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Special Issue

EDITORIAL: VOICES FROM THE WYOMING WOMEN'S PRISON— A COLLECTION OF WRITINGS BY INCARCERATED WOMEN

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This special issue features the dynamic results of feminist collaborative work undertaken as part of Wyoming Pathways from Prison (WPfP), a trans-disciplinary and trans-professional statewide collaborative that aspires to support currently and formerly incarcerated people in navigating the waters of higher education and life more generally. WPfP works in close collaboration with the Wyoming Department of Corrections (DOC) and is co-coordinated by Susan Dewey, Alec Muthig, Katy Brock, and Rhett Epler with the primary goals of: offering college credit to incarcerated people at no cost, mentoring University of Wyoming (UW) students in teaching and leadership, engaging in valuable service to the state of Wyoming, and providing UW students with real-world experience through teaching and assistance to the DOC.

This work builds upon and takes place in dialogue with multiple higher education initiatives in jails and prisons across the United States. As Katy Brock observes in her article featured in this special issue, "Benefits of Education in Prison," incarcerated people's access to education can play a potentially transformative role in fostering self-esteem as well as preparation to rejoin communities and enter the workforce upon release. A recent list of higher education programs in U.S. jails and prisons compiled by Victoria Bryan and Rebecca Ginsburg, director of the Education Justice Project at the University of Illinois, identified 152 such programs, which vary in size, scope, and

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courses offered from those granting college degrees to small-scale projects focused on one or two key areas (Bryan & Ginsburg, 2016). 152 may seem like a large number, but not when considered in light of the fact that these programs provide services to the 6,937,600 adults incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013).

Research with currently and formerly incarcerated women expanded dramatically following the equally dramatic rise in drug-related convictions among women in the 1980s. Many of these researchers argue that justice system-involved women and girls face a different set of issues than men as a result of their criminal convictions due to dominant cultural expectations that women will be passive, altruistic, and obedient (Belknap, 2007; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). As incarcerated women violate all of these gendered cultural norms, public perceptions of them do not always account for the uniquely gendered forms of violence that can inform women's pathways into and through the criminal justice system (Belknap, 2010).

Across the United States, research indicates that incarcerated women have experienced violent physical, sexual, or emotional forms of violence or other grief-generating events and often struggle with the concomitant mental health consequences of such events long before their incarceration (Batchelor, 2005; Cook, et al. 2005; Leigey & Reed, 2010); in one study, an incarcerated woman succinctly noted, "prison is the safest place I've ever been" (Bradley & Davino, 2002). Once released from prison, women face myriad challenges with respect to employment, housing, and resource access due to the significant stigma that surrounds felony criminal convictions. (Richie, 2012). These challenges are compounded by the reality that the majority of incarcerated women are mothers of young children, that women often earn less money than men, and that women are more likely than men to be victims of intimate partner violence (Parker & Reckdenwald, 2008).

WPfP chose to begin its higher education initiatives in a women's facility precisely because of the special challenges facing incarcerated women. WPfP has been extremely fortunate to enjoy a supportive and collegial relationship with the DOC, particularly its Correctional Education Programs Manager, Betty Abbott. Ms. Abbott worked tirelessly to facilitate a strong collaborative partnership between the DOC and UW, and this special issue would not have been possible without her. Mutually beneficial supportive relationships between

universities and state agencies are all-too-rare, and WPfP is extraordinarily fortunate to enjoy such support.

This special issue is the product of the first college course WPfP offered at the Wyoming Women's Center (WWC), the only prison for women in the state. Most women incarcerated at the WWC, which houses under 300 women, have relatively short sentences, ranging from four to seven years. Just under 78% received felony convictions for non-violent offenses and, in Wyoming as nationally, just over 42% of incarcerated women received drug convictions (Wyoming Department of Corrections 2014). The vast majority of women incarcerated at the WWC are White (84%), followed by much smaller numbers of women of color who self identify as Native American (9%), Hispanic (5%), Black (1%), or Asian (less than 1%).

The course developed from a needs assessment study, funded by the UW Social Justice Research Center, that involved 71 in-depth interviews with currently and formerly incarcerated women. Results indicated that UW could meaningfully engage with the DOC by offering college courses to incarcerated women, who expressed a desire for more educational opportunities. Interviews and informal conversations with women who had been incarcerated at the WWC, in conjunction with studies of successful higher education in prison programs nationwide, demonstrated that a writing course focused on the women's experiences might be an interesting way to begin our collaboration.

WPfP obtained a UW Summer Innovative Course Award to support accommodation costs for UW faculty and students to spend three weeks in June 2016 living near the WWC, which, like many prisons, is located in a remote area. I worked closely with my Gender & Women's Studies colleague Bonnie Zare as well as our students— Jess White, Julia Dohan, Cassandra Hunter, Rhett Epler, Kristine Sloan, Lorna Barton, Carly Fraysier, Kyria Brown, Alison Berreman, Katy Brock, Heather Baker, Liz Kulze, Amber Donais, and Britney Welch— to collaboratively develop a syllabus and implement a course that reflected a wide array of disciplines and life experiences. During our three weeks at the facility, many of us spent six hours a day, four days a week, in the prison teaching two sections of "Telling My Story," which focused on women's memoir.

WPfP chose memoir as the topic for its first WWC course because it is a unique storytelling form in which a writer's experiences take center stage as she recounts a series of events that played a

formative role in her life. Each class session included substantial discussion of assigned excerpts from women's published memoirs as well as time for the WWC students to develop and receive supportive feedback from UW students and faculty on their works-in-progress. UW students read an extensive collection of academic work on women and the U.S. criminal justice system prior to entering the prison, received DOC training on appropriate conduct in a correctional setting, and spent countless hours with me both inside and outside prison walls ensuring that this special issue took the strongest possible form.

A typical class session began with a discussion our reactions to memoirs by a wide variety of women authors, including Dorothy Allison, Jenny Lawson, Mary Crow Dog, Sylvia Plath, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, Alice Walker, Mary Karr, Sonali Deraniyagala, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Carolyn Jessop, Jo Ann Beard, and Paisley Rekdal. UW students took the lead in organizing class discussion surrounding each author's approaches to writing, although at the end of our three week class some of the WWC students emphasized that in future iterations of the course the WWC students should take a greater leadership role in facilitating class discussion of the assigned work. Each class included a writing exercise designed to spark ideas for the women's memoirs. At least half of each class was devoted to a one-on-one workshop in which WWC and UW students collaborated to polish the WWC students' writing.

Fourteen WWC students participated in the two three-hour sections of the "Telling My Story" class, and all of the women chose to publish their work in this special issue. Some women opted to use their real names, while others preferred pseudonyms, and in this editorial I accordingly refer to the women using the names of their choice. While the WWC women's work rightly takes precedence in this special issue, their texts are supplemented with self-reflections, academic essays, and book reviews by five students who assisted with this course— Jess White, Lorna Barton, Katy Brock, Cassandra Hunter, and Julia Dohan.

WPfP is extraordinarily proud of the sensitivity and feminist collaborative spirit that surrounded our work together and the results of several hours of focus group-style conversations we undertook on the last day of class emphasize the transformative nature of our work together. Detailed results feature in the special issue's first piece subsequent to this editorial, by Jess White, "Memoir and Memory: A 'Telling My Story' Focus Group." Yet it is equally important to mention the ethical

challenges inherent to the work undertaken in the "Telling My Story" class. UW faculty and students remained constantly mindful that, no matter how collegial our relationship with the WWC students, each day UW faculty and students entered the WWC women's home to discuss with them how they wished to represent themselves and their lives, and then left the prison each evening. Despite the sometimes very personal information that the WWC women shared with UW students and faculty in their writing and their conversations about it, UW students and faculty could not reciprocate in the interests of maintaining professional boundaries in a correctional setting. These prohibitions on UW students and faculty disclosing personal information stem as much from my own ethical opposition to persons entering correctional facilities with the goal of processing their own unresolved emotional issues, as it does from DOC regulations.

The content and the mode of conveyance chosen by the WWC students presented an additional ethical challenge when views expressed or language used proved troubling to some participants (both incarcerated and not). One of the class' central goals was to assist the women in representing their life experiences in all their complexity as well as in their own words. At the beginning of our course the UW and WWC participants made the editorial decision as a group to publish the women's words in the form that they left the facility on the last day of class, out of respect for the WWC students' rights to control their own representations of their lives. The only exception to this rule was that WPfP, out of respect for its long-term collaboration with the DOC, also gave the DOC the right to review the special issue in order to avoid possibly causing harm to the women's families or victims of their crimes; the only DOC-mandated changes made involved providing pseudonyms to the women's children.

Yet our class' collaborative decision to publish the women's work without editing for content after leaving the facility meant that we sometimes needed to engage in difficult discussions. In almost every class I tried to make a candid point, often by citing negative reactions to my own published work, about the possible repercussions of women writing about themselves and their lives in particular ways. Often this took some form of my stating, "remember that once we publish our work, we have no control over how people will react to it; we give it up to the world and the world will do whatever it wants to our work." While these reminders on my part prompted some women to choose

pseudonyms or change the focus of their writing, others felt that sharing the aspects of their lives featured here constituted a cathartic process of which they were very proud and wanted the world to read.

Another difficult discussion stemmed from the sometimes divergent beliefs held by UW and WWC participants; while I think that most UW students and faculty regarded their work with incarcerated women as part of their respective forms of feminist praxis, this was not necessarily true of WWC participants. Two examples stand out as particularly illustrative of this sometimes-significant disjuncture. In one instance, a WWC student read a piece in front of the class in which she expressed her frustration regarding the restrictions she faces as a person with a felony conviction, including the fact that many countries consequently will not issue her a visa. She ended her piece by asking the audience, "is America the only country that's easier to get into than a Hollywood hooker?" This question provoked an immediate reaction, as several women in our class had been involved in the sex industry and/or had quite a different perspective on U.S. migration policy. The author decided to change her description after a private conversation with me about ways to express her frustration without denigrating others. However, this was not always the case; in the second example of divergent viewpoints, written by a woman who had a history of sex industry involvement, the author chose to keep written descriptions of individuals that some class members regarded as racial stereotyping.

Such examples illustrate how, taken together, this special issue features a wide spectrum of incarcerated women's experiences but is by no means intended to represent the diversity of people in prison, or to offer political commentary on the U.S. criminal justice system. Our goal is to share with readers, in *Wagadu*'s open access format, a bit about the lives of incarcerated Wyoming women as the women themselves see them— and, simply by taking this politically neutral approach to a very heated topic, I think that we have accomplished quite a lot.

I have taken the lead on many interdisciplinary projects and edited volumes throughout my career, but none posed this special issue's level of difficulty both in terms of coordinating so many people's energies before and during the class and in determining how best to order the pieces featured here. The final order of texts in this special issue was determined in conversation with UW graduate student Rhett Epler as he and I travelled to the 2016 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison. We envisioned the order as a way to help readers first understand

our class and what it meant to everyone who participated (White), grasp Wyoming's remoteness (Barton), and consider benefits of higher education in prison (Brock) in order to contextualize the WWC student's excellent work. The special issue concludes with pieces by UW students (White, Brock, Hunter, and Dohan), including a co-authored piece by a WWC student and a UW student (Brock and Rouse).

In "Memoir and Memory: A 'Telling My Story' Focus Group," Jess White adroitly summarizes the results of extensive focus group notes (taken by Julia Dohan) in which WWC and UW students discussed the writing and workshop process. Those interested in beginning their own higher education in prison program may find the WWC women's insights, which take precedence in this piece, particularly useful in their reflections on how this class impacted their lives. The subsequent piece, a photo-essay by Lorna Barton, combines stunning images of Wyoming's vast expanses with her reflections on work in the confined space of the prison. Katy Brock's piece, "Benefits of Higher Education in Prison," draws on academic literature to provide additional context on the value of this work.

"Silently Crying Out Loud," by Chris, features a series of open letters to individuals across the U.S. who are involved with the criminal justice system in various capacities. Jessica Jade, in "A Life Unraveled," discusses her family's struggles with breaking the cycle of addiction and substance abuse. "On the Run," by Teresa Hart, describes the impact of addiction, prostitution, and tumultuous relationships on the author's life. Sarah M. Lujan's "3:15 p.m." focuses on how the murder of her children's father prompted her to change her perspective on life, and reflects on the choices she made before coming to prison. Also focused on the theme of change and transformation, LaTasha Lynn LeBeau's "The Wound May Heal but the Scar Will Remain" conveys the author's path to addiction recovery in hopes of reuniting with her children, one of whom she gave birth to in prison.

In "Ignorance is No Excuse," Sara Bueller recounts how, in her words, "a disillusioned single mother single-handedly changed her and her son's lives forever" as a result of her struggles with methamphetamine use and an abusive intimate partner. Darla D. Rouse, in "Hard Won Lessons," juxtaposes her early life experiences with the meaning that her religious beliefs and bond with a mentor have provided to her in prison. "Nineteen and Life," by Clover Brown, relays the series of abusive relationships with men that culminated in her fiancé's murder.

Sissy Pierce's eponymously titled piece recounts her struggles to raise her children independently in the midst of her relationships with men, some of whom were abusers.

Taking a more structurally directed approach, Amanda Bayne's "The Juice Box" analyzes the consequences of having a felony criminal conviction in conjunction with examples from the author's own life. B.D.K.'s "Heaven.Hell.Repeat." describes the intergenerational repetition of abuse, poverty, addictions, and foster care placements that have characterized her family life. In one of this special issue's more challenging pieces, "The Secret Life of Dahl," D. Jackson focuses on the ways that prison helped her to see how the psychological consequences of her own childhood sexual abuse contributed to her husband's sexual victimization of their daughter, a crime for which she is currently serving prison time. "In Secret Storm," DeeDee paints a harrowing portrait of long-term intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and discusses the author's journey toward healing in prison. Kendra Leigh Horn's "What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger" describes the consequences the author faced for her relationships with individuals involved in various criminalized activities, giving birth in prison, and her deep sense of regret about both.

The special issue's final four pieces, written by or with UW students, feature self-reflection on the experience of teaching in prison, or of being incarcerated. Jess White's "The Place to Go in Your Head: Editing the 'Telling My Story' Collection" offers critical analysis on the important role that isolation plays in the writing process for many authors in the free world, and contrasts that isolation with the conditions faced by incarcerated women. In "The Women We Are," two co-authors of the same age, WPfP co-coordinator and Ph.D. student Katy Brock, and Darla D. Rouse, who is incarcerated, juxtapose key developments in their lives over the course of four decades. UW student Cassandra Hunter, in "Her Name Was Flor," describes her own experiences with incarceration, while "The Meaning for Me," by Julia Dohan, recounts what the author learned about the criminal justice system in prison and how these lessons will help her in her future career as a public defender.

The path to completing this special issue was far from easy, but WPfP hopes that readers will find the results meaningful in ways that will offer encouragement to those who might consider beginning their own higher education in prison programs. For those who choose to do so, please know that there will be challenges and setbacks in attempting to

form meaningful collaborations between academics, who often have limited experience with the criminal justice system, and those who make their living (or their home) within it. Yet, as evidenced by the strength and sheer force of the writing featured here, higher education in correctional settings has the power to transform lives, both within and outside prison walls.

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