exchange can take place between Native and non-Native peoples, the dominant perspective must be dismantled and the room be made for Aboriginal perspectives”. Walsh also notes that “the insertion into public spaces such as art galleries of signs other than those that are readily visible to mainstream society spectators [...] can be disruptive to the dominant scopic regimes” (ibid, p. 254) of the art world. I would also add that the initiative disrupted pre-established expectations of what constitutes “art” and “literature”, as well as who can be considered an “artist”. Since “the relation between legitimacy and visibility becomes a fundamental part of the politic of seeing and representing” (ibid), Indigenous art and the use of a formal youth gallery to display these particular Indigenous works provide a sense of legitimacy to the artists, whose voices are rarely heard publicly or in a domain significant to the struggle of Indigenous youth. This venue also provided substantial visibility for the artists’ intimate experiences with the criminal justice system, as did the media coverage from outlets such as the Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* (e.g. James, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Allison Piché (2015, p. 48) states that *Inspired Minds* workshops have the potential to not only provide a sense of autonomy and self-worth to participants, but also “the opportunity [...] to think about and discuss issues of power, marginalization and incarceration from the perspective of their own experiences”. The author argues that this is a victory that extends beyond the lowering of recidivism rates and the learning of technical writing skills that prison-educational programming is often lauded for (ibid).

In viewing works in a gallery space, an audience is – whether wittingly or not – acknowledging the humanity of the creator of the piece of art they

are engaging with. There is a recognition in viewing art of an authority or expertise on behalf of the person who produced it regardless of their circumstances. It is in this sense that the audience yields to the artists' lived experience and is tasked with finding a way to engage with it, although it may not resemble their own.

Pushing back against forms of prison tourism and voyeurism which put incarcerated people on display (see Wilson *et al.*, 2017), this art show – through everything from the selection of the gallery, to the curation of the space, to the nature of the art production – compels its viewers to challenge their own biases regarding the definitions of art, writing and family to engage with intricacies of experiences which may be foreign to them. The viewer of the artwork is forced to confront the assertion that “a convicted prisoner [...] writes from a position of assumed culpability [and thus] does not start off on equal footing” (Ryhms, 2008, p. 49), by acknowledging that the agency through which the artists produced their work is one that extends beyond the confines of their carceral space and can serve to educate the public. Through this collaborative initiative between *Str8UP* and *Inspired Minds*, art, which may once have only expressed the experiences of a single person within the prison, became an active dialogue between those in prison and the public, where preconceived notions of Indigeneity and incarceration can be meaningfully challenged.

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*Jillian Baker* is a white settler scholar living and working on Treaty 6 Territory in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. An active member of the Board of Directors at Str8Up – a local organization that helps to support currently and formerly incarcerated peoples exiting the gang lifestyle – Jillian has been engaged in community-based research for nearly five years. Her work, focusing on rhetorical sovereignty with incarcerated writers at the Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre, is funded by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and supported by community research partners, both inside and outside of the correctional facility.