Education, Gossip and Social Carcerality: Contesting the Liminal Spaces Between Incarcerated Body and Incarcerated Mind

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ABSTRACT

A prison's social geography is secondary to the maintenance of its built landscape but is still a product of intentional design. State apparatuses used to incarcerate create environments for gossip and the weakening of social networks. Gossip feeds distrust as a means of social control. Post-secondary education in prison provides opportunities, reduces recidivism, normalizes behaviours, but also exposes the shadows created by gossip. In the 'inside' classroom, truth is contested rather than manufactured, and relationships between 'inside' bodies and 'outside' bodies emerge. Education can be an intentional act of abolition, one that displaces gossip and disrupts statist social control.

INTRODUCTION

Our paper seeks to explore the social geography of the prison and our abolitionist intervention through a prison post-secondary classroom. The maintenance of a prison's social geography is secondary to the maintenance of its built landscape, but it is every bit a product of intentional design. The same state apparatuses used to incarcerate bodies – the cells, walls, gates, threat of force, segregation – create a fertile ecosystem for gossip and for the weakening of social networks.

The authors, Gerty and Billie, a formerly incarcerated student and university instructor, met in a prison classroom in 2021. After our university course came to an end, we wanted to stay connected and write together. With a small research grant, we set out to explore what the experiences of being in that prison classroom had meant to us. It was important to both of us to continue to break down imposed hierarchies between us and to work across our differences. Importantly, we wanted to validate the lived experience knowledge of Gerty as equal to any other kind of knowledge. Thus, the *process* of writing this paper together was as important to us as the *outcome* of this paper.

Our meetings took place on Zoom – after Gerty's release, she went back to her home province. We began by writing to each other about our

experiences of a semester spent in a Canadian federal prison classroom. The second time we met, we exchanged what we had each written. In subsequent meetings we began taking turns interviewing each other about what we had written for the other. Thus, began our iterative and dialogic approach to our research and writing. Over the next several months we recorded and transcribed our conversations about the prison classroom, about prison life, about getting to know one another and about the dynamics amongst inside and outside students and the instructor. Our friendship deepened along the way.

The italicized excerpts throughout the paper reflect the lived experience/knowledge and insights of Gerty and it was these insights that drove the topic for this paper. We therefore seek to understand the function of gossip in prison, along with its subsequent disruption created by participation in post-secondary education. We felt that we came away with a better understanding of how to enact an abolitionist practice within the total institution of the prison.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Not everyone comes into prison with strong social networks but for those that do, maintaining contact with family and/or friends on the 'outside' (i.e. the non-incarcerated public) is very important. Social networks amongst imprisoned folks are critical for psychological health, particularly if they are maintaining relationships with people who are otherwise healthy on the outside, as this helps set patterns of normalcy and acceptance. Ongoing relationships are the hardest to maintain and to build in carceral settings, but are even more critical given the forced disconnections and isolations that folks inside must endure. This is especially so in a setting where relationships are highly controlled. Retaining those relationships is important so that prisoners have a means to transition back outside and to do so in a supportive way. These relationships would also serve to remind the person who is incarcerated that they themselves are more than just an 'offender' – they have value to other people.

Over time, however, the longer someone is 'inside', the more difficult it can be to maintain those social networks – in part due to the high costs of phone calls and correspondence (i.e. stamps, envelopes and paper) relative to one's prison 'wages'. Invariably, these social networks break

down or start to fade. Friendships and relationships on the 'inside' become increasingly important, and in some cases can be a matter of survival. The isolation and insulation from the outside that occurs for imprisoned folks, however, can also make one increasingly vulnerable to those inside social networks and to inside gossip.

In this paper, we explore the intersections between the physical and the socio-psychological conditions of the prison, between disinformation and education. In doing so, we illustrate how social stress and gossip extends the punishing conditions of carcerality and devalues human connections. Gerty reflects on her experience in prison and in particular how people are treated by staff that contributes to low self-esteem while inside:

> It's not even just what you did, it's the way you are treated every day. They act as if you're contagious and diseased. They don't touch you or your belongings without gloves, and their attitude is if you're lucky, we might be able to fix you, and you might be able to leave here and have a chance at not returning. This messaging is reinforced, over and over, and that's just one example of how depressing this place can be.

As we note in the introduction, conditions of confinement create an environment that fosters gossip and weakens social networks. In the next section, we examine our pedagogical approach. Because of this pedagogy, we found ways to disrupt statist social control as we created a respectful, non-hierarchical space in the prison. The employment of affective pedagogies (Ainsworth & Bell, 2020) within an inside classroom offers a powerful way to disrupt these cycles by creating opportunities for emotional and social connection that cannot be obtained otherwise. Affective pedagogies are ones that recognize the importance of cultivating emotional competency in the learning space. Adapting the Indigenous sharing circle allowed for significant connections across differences (incarcerated/non-incarcerated, instructor/student) to emerge and for deep sharing. Because of this deep sharing in circle, we argue that education can be an intentional act of abolition, one that displaces gossip and disrupts statist social control over the social and emotional lives of the incarcerated.

WAREHOUSING THE MIND AND BODY

Everyone who enters prison has experienced some sort of trauma. The majority of people in prison are poor or lower working class, are survivors of abuse and/or structural oppression, and have very little education (Boe, 2015, n.p.). Not only are people bringing trauma in, but the prison itself is a traumatizing institution that causes harm where those 'doing time' experience isolation, boredom, and lack of connection (Hansen, 2018; Horii, 1994; OCI, 2021). Imprisonment is a layered experience. Prisoners are sentenced, confined and, then while in prison, are punished again via conditions that warehouse (under stressful conditions), that lack stimulation (especially in prisons designated for women), and that severs bodies from social networks beyond the prison wall. Gerty reflects on the sense of boredom and how gossip is part of the culture of jail:

> Gossip is a truly formidable adversary in prison, boredom is wrestled with daily, and gossip can be addictive. It can bully and shame, and it can lead to violence. It is also shamefully enjoyable when there's simply nothing else going on. With little to do and almost nothing productive to do, opportunities to use your mind for anything expansive like creative thinking are non-existent. So, you allow yourself to get caught up in it. You need to keep your mind entertained to get through the day. Inevitably it starts to sicken you. You can pledge to stop participating in it, but, within a short period of time you'll catch yourself enjoying a good tongue wag. The micro community of the prison climate breeds gossip.

Inside, gossip foments and feeds on the absence of truth and the lack of autonomy. A prison's social geography is secondary to the maintenance of its built landscape, but is still a product of intentional design. State apparatuses used to incarcerate create an environment for gossip and the weakening of social networks. Gossip feeds distrust as a means of social control. Gossip feeds on the absence of truth and the lack of autonomy. Rumours and innuendo, mis-information and disinformation result from and contribute to disconnection, boredom, and lack of purpose. More illusory of truth than truth, gossip reinforces and reproduces carcerality.

Despite the stated objectives of imprisonment (see CSC, 2014), prisons are a brutal instrument of warehousing for already vulnerabalized folks

(Mathiesen, 2006). Lives are suspended and time is arrested (see Halberstam, 2005; Luk, 2018) – 'doing time' is not meant to be 'productive'. Altered notions of time (and space) are central to the prisoners' experience where time is regimented, controlled, permitted, stolen, lost, extended, uncertain, and meaningless. Given the isolation of imprisonment, prisoners lose connections with families, communities and with technology, contributing to a sense of being warehoused, purposelessness, and boredom. Gerty experienced that sense of purposeless and boredom first-hand. She distinguishes between absolute time that is marked by weeks, months and years, and her sense of relative time – a more intangible sense of time not moving forward.

> Time passes differently in prison – you try not to count the days. You want to ignore the calendar. You try to stay positive and keep your head up, but it's a lot harder than it seems. It's a mental marathon. It's a weird world in there because every day is exactly the same. You wake up, make your coffee, go to work… Life becomes this nightmarish, "Groundhog Day" thing, and you try to get lost in it, because you want time to pass quickly. We have events that serve as time markers, for us every Thursday we got our groceries for the week so, in your mind, you know that weeks are passing and spring will come again soon.

It is interesting how various seemingly non-descriptive events on the outside, become actual markers of time passing – grocery deliveries highlight an event almost like a clock for prisoners.

Another marker of time passing and of one's isolation from the outside is when a prisoner must deal with the death of a loved one. Gerty recalls that "*in one case, there was the death of a sister, in another, it was the death of a child*". Gerty tells me, however, that there's no guarantee that one can attend a loved one's memorial/funeral. *"Only in some cases – if the funeral is in the same area and not too far from where the prison is – one may be allowed to attend a funeral. But if it's too far, like in another province, you'll not be allowed to go".* For Gerty, this represented "*a serious breach of connection with one's family"*. This has greater resonance for women who are housed in federal Canadian prisons often far from home or traditional territories. Gerty goes on to say:

> …the fact that you're living in a separate world where time is standing still is most evident when you experience the death of a family member or friend. You don't get a sense that they're gone, you're not there to see the flowers, the funeral, or the tears. You don't get to see that they're missing from the place they once were. It isn't a real death for you until you get out and you're able to see that they're gone from the world.

This speaks to the surreal environment that is prison and the way folks experience removal from their lives.

The built landscape of the prison also impacts one's body. Studies have found that traumatic brain injuries and other forms of neurological conditions such as intellectual and learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia, ADHD), and developmental disabilities (i.e. cognitive and adaptive functioning) are more common among incarcerated people than the public (e.g. Han & Nath, 2022). These are often associated with other negative health outcomes such as heart disease and obesity. "Sleep disorders, and overall difficulties with obtaining adequate sleep, are a common problem within prisons" (Han &Nath, 2022, p 2). Writing from the Pennsylvania State Prison, Younker (2023), who suffers from major neurological distress, tells us that the loud clamouring can trigger a seizure episode.

Chronic exposure to noise and light keeps the stress response activated continuously and eventually, it starts to wear the body down, causing mental and physical health problems. Excessive noise and light are reproduced deliberately and according to Gerty, are inescapable.

> If we know that dim lighting and silence can relieve stress and help us to relax then obviously the opposite must also be true – those halogen/fluorescent lights and constant loud noise must produce feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger. Is this a deliberate assault on our senses? Not only is my body locked away but my mind… is being punished as well.

Gerty describes the noise inside:

> Prison is a noisy place, cell doors are slamming shut, announcements are constant, some guards yell into the intercom on purpose as a gesture – of power and control over you. Life in jail is never quiet, never dark, and never private… it gets to you and the pressure affects your emotions.

> It creates angst, bitterness, frustration, and irritability. A lot of people develop very short fuses.

This is echoed by Hann and Nat (2022, p. 2) who suggest that in adults, a lack of quality sleep may be associated with increased rates of aggressive behaviours. Gerty remembers her time in prison and how the noisy environment became somewhat normal.

> The constant announcements are something that takes some getting used to and compounds the pressure you're under. But you have to realize that in prison it's happening all day long in your home. There's an intercom in the hallway outside your room and in the kitchen… everywhere. And every few minutes, someone is called to go to healthcare or visiting. They call movement time, count or lock up. It's something you learn to tune out, but from 7am to 10pm it's constant. After a while you learn to tune it out, but you are working to suppress it whether you're conscious of it or not.

The stated goal of prisons is rehabilitation. According to those with lived prison experience however, they have felt unprepared, for release and for *survival in the real world* (see Jackson *et al.,* 2022; Hansen, 2018; Law, 2021). The 'rehabilitation' Correctional Service Canada (CSC) claims to offer is coerced and creates widespread cynicism. Most programs make sure that prisoners revisit their crime and crime cycle – and one is forced to relive what is usually a traumatic time in one's life. For Gerty (and others), this played on her sense of self.

> It's not really possible to have self-esteem while incarcerated, and if you did have any, by the time you get out, it's gone… they certainly don't do anything to help you gain a positive sense of self, they just go over your crime cycle, your trauma, your abusers. They don't try to find those things about you that you gave up when things started to get hard. They don't say "what did you really love to do before you started down this path?" They want everyone to keep their crime in mind, that's still who you are, who you're always going to be, you're never going to be anything but that person who did that thing.

This focus erases the part of your life that existed before your crime cycle began, even what was positive.

Women in prison are considered 'too few to count' (Adelberg & Currie, 1990), and are thus provided with very few resources and programs. The absence of creative outlets and stimulation create a fertile ecosystem for gossip. Gerty describes this ecosystem as death-like.

> Being warehoused feels like a premature death, you're not living, you're just in purgatory. Inside, women lead apathetic lives gossiping and eating in order to subdue their frustrations and dissatisfaction with this dull and tedious routine. For entertainment we make pizza and bake cakes competitively, and engage in trying to one up each other with our delusions of grandeur, regurgitating stories of how successful we were in our lives of crime.

Gerty critiques the sense of being warehoused.

> We have nothing going on and no opportunities. There's no hope that there will be anything interesting to participate in… no access to real education… so everyone just talks about who is eating what and who is doing who… we just sit around and wait. I was seeking justice for this stolen time in which I was supposed to be paying my debt to society, but what's society really gaining if I return to their streets the same person that left? Surely there's a better use for this wasted time in which nothing is being accomplished except that my BMI is gaining momentum by leaps and bounds.

The state actively and passively creates conditions of social as well as physical disconnection, with few meaningful avenues in which to counteract the social violence within prisons. For instance, despite the importance for prisoners to build connections outside the prison – especially as their release date approaches, this is not given priority. Escorted Temporary Absences (ETAs) are part of one's release plan and they tend to be limited to attending (Christian) church or Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous groups. Gerty comments on working towards her release:

> I worked hard to gain the privilege of having several ETAs a week. Unfortunately, the only options were for support groups or church, which is too bad because it would be nice to make community connections with groups that foster new interests and provide a sense that you're working

> towards building a new life upon release. However, after earning the privilege of being able to leave the prison for outings, they were often never actually provided. There was always a shortage of volunteers to escort us or some other excuse.

While, in the absence of alternatives, self-improvement groups mean a lot, their messaging is that prisoners are deficient. The lack of possibilities for going outside of the prison makes building community connections next to impossible despite this being an essential part of one's release plan.

Despite the importance of connecting with the outside community, this is not supported, as Gerty explains:

> …out of three ETAs a week I think I went on maybe two a month, and sometimes months would go by without being called up at all. ETAs should provide prisoners with the opportunity to build a new life after release, make connections with groups or classes that are fun and enjoyable like art classes or jiu-jitsu. We should be encouraging people to think about life after jail and helping them to build that life. If you're released into the community and you still identify as a prisoner or drug addict, then you will no doubt return to that lifestyle. We need to help people find their new identity, as a student, or artist or writer – whatever it is.

Furthermore, the state actively weakens social networks for prisoners – paying for phone cards is expensive, letters are processed slowly and sometimes withheld, people are put in the SHU/solitary. People are punished even for establishing seemingly normal relationships with one another, as well as for sharing clothes and other resources. Over time prisoners slowly lose the ability to engage with those on the outside and thus their disappearance becomes more complete. At the same time, the limits on relationship-building inside reduce the potential to develop trust in one another, creating fertile grounds for rumour and innuendo. Gerty explains how she survived in this difficult environment.

> 'Inside' gossip is inescapable, you can't get away from it, it's part of every conversation, and you hear and it's everywhere you go… it suffocates you. You have to watch what you say to people – any information spreads instantly. No matter what you say it gets around, so you learn to mind your

> own business, live your own life. If you're lucky you end up with a small circle of friends you trust. After a certain point you have to stop caring what people think. When you first get in it takes a while to learn who to stay away from.

Gossip is ubiquitous in prison and, according to Gerty, it does more than fill the void left when there is so little connection to the outside world. Gerty asserts that gossip serves as a tool for checking each other's social power and for surveillance. Gerty remembers what it means to live under layers of continual surveillance.

> You're under surveillance not only by the prison, by the guards and the cameras, but also by other prisoners. People are always judging you by your associations and actions, by all that you do. It all compounds, all the little things and all the big things… After a while, you get used to it and you don't notice because you're living under different levels of surveillance.

Gerty explains how this surveillance of one another works inside.

> If you go out for a walk with someone new, everybody's talking about it. Why are they walking together? Everyone's asking if you've slept together. Are you together now? You may think it's absurd or say, "Who cares? Let them talk", but I've known women who were violently attacked because of rumours. If the person you're talking to is in a relationship and you're seen laughing together or going into a house together, all of a sudden there's this rumour. Next thing you know, they roll into your house and break your jaw. Because of a rumour. We're under surveillance all the time, by the institution and by each other. It's a layered system of surveillance.

The anti-relational logics of the prison produce an environment in which gossip foments. Gerty asserts that this is intentional and by design.

> It's like a bubble of toxic air – the atmosphere inside is stale – no fresh ideas, nothing new or interesting. All the same old shit. If you deprive people of love and affection and information, they need to feed on something. There's no emotional or intellectual stimulation, and the only

> information you get is what they allow you to see. When you deprive people of meaningful social and emotional interactions/connection it can lead to violence, suicide, mental decay.

THE 'INSIDE' CLASSROOM

Looking back on her time inside, Gerty explains how easy it is to become institutionalized: "*I only served 4 years out of my 10-year sentence, but I had already started to view the prison as my home and started to question my ability to reintegrate into society successfully*". The ease with which Gerty started to become institutionalized in a relatively short time speaks to the importance of post-secondary education within the prison.

Multiple authors have looked at the evolution of prison post-secondary education in the Canadian context (e.g. Duguid, 2000; Munn & Clarkson, 2021). Particularly when compared to more expansive post-secondary opportunities offered in facilities south of the border, access to post-secondary education within carceral systems has been relatively limited in Canada – especially so for women. These initiatives have been marked by periods of growth followed by contraction. Models of post-secondary education that have dominated prisons since the 1970s have played into the 'rehabilitation' of prisoners through enlightened education, only to be followed by a focus on 'punishment' and restricted opportunities.

More recently, small-scale, somewhat disparate post-secondary initiatives have emerged in Canada's federal and provincial prison systems. These range from programs contracted by the prisons themselves, such as in trades and high school completion, to individual courses developed by colleges and universities that integrate students from outside and inside prison into a common classroom.

In 2021, Billie piloted a first-year course at a federal prison. This pilot built upon previous efforts that delivered non-credit learning opportunities (e.g. guest talks and workshops) inside. The piloted course emerged only after years of relationship-building within the carceral system. The pilot course involved 'outside' university students to study alongside 'inside' prisoners' students for one semester. Multiple prison education organizations have adopted this as a model for delivery, most notably Inside/Out, although this pilot course was aligned with a Canadian organization instead. Outside students underwent clearance checks and joined the inside students in the

prison, each week for three hours. Gerty describes what it means for a prisoner to go to a university class, despite still being in prison.

> The classroom was a space that upon entering I shed my 'offender' status and became just a person with a thirst for using my God given right to learn, listen, share, and think creatively. This space is in between the University and the prison, for me it exists outside of my daily world, it is a unique space where I feel safe to express my opinions and feelings without being afraid of their consequences. I even relate to my fellow inside students differently than I do in the yard. In this place we are just students, without the layers of surveillance from the institution and the ones we subject each other to. We can breathe easier in this place and we listen to each other with open minds, eager to absorb everything because we will take it back with us. We will revisit these lessons and readings, we will reflect on them and our conversations, using them to take up as much of our "free" time as possible. For us, this is a precious opportunity to fill our time with something fresh and clean, and new.

Our pedagogical approach drew in part on the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) who developed techniques for giving voice to those on the margins of society. Given the variety of learners and abilities in one class, traditional instructional models of lecture-style presentations would not be as effective in learning and in engaging learners. Instead, in a supportive environment students worked through theoretical readings in various ways: small group projects, artwork and in the larger circle. The circle meant a lot to Gerty.

> In a normal class you have the students who always share and have the answers, and you have the students who prefer to keep their ideas to themselves. In our class that was not the case. We go around the circle and everyone gives their impressions on the theory/lesson. The circle requires everyone to share their thoughts and perspective. Even if you don't understand or really have a grasp on the subject, you express something. This allows you to get to know everyone quite intimately. You also get a lot of different interpretations. Sometimes I started out having a certain opinion of the lesson we were discussing, but after going around the circle and hearing everyone's perspectives, my mind had many different

> opinions on the subject. It gave me the opportunity to understand that everyone thinks differently and to appreciate it. That is the beautiful part of the classroom, you're not what you did or what was done to you, they don't even know your real name and they don't care. They listen and care about what you have to share, and they base their opinions on the here and now. Only the person who shows up to class – only the real you.

The most innovative and change-directed education employs affective and decolonized pedagogies. The creation of affective states for learning is borne from broader efforts to decolonize post-secondary education and integrate Indigenous ways of knowing.

Post-secondary education in prison provides opportunities, reduces recidivism, normalizes behaviours and works towards any of the other expressed goals often used by the state for expanding access (Davis, 2019; Duguid, 2000; Fayter, 2016; Kerr & Bondoux 2019). It can also expose the shadows created by gossip. Education can be an intentional act of abolition, one that displaces gossip and disrupts statist social control. Education – especially non-hierarchical, relational, and Indigenized education (see Fiola 2015; Kovach 2021; Wall-Kimmerer 2013) – claims the right to occupy the liminal space between the incarcerated body and the incarcerated mind. In the inside classroom, truth is contested rather than manufactured, and relationships between inside bodies and outside bodies emerge. For Gerty, the antidote for the toxic culture of gossip is affective pedagogies used in the classroom. She explains:

> …it would be a place of ideas and sharing, of new thoughts to be explored. A sacred space where your jail self can be left at the door, and you can enter as a person who wants to purely be inspired and make connections with other knowledge keepers. Also, to be able to share without fear that it will be held against you at some later date when someone finds the perfect opportunity to blackmail you with your own words.

We used the Indigenous sharing circle to structure our classes. The sharing circle is borrowed from Indigenous pedagogy (Kovach, 2021; Winters, n.d.) and is also part of the model developed by a national organization. Sharing circles are an important structure in Indigenous world views, an essential part

of the oral tradition of Indigenous communities (Raven Speaks, 2012), and can provide openings for deeper sharing. Gerty comments on how the physical space of the circle breeds a closeness among inside and outside students, and it erased the differences and broke down the walls between students.

> The circle allowed us to see everyone. If someone is struggling at that moment or on that day, it's very apparent. Sometimes we talked about things that got very personal and there were very intense emotions involved. After several classes we got more comfortable with each other. We got to know each other very well, and that's when the class really started to take on this quality that we were doing something special. People started opening-up and sharing personal experiences. Some students shared stories that brought laughter and some had the whole class in tears. We experienced things together in that class because of the circle. It allowed us to share from the heart. It also fostered a feeling of acceptance and closeness that I've never experienced before in a classroom. Especially not in jail, where you always have to be on guard and pretend to be strong. We started to feel like a little family because of the emotional connections we were making. I felt like I could trust everyone. I felt safe. We were all very aware that this was a unique experience.

Affective pedagogies (Ainsworth & Bell, 2020) recognize that emotional well-being and learning are interconnected, which are at odds with the lived experiences of prison. The prison environment is designed to produce docile (i.e. law abiding) subjects and to discipline bodies who are deemed non-compliant (Foucault, 1977). Questioning and critique are punishable. That emotional and social health are actively manipulated as an extension of state surveillance and control, contrasts sharply with the intentions of the sharing circles. Winters (n.d.) suggests that the sharing circle's basic purpose is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant can contribute to the discussions, as well as provide a safe place for connection and dialogue. Circle processes are based upon equality between participants – the principle of sharing power with one another replaces having power over one another (Raven Speaks, 2012). Gerty articulates how the circle works against the punitive, and anti-relational and hierarchical logics of prison.

> Taking a class of this nature in prison is so much more than just taking the class. It's the excitement when you see the posting that the class is being offered. The anxiety and effort put into writing your letter of application – hoping that you will get the opportunity to be a part of it. The joy of finding out you've been accepted. The anticipation and wonder of what will be included in the course. The trepidation when you think about the outside students, will they look at us differently? Will they accept us for who we are? Being in the class is exhilarating. Coursework done outside the classroom is a welcomed change to the monotony of regular jail life. The reading and writing of papers involve many hours of reflection and conversation with others who are taking the class and sometimes those who are not. The feeling of pride when handing in your work. Waiting to see what mark you will receive. It's an all-encompassing experience. It spills out into all of the areas of your life, and it's a marvelous way to spend your time inside. Also, is it not the best way you can repay your debt to society? By bettering yourself so that when you do return, you return not as a struggling drug addict, but as an educated member of society ready to contribute.

The circle helped us create a supportive setting in the prison space. In prison, vulnerability is dangerous, yet in the circle we all become vulnerable. It was important to try to foster emotional safety because without it, it would be difficult to create a sense of connection between inside and outside students. The circle requires students to develop emotional competence and for 'inside' students this meant extra work as some live together, some conflict with each other and cannot ever quite separate from one another the way the 'outside' students could. This process required a level of maturity to be able to leave conflicts at the classroom door. For Gerty, the class put a wedge between herself and the prison, something that seldom occurs.

> Once you've experienced the sacred space of the classroom, you open your mind to the possibility that you're more than just what's referred to as an 'offender'. There's much more available and possible, and it can be a turning point for anyone who has had this experience. The grasp of the institution becomes thinner and more decayed, it no longer has a stronghold on you. You're moving away from this place if only at first in your mind. It's the beginning of leaving the carceral system for good.

EDUCATION AS INTENTIONAL ACT OF ABOLITION

…is abolition a metaphor for love?

– Hartman, 2020

Carrier and Piché (2015) suggest that abolitionist objectives have become broader and include not just the prison and criminal justice institutions, but also include the goal of eradicating immigration detention, camps, and mass surveillance. Abolitionist struggles, however, come in different forms and scales, and it is not always about the more ambitious tearing down of the capitalist prison industrial complex (Gilmore, 2007) or about the abolition of the capitalist state (Davis, 2003). Gerty and Billie realized that just as imprisonment is a layered experience, so too is abolition. We saw our growing friendship as a type of abolition. Gerty reflects on this point.

> When it's all said and done, the one thing that's made the biggest difference in my life, isn't the facts or the knowledge from the material, it's the connections with the people that I met in that class. But we had to fight to stay connected. The institution puts so much emphasis on telling us to create supports in the community, but don't support it. As our friendship grew throughout the class, all we really wanted was to continue to communicate until my release, but we were being told it was against policy. You cannot be friends. If university students and professors aren't appropriate community contacts, then who the hell is?

Our abolition was congruent with that of Critical Resistance (n.d.) in that we can enact abolition "in the here-and-now through collective movement, community building, solidarity, art, teaching, and thinking".

Prior to beginning the class, outside students were discouraged from getting too close to incarcerated students. Initially, students were nervous about sitting in a room with strangers in a relatively intimate space. Imprisoned students were concerned about the stigmatization associated with being a prisoner from society at large and about being judged by outside students.

The relationship between academia and those who are studied is fraught to the point that communities have a deep suspicion of, and alienation from, academics (Kovach, 2021). In considering these uneven power dynamics,

our pedagogy took seriously the challenges of working across difference and valourizing the knowledge of everyone involved. Importantly, outside students were not there to 'help' or advise inside students – rather everyone learned together, including the instructor.

Like Harney and Moten (2014, p. 26), we were able to "sneak in… and steal what one can" from the institution. We began to 'steal' what was not meant to be ours: a type of space in the prison; the social relations as we shifted the prison space into a caring, 'safer', sharing space; the focus on differences and the 'us' versus 'them' approach was minimized as we found common ground between prisoner and non-prisoner. Gerty saw the classroom as a type of sacred space, noting:

> The space of our classroom became our meeting place, and we took the time and the space the prison gave us, and we created a network of friends. We did this under the radar and we did this quietly. We knew we wanted to stay in contact, and we knew no matter what they said we were going to. To start connecting people with community – teaching them to think for the future… it can't just all be about what you did wrong…and what your issues were before jail….it has to be more about what will pull people through and past jail… creating a new identity for prisoners is so important (student, artist, writer etc). Jail doesn't prepare you for life after jail. We need to start rehabilitating people to think beyond their prison time… we need people to evolve from this experience, past their identity of offender.

Our 'theft' was strategic – our pedagogy sought to validate 'survival knowledge' of prisoners as critical knowledge and to undermine 'offender' identities in exchange for being 'critical knowers'. By using the sharing circle, it allowed us to create mutual understanding and lay the groundwork for deeper, more meaningful discussion and understanding of one another. We challenged the hierarchies embedded within academia and we inserted emotionality into the academy (hooks, 2003). Thus, we did not just steal a certain kind of space in prison but also in higher education - we stole from both. 'Stealing the space' became an important idea for Gerty.

> We can't get folks out of prison – but we can build them up so that when they're released, they won't feel that they don't belong in the outside world… some people really feel lost when they get out of prison. Inside

> you're surrounded by people all the time but when you get out it's easy to feel alone in the world. We need to make connections before folks get out so they're excited about getting out and having opportunities and things to do.

The role of the instructor can contribute to 'stealing' the space of the prison. In the context of our course, Gerty appreciated the instructor's approach.

> You were friendly and warm. The part that impressed me most about you [instructor] was that if you didn't have the answer, you admitted it, you were down to earth and you seemed to be on our level. It gave a sense of togetherness. You did not act like you worked for THEM. It was just such an easy, relaxed atmosphere and we all connected so easily because of it. I obviously knew that you had things to teach and that I had a lot to learn from you. But I never had the feeling that you thought that you were better than us.

Educators in prison do not necessarily identify with abolitionist struggles, but rather think of themselves as teaching a skill. How is it then that post-secondary education can be an intentional act of abolition? Post-secondary education can strip the ability of the prison to control people emotionally and thus reduce the reach of the state in controlling the emotional landscape. It can claim the right to occupy the liminal space of the incarcerated body and the incarcerated mind.

> I don't think you can have a teacher by profession in this position, you must have a teacher by passion. They have to actually care about their students on a personal level. They have to want to sabotage the stigma surrounding prisoners. People experiencing incarceration are in a very different situation than regular students. For them, this class is most likely the only access to post-secondary they've ever had and for them to like it and want to continue with their education it has to be a positive experience. The teacher must be more concerned with connecting and inspiring their students than following the rules of the prison to a fault.

Gerty recognized the importance of the instructor in the totalizing prison environment.

> Instructors in prison have to be willing to give their students the gift of educating them beyond the reach of the carceral system. When you show incarcerated students the path away from prison, they're no longer so easily controlled. A teacher in this position has the power to change the way their students see themselves and, ultimately, they can change the course of their lives if they take the time to connect with them on an emotional level. You can't be fake in a class like this. You have to lead with your heart and follow with your mind. You have to be an abolitionist.

Prison is not absolute, nor is abolition. We created space for prisoners to exercise autonomy. We stole what we could as we shifted the emotional landscape of the prison and reduced the reach of the state. There was no place for gossip in the sharing circle. More than the material in class or promise of university credits – it was the connections that contributed to the survival of prisoner bodies on several levels: emotional care and friendship. It meant a lot to all of us to stay connected. Gerty articulates why it was important even when she was released.

> When I got out you guys really supported me and cheered me on to continue with post-secondary. You were patient and understood it wasn't something I could take on right away, but you never stopped saying, "you should be doing this, you can do this, and people need to hear what you have to say".

CONCLUSION

Some of the most powerful acts of abolition are small and seemingly insignificant as a warm smile, a promise of friendship, a letter of support at a parole hearing or a ride when you get released. It is also an ambitious political project. Both interim and revolutionary goals are at work, sometimes in ways that create tensions and challenges to maintain abolitionist visions and ways of relating to one another. When we take the university inside the prison, it does improve the prison, which is not the goal of abolition. And yet if we did not go inside, more people would disappear. Seemingly small acts of abolition become intensely radical within the confines of the prison. Abolition is about providing support, connection and friendship. Abolition

is about reducing the control the prison has over people and showing them how to take their power back.

Not everyone comes into prison with strong social networks. However, for those that do, maintaining contact with family and/or friends on the 'outside' (i.e. the non-incarcerated public) is very important. Social networks amongst imprisoned folks are critical for psychological health, particularly if they are maintaining relationships with people who are otherwise healthy on the outside, as this helps set patterns of normalcy and acceptance. Ongoing relationships are the hardest to maintain and to build in carceral settings, but are even more critical given the forced disconnections and isolations that folks inside must endure. This is especially so in a setting where relationships are highly controlled. Retaining those relationships is important so that prisoners have a means to transition back outside and are able to do so in a supportive way. These relationships would also serve to remind the person who is incarcerated, that they themselves are more than just an 'offender', but they have value to other people.

Gerty recognizes that "*the longer you spend inside, the greater the distance your connection to the outside world becomes".* The longer someone is 'inside', the more difficult it can be to maintain those social networks and eventually they break down or start to fade.

> You start to feel like you don't belong in society anymore and start to question how to find your place in it again. Many people experience major anxiety upon release because of this. Some people even prolong their sentence because they don't feel like they can assimilate. After years in prison all your supports are in prison, all your friends and "family" are inside. The idea of building a whole new life from scratch becomes too daunting. When you're released, you feel lost and alone, and miss the safety and security of prison. This disconnection causes people to do whatever they need to, to be sent back, consciously or subconsciously.

Our work together is grounded in the recognition that our relational networks take shape through power hierarchies which are maintained by the prison system and university system. As Gerty observes "*creating meaningful connections and a sense of belonging with people in the community would be an easy fix for this problem".* Our methodology for this paper reflects our

efforts to flatten the hierarchies between us and to centre the knowledge of those with lived experience.

Although seemingly a small gesture, Gerty reflects on how putting a wedge between the prisoner and the prison for a few hours a week, is actually life-changing for some.

> Once you have a bit of education, you start seeking a better life for yourself. You want to be something other than an ex-inmate. The prison loses its stronghold on you. In many ways, some more subtle than others, the prison makes you believe that you're always going to be an 'ex-offender'. This class was when I stopped thinking of myself as an ex-offender, and started thinking of myself as a student, researcher, academic writer… if you believe good things are possible for yourself it makes you more free… it's all about your state of mind. During and after my experience in this classroom I became surer of myself, and started to look forward to and plan for my release. I wasn't caught up in the negativity of the yard, in some ways I was above it. It didn't affect me as much and it didn't have as much power over me. My classmates made me feel normal… they helped me to liberate my mind from the prison. My thoughts and actions each day were more focused on my future and not on the gossip that surrounded me.

Abolition is for liberation. Prison post-secondary education can be an intentional act of abolition, one that can displace gossip, and disrupt statist social control. Non-hierarchical models that use the sharing circle can work against anti-relational logics of the prison system and allow for creating bonds across difference as a basis for struggle. Gerty speaks to the importance and value of relationality to emotional wellbeing upon release and thus as central to resistance to carceral harms.

> I think more than anything when people get out, they need emotional support and connection. They need people cheering them on saying you can do this – I believe in you. You deserve to do this, you're smart enough, you're capable. More than anything, people getting out of jail need to be shown that they don't need to go back to what they were doing. They can do better, they can be better. You have to be able to think you can do it, because that's the only thing stopping you from doing anything that you want, it's thinking that you can do it.

The state's reach into our lives is diminishing as we continue to deepen our friendship. Our friendship across differences goes well beyond the classroom experience. We continue to work, write and teach together. Not only do we tend to our relationality, but we support folks coming out of women's prisons and we continue to establish relations of equality with those with lived experience and attending to breaking down hierarchical structures that organize us.

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