

**Reflection in Five Moments:
Walls to Bridges at Fraser Valley Institution**
Walls to Bridges BC Collective

ABSTRACT

In Fall 2019, Walls to Bridges held its first class in British Columbia. As inside and outside students we came together, quickly realizing we were part of something special; many of us were keen to stay involved in any way we could, even after the class ended. When we were first called to participate in this journal in 2020, we were desperately seeking connection across barriers put up by prison walls and a global pandemic. The idea was to share our most poignant moments, both inside and outside students, from our first W2B class and reflect on our shared and diverging experiences. In this article, we reach back to the past from the present and connect again over a pedagogical environment that shaped us all.

INTRODUCTION

Back in the summer of 2020 when all was chaos and uncertainty due to the global pandemic, we were offered the opportunity to contribute to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* as a potential project, both to keep our very young Collective alive and to connect with the members we could not easily reach inside the prison. It did not take long for one of our Collective members to come up with an idea and send us an incredible submission: their top five moments from our Walls to Bridges class. Several inside members were going to contribute and one outside student was as well, but plans changed, as did pandemics and prisons, and for a while we only had one member's "top five". After a couple of months our instructor added their top five moments, but then the special issue of the *JPP* was postponed, and this writing was left on our messy digital desks, waiting for the moment to be revived.

We have arrived here at last, excited to make our contributions, but you may be wondering: Who are we? And what is our Collective? The first Walls to Bridges (W2B) course in British Columbia (BC) was held at Fraser Valley Institution for Women (FVIW) from September to December 2019. We were eight outside and eight inside students, and we spent a university semester's worth of time together, making a commitment to show up for ourselves and each other once a week for three and a half months. At the end of each W2B class, the group creates a project. We wanted to create a

strong, consistent presence of W2B in BC, like there was in Ontario, and we wanted to stay connected, so we formed a Collective in a similar fashion to the Collective at Grand Valley Institution for Women – similar, but unique, as we are unique. A new Collective, especially one striving to work across boundaries and borders, is in a particular sort of flux and change. As the pandemic closed the prison to visitors and some of the members of the original group went on their own paths for a variety of reasons, we began to look for new ways to work and be together.

To honour the work of our Collective members, particularly those who do not have the capacity to participate at the moment, we are grateful for the opportunity to showcase their thoughts and insights on what makes a W2B class meaningful, poignant, and resonant for months and years afterwards. Below are three submissions of our “top five” moments, un-edited except for adding the name and approximate date they were written at the top, with the occasional footnote for clarity. We have decided to let the original authors speak for themselves and to each other, and to you, without interlude. Thank you for reading.

COCO’S TOP-FIVE: SEPTEMBER 2020, FRASER VALLEY INSTITUTION FOR WOMEN

Greetings from purgatory. My name is CoCo. The concept of a top-five list reminded me of that feel good movie from the 90s, *High Fidelity*, starring *John Cussack*. The basic premise of the story was him living his life in and out of relationships, and describing his life in a series of top-five lists. This cult classic got a reboot in 2020. Now fully modernized and genderized, with the protagonist switched to a female POV (point of view), played by Zoë Kravitz. This format intrigued me with all its dualities that paralleled our experience in W2B. As a transgender person with the inner fluidity of free-flowing prose, the reader can imagine my monologues narrated by either gender. We are taking the key ingredients from both *High Fidelities* – i.e. monologues with “real world” attitude, old and new school POVs, gender role reversals, tragedy versus comedy, and making a hangover soup with said flavas, including all the nutrients to make a body feel... somewhat able to face the day. This is our twist on the ethnographical style, we hope you like it.

As with most of society living in this linear world of clocks, deadlines, and appointments, we formatted the list in chronological order. Starting

from the very beginning, the prequel to university dreams. Before any of us ever met, before the class was chosen, to the last day of graduation. FINDani and Froggy.¹ We are students of Walls to Bridges (W2B) and also prisoners of Fraser Valley Institution (FVI). We recently received a telegram from our fearless leader Nyki, asking for volunteers to write about our experience with W2B for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* or as we like to call it Jo-PoP. We liked the ethnographic style Nyki suggested, but we needed a hook. Dani came up with a top-10 list of our most poignant moments of W2B. This immediately received its first edit to a top-five.

5) Pre-Class:

Events Leading Up to Orientation

I first heard of W2B around July 2019, from my teacher Barb. She told me there were university students coming to FVI for a credited course. I found this slightly outlandish until she handed me the info sheet. I read the deets with a sense of curiosity, then wrote the 750-word essay explaining who I am and why I would be a good prospect. I wrote the prerequisite, and quickly forgot about it, not expecting to get in.

Around this time the story of my life took a serious spiral in the form of flaming dog poo, several consecutive bags of it. The primary source of most of it was my fault for getting caught with an illegal substance (shatter), with ion traces of heroin (bullshit). Secondly, because of said substance, I was immediately expelled from DBT (Dialectic Behavioural Therapy). This is an essential program to cascade out of the system. Thirdly, my ETAs (Escorted Temporary Absences) were postponed indefinitely, therefore, delaying my plans for day parole. The fourth flaming bag was getting fired from my job in the IMC (inmate committee), thus affecting my pay levels, to zero for six weeks, then to level D pay² until I found another job. The fifth and unrelated issue was the messy break-up of my relationship. Not only did this have case-management consequences, I was all aboard the emotional “Heart Break Express” that left me reeling for a very long time. Oh well, c’est la vie. There you have it folks, a top-five *within* a top-five (in your face Dani & Froggy).

Anywho, it all sounds so fraught, even a little bit amusing now that I am not living in the midst of it. At the time I was completely overwhelmed, in my darkest days. On what was probably a rainy day I trudged to the F-Building to check my mailbox, and what do you think I find? Yup you guessed it,

finally some good news. A letter of acceptance from W2B, welcoming me to the upcoming *Human Geography course "Through a Carceral Lens"*! Like a life-saver flung to my last gasp, that is how I remember W2B; as the only good thing in a world of crap. I kept hanging on, out of curiosity. The possibility that something good, something constructive was about to happen.

4) First Day with Outside Students:

My Battle with Social Anxiety

Okay, so everyone in the pedagogy knows my story. For those reading Jo-Pop for the first time- imagine a transgender person who is not the least bit "passable" (self-esteem issues). At the time I was in my 25th year of incarceration (institutionalization issues). For those reading between the lines, I was not the poster-girl for social interaction. First impressions are my greatest weakness, and the first day was a whirlwind of faces and sensory overload. It was like diving from a height I had not done in a very long time. I knew I could do it, I was just so out of shape. I was belly-flopping all over the place. Some of the other girls looked shy in a charming sort of way; this was not me.

Kirsten and Nyki³ started the class with a series of icebreakers, which sort of made things worse. The best thing about W2B is the pedagogy, the circular shape of class. There are no rows, no front of the class power structure. The circle puts everyone on equal terms. I have experienced this in my Indigenous culture, where this method of teaching is in reference to the circular shapes and cycles of life. I never experienced this in an educational setting before and the difference is huge. In a conventional classroom I would have been in the back row slowly disappearing, I knew social distancing before COVID was ever heard of. The circle brings everyone together. It promotes equality on all levels: races, cultures, genders, sexuality, inside and outside students. Humanity in all shapes and sizes are represented and celebrated in the circle.

3) Writing Our Papers:

Doing the Work at a University Level

The class was structured over a three-month period with three major assignments in the form of eight-to-twelve-page essays on whatever subject matter we chose. In between were weekly articles and a textbook broken

down in smaller assignments and group discussions. For some, the three papers were the mountains that “had” to be climbed and Kirsten, our Capilano prof, was our much needed Sherpa. For me personally, I was fully geared to write. English has always been my favourite subject. I am the opposite of mathematics. I am left side brain, creative, and feminine. I am much prettier on the inside (spiritually that is).

I did have some misgivings on the “technical” aspects of writing at a university level. I had problems reigning my allegories, those emotional tangents that wanted to run amuck. I was constantly editing and re-editing. I had to learn to write outside my comfort zone. I was learning to write the facts of highly emotional content without getting bogged down in morbidity.

The danger behind any good protest is getting lost in the “victimization” of it; even when the ways and means of genocide are brutal beyond belief. The writer must maintain a semblance of controlled rage to match the cruelty of the oppressors. Writing from a factual cold hard stance, interspersed with subtle shifts of controlled emotion is empowering. This disciplined method makes finding solutions possible. Power structures are more willing to work with a resisting force when the language of legalese is implemented.

All three of my papers were based on Indigenous issues. Historically, two spirits were a warriors’ ally and I really wanted to represent the culture. I presented the past race relations as facts with the inevitability of change. These issues are super complicated and someday it is all going to get resolved. Believe it.

2) The Gelling of Group Dynamics:

How the Pedagogy Became Larger Than my Hang-ups

For many years my regular institutional conversations consisted of war stories glorifying my past; drug use, money making schemes, violence and blah, blah, blah... I am so over jail house politics, yet still find myself embroiled out of sheer spatial limitations and habit. Later, after a lengthy bull session, I will laugh at myself for playing this tired game.

I took refuge in the pedagogy. For that one day a week I had a ticket – a front row seat to really good conversation. I read all the weekly articles just so I could keep up to the debate and the examination of issues that had everything to do with modern relevant concerns. The deeper our class got into human geography, the more I was able to forget myself, becoming fully engaged in the subject matter. Sure, I still suffered the odd panic

attack, this is normal institutionalized behaviour. The pedagogy reminded me how comfortable I have become with prisoners. I have been in places where gossip literally kills. In FVI it kills you emotionally and whatever character you have left. The constant underlying sense of distrust-escalating to outright aggression. It is extremely hard to find real friends. When this mentality becomes natural, it becomes harder to make it on the outside; hence, the vicious cycle of recidivism.

One thing I found interesting was when we broke into smaller groups, then reconvened to discuss individual group topics. I never found myself in a “weak group”. Every time, every group had good dynamics equal on every level. This was the power of the pedagogy. In a conventional class, groups would have been separated by racial clique, social pecking order, or monetary standard of living.

For me, the class started to gel around mid-term, maybe because we started talking about the graduation very early. Discussing the impending end made me appreciate the journey more and more. From mid-term to graduation I had this “sense” that our circle was boarding a higher, faster plane of learning. Maybe it had more to do with our differing institutions coming together in a spatial place, so out of the box (pardon the irony) that it set some of us free. For the outside students, maybe they looked at their freedom with new eyes, becoming more grateful when they saw how controlled and regimented the inside lives are. I wonder if anyone else felt this. There was a good vibe flowing in that room that made me want to do better. If some people did not get it, I apologize for your lack of perception and I do not mean that as an insult. After all, many people have full lives and families and other distractions, it is understandable. For me the pedagogy became larger than myself, in that my loyalty to the whole enabled me to overlook pettiness. Any disagreement can be squashed out of respect for the shared experience that was and is exceedingly better than the current day to day bullshit.

1) Graduation: The Dreaded Last Day Goodbye

Aaah, the bittersweet success. Graduation and everyone going off in separate directions. Some of us becoming doctors, entrepreneurs, and website designers. Some of us getting parole, starting a moped rental business in some tropical non-extraditional country, and hopefully never coming back to prison. Sure, I was filled with that sense of accomplishment. My writing

abilities improved. I learned much new information from the dozens of articles we read. I felt intellectually capable of keeping up to a room of intelligent people. I was going to miss the people.

Yes, anti-social, pessimistic little ol' me. Even though near the end I confided to the group that I would only make rare appearances due to my agoraphobic issues, just to know the circle was strong without me, that it still existed was comforting. Then COVID-19 invaded our lives and I sensed this slow deterioration of the circle. The inside students who all had jobs at the dog kennel were now unemployed. Their sense of purpose and love for their work gone, their morale shaken. The almost complete disconnect from the outside students grew farther each month. I would hear snippets from Nyki and Kirsten and really appreciated Emily adding her thoughts to the newsletters.⁴

It felt like just another example of “nothing good lasts forever”. I get it, universe. Be strong, whatever does not kill you makes you stronger, life goes on. Jolly good then. I have been living these clichés for years now, but this bothered me on another level. I was just about to call it another failed social experiment when I got a letter from Nyki saying she is organizing authors and poets, along with their published works, and that these new members will be in discourse with our outside students. She wrote that there may be new writing projects and letters. I was over the moon with this news and hope to hear more. Keep me posted Nyki.

Anywho, I digress. The grad ceremony was all right. I am not much for crowds. Small talk for me is similar to pulling my teeth. Fortunately, I was distracted by an Indigenous professor from Capilano, who I was happy to let do most of the talking. He saved me from that awkward mingle shuffle. Everyone from the class remembers the camera fiasco, as the pictures prove. I look like the bride of Frankenstein. I smiled for the first ten seconds when she could not take the shot – so I look perplexed from several different angles. Oh well. As the guests dispersed leaving just our class, the real party began. Thank you Guilianna for remembering my song on the sound track you made. The chatter was upbeat as we filed from the gym under a plum dusk sky. In that random way lifelong memories are instilled. It was that short walk back to our classroom I remember as one of the highlights, the atmospheric pressure was sizzling with “real life energy”. The way I imagine it exists beneath the insulation of everyday fears and hang ups. It was a rare moment.

The comfort food was great, catered by people who know how to cook. I appreciated Roz taking the time to warn me of my first taste of wasabi. The banter was light and a lot of fun. I finally reached the pinnacle of “good social skills” and it only took 2½ months to destroy 25½ years of egomania. All it took was a solid group of people. Rehabilitation is possible, folks. Of all the programs I have taken over the years, nothing is more helpful to long-term prisoners than “real people” (not just prisoners), working towards a common goal. The big difference is you are not learning from a book to live life. In W2B you are living life and learning simultaneously. Each week I was tweaking my communication skills, figuring out improvements on the fly. Sometimes I had to apologize for things I said. My humour is a thumb in the eye, hit or miss. I was learning some punch lines are better left unsaid.

Life skills normal people take for granted I was suddenly aware of. Like individuality is cool in its proper place and time. That community supersedes the lonely self. Unfortunately, narcissism is the reality prison promotes. The looking out for number one mentality because prison lacks that sense of “community”. This sense of isolation is the worst form of punishment one can inflict on a human being. Statistically, parole boards rarely release prisoners from maximum-security, because “isolation” – literally and figuratively – decreases as the prisoner cascades through the levels of security. Weirdly enough I have never seen this picture so clearly before.

Now, my emphasis is on social skills and living well with others. This is the new focal point in my comeback and return to the mainstreams of life. I am learning to concentrate on the positives. Walls 2 Bridges, AA meetings, Indigenous events like sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies. These groups are an oasis in the desert. This is what I do. This is how I stay alive.

KIRSTEN’S TOP-FIVE: NOVEMBER 2020, CAPILANO UNIVERSITY

1) Pre-class: Events Leading Up to the Course

The first BC Walls to Bridges course at the ‘women’s’ prison in 2019 was the culmination of immense amounts of work prior to the course, which included several years of negotiations with VP, deans, admissions, registrars, and departments. Establishing the first Walls to Bridges course in BC was also facilitated by the already-established educational connection between the prison and the university. Previously, Capilano University had established

an educational connection with FVI, which provided momentum for the Walls to Bridges course! Starting in 2014, we had begun to offer several drop-in university classes, discussion groups, and a book club. We also had held one course (on poverty in Canada) involving three outside students from Capilano University and also UBC. This created an educational connection between the prison and the university. Then in 2016 we were approached by W2B to see if we wanted to engage with their program. Two prisoners had transferred from Ontario to BC and brought with them their experiences with W2B at Grand Valley Institution for Women in Ontario. We agreed to work together.

The biggest moment for me was when our small university agreed to fund the first for-credit university class at the prison and to be able to bring in folks from the outside! After much effort and because of our previous educational connection, we were able to offer a Human Geography 100 course using the W2B pedagogy! This made the immense amounts of work leading up to 2018 all worth it. It also meant a chance to break down the isolation that prisoners face, as well as build connections and reduce stigma. In turn, those experiencing incarceration have a lot to offer the non-incarcerated public in terms of knowledge about the prison system from a perspective that is often not heard.

I was immensely excited at the prospect of connecting outside students and inside students, but it meant that choosing the ‘right’ mix of students was integral to building a ‘safer’ cohesive learning environment. Given that this was the first time a W2B-based course was being offered, I knew we would all be under the spotlight from both the prison and the university. We really wanted this to be a success!

2) Inside Students: Office Hours

One of the highlights for me was my weekly office hours. Once a week, I would head to the prison to be able to offer office hours for inside students – usually one-on-one but sometimes a couple of students would come. I adored these interactions. We usually went off topic, laughed, talked about our struggles, but we would also focus on the weekly readings or an upcoming paper. It was in these intimacies where I saw knowledge: knowledge about oppression; about speaking one’s mind; about how to support one another. It affirmed for me how the knowledge of those ‘inside’ is knowledge that does not need to be consumed, analyzed or translated, but just supported

and related to – as knowledge that is equal to any other knowledge form that we might read about or study in class. I considered it a privilege to be able to connect one-on-one with inside students.

3) An Inside Student and Class Papers

Every Friday, I went to the max to support one of the inside students. This particular student had a thirst to learn and to read articles that were theoretically dense and triggering – such as Sherene Razack's (2016) *Gendering Disposability!!!*⁵ The articles seemed to provide a new perspective. Having never written a university paper, this student worked *very* hard not only at sentence structure, grammar, and composition, but also at understanding theory and then applying it to her lived experience – not an easy task.

The student's papers were hand-written – two copies, one for her and one for me. We would spend our entire allotted time going over and editing the paper. Then a few days later, in class I would receive another hand-written version of the paper that again I edited and returned to the student. Many hours were devoted to writing these papers, not to mention the work of reflecting on difficult material (without privacy) was something to witness. Eventually, in our last office hour together, and before the last paper was due, the student arrived without her rough draft. I was surprised. The reason given was that the student felt that they had now learned how to write a paper, how to organize the paragraphs and topics, engage with the theory and they no longer needed assistance. It was moving to see how with a little bit of academic support, and gaining some academic tools, this student could excel. What was more striking was how hard this student worked. And despite dealing with maximum-security, it became obvious that some support and connection can enhance learning and academic skills.

4) Smudging and the History of a Struggle

In one class, after a particularly hard week, two of the Indigenous inside students suggested that we smudge. Despite some resistance to this, most felt that it was important to honour the teachings of the students and of the land. I also felt it was important to honour this request because being allowed to smudge inside a prison was the result of the hard-fought, prisoner-led struggle for spiritual freedom in prisons. The Native Brotherhood movement began in 1964 at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary and spread quickly across

Canada given the practice of involuntary transfers of prisoners. The Native Sisterhood emerged in 1976 at the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) and took up the struggle also. The struggle for spiritual freedom (like smudging) was influenced by the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, including the American Indian Movement, some of whose leaders were themselves incarcerated in BC. I always want to remember the people who struggled for Indigenous spiritual freedoms inside. Some of them are still inside and have given up hope of getting out. Some of them have passed on. They all brought about a vision that has yet to be realized. The struggle has reverberations in all prisons across Canada – even to this day. For many inside students and certainly outside students, this was an unknown history, but one that needed to be taught, learned, and honoured.

5) Outside Students: Our Freedom!

This is not a specific moment or incident, but I learned more than I ever expected from outside students, particularly on our drives home from the prison – even our gas station pit stops. Almost instantly the outside students became deeply committed to inside students by regularly spending time together meant that everyone could find points in common. This relatively simple act became significant as it was a building block to create a community of learners. This idea of the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and of a criminalized ‘other’ was challenged. Every week when we left the prison there was a sense among us of being disoriented – the forgotten cell phones and papers in my van attest to this! – by what we had learned and from the experience of being in a carceral space, even just for a few hours. As CoCo (a former inside student) suggested, we all looked at “our freedom with new eyes, becoming more grateful, when [we] saw how controlled and regimented the inside lives are”. We started to become aware of our privilege of not being incarcerated.

CATHEE’S TOP-FIVE: JULY 2022, COLUMBIA PLACE HALFWAY HOUSE, NEW WESTMINSTER

1) Security Meets Normalcy

It was so embarrassing. Absolutely mortifying really. Two of our women were patted down in front of the class for an imaginary offense. One of the women brought a lighter to class and handed it to our maximum-security prisoner we had in our class. She used the lighter to light smudge so we

could do a spiritual opener, to start the session. The CSC teacher called the guards. That was impactful. Even more impactful was the way the class handled the invasive action... we did it together. We went back to the original purpose of our pedagogy... to create non-hierarchical connections in a place of hostility. That in itself was an act of subversive disruption. We went around our circle, the safety of our pedagogy, three times and put our emotions, experiences, and thoughts into the middle of the circle where they connected in a place of positive energy and vibrations. It was extremely beautiful and I was so proud of all of us.

2) An Unexpected Ear

The first time an outside student listened to me. Wow! They are taking my opinions into account. They are not scared of me. They do not treat me like I am a criminal who committed a heinous crime. They are acting like what I say is valuable. The impact of someone listening to me is a priceless gift. In prison, I did not get listened to, deeply engaged and heard, about a topic that has nothing to do with my behaviour. I was not heard when it was about my behaviour and was gaslighted on a regular basis. Having someone hear me, not try to pathologize me, was... shocking, and relieving and I felt it in my diaphragm; the big thunk of realization that I might just be a member of society. It almost seemed surreal. When I long for something to happen, and it finally does, I feel disconnected from it at first; just for a few seconds, like I am in a movie. Then reality comes crashing back and this time, I came back to a welcoming body language, kind eyes, and excellent energy. The experience of being listened to was so new to me that it was almost frightening. I thought, "when will the prison take this experience away? Nothing this amazing happens in prison and if they know... they'll take it". I decided I had to treasure the listening experience because one day, it will be gone.

To this day, this person is a close friend, and they will always be in my heart for being themselves around me and creating a bubble of safety. Thank you, Shea.

3) Back in Time, Presently

When we participated in a breakout group that studied the names of the original Indigenous places in Canada before colonialism it was incredible, beautiful, and extremely sad. It was a departure because some of us had not worked together before. Someone was not fond of taking notes. They took notes. Someone got anxiety from presenting and public speaking. They

were the person to present. There were four of us and we all did different things in that group activity. This group was not only a point of gathering knowledge, but experiencing the process of doing different tasks, together. This is a process in which many of us are still involved.

4) Instructor Match and Point!

The relationship with my instructor was incredible. I remember instructors being judgmental, gravitating towards the gifted and outgoing. I watched her interact with all of us in a kind, caring, incredibly intelligent way. Everyone was important, everyone was heard. No question was ridiculed or pushed away. Nothing was too simple or stupid, to be asking of her. Kirsten taught me so much about human geography and how it is important to be vulnerable to learn. She taught me to use that vulnerability to push forward and explore unknown topics, emotions, and experiences. She was the vehicle through which W2B helped me see the light of the possibility of release one day. Thank you, Kirsten.

5) Volun-told to Greatness

Our T.A. (Teaching Assistant) taught me, not only the course material, but how to engage others and experience things that were safe enough to be outside my comfort level AND learn and grow. She taught me how to be a part of something as an incarcerated person that was not part of the incarceration. She helped me understand I was worthy of knowledge and could achieve things I never thought possible. These things are invaluable in my life today. Thank you, Nyki.

CONCLUSION

As you can see, while we all participated in the same class, in the same physical space, and at the same time, our experiences, thoughts, and feelings about our time together differ vastly. Yet in reflection we also see and feel the commonalities that left us, at the end of the three months, with a sense of connection, comradery, and shared experience. The variety of our perspectives weaves together closely but does not obscure or obliterate one another – we are complex, beautiful, and unique, and it is these differences that connect us with one another.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To everyone part of our class, thank you. We may not all be in touch right now but we were all part of something special and we hope you're doing well, carrying your own memories of our shared experience.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Dani and Froggy are Collective members who originally planned to contribute to this article, but were unfortunately unable to.
- ² D tier is the lowest tier of pay available for incarcerated people who choose to work.
- ³ Kirsten (Capilano University) was the instructor for our class, while Nyki (FVI) was the teaching assistant.
- ⁴ During the time this was written, the BC Collective was sending a newsletter to Collective members and alumni who were incarcerated.
- ⁵ Razack, Sherene H. (2016) "Gendering Disposability", *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 28(2): 285-307.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The *Walls to Bridges BC Collective* is a group of inside and outside student alumni and instructors from the Capilano University-Fraser Valley Institution for Women partnership.