ART AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM:

A POST-INTENTIONAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Mia Ruyter

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Abstract

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Mia Ruyter

This post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) study explored the experience of educators who teach art in prisons. Prisons are "total institutions" (Goffman, 1958), with a culture of deprivation, domination, and dehumanization that may impact educators' experiences. Prisons expect teachers to maintain an authoritarian hierarchy. Prisons strictly control what and how educators teach, with tight limitations on materials, time, and space. Despite that, many art educators commit to teaching art in prisons. Using a PIP approach (Vagle, 2025), this study inquired: How might teaching art take shape for educators in the prison system, with all its complexity? How do unexpected moments—the surprises that happen while teaching—help co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom? How do non-human elements—for example, specific art materials or the prison environment—co-produce the teaching experience? I spoke with four art educators who teach in prisons on Zoom over 3 months, using an open-ended conversational interview protocol. I supplemented their accounts with texts on incarceration, artists, and pedagogy as well as narratives of my own experiences teaching in jail. I am an abolitionist and committed to liberatory education. As I engaged in the iterative process of reading and reflecting, I remained open to thinking with other useful theories for analyzing the research materials and creating my text. I engaged in "thinking with theory" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), drawing on concepts from abolitionist thinking, critical pedagogy, and new materialism. The narrative text I created shows how the complexities of prison teaching

create obstacles to a positive learning environment. However, in collaboration with students, the art educators can work through and around barriers to create classrooms where liberatory pedagogy is practiced. The students in prison often surprise their teachers with unexpected observations and opinions, inspiring personal insight for the educators, and creating moments of connection between the teachers and the students. In particular, art is a powerful catalyst for building community. The tactile and visceral characteristics of art materials elicit nonverbal ways of knowing and possibilities for expressing vulnerability that deepen connections among the students and the teachers.

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Acknowledgments

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M. R.

Chapter 1: BEGINNINGS

Imagine me driving home from the jail on a Wednesday night, alone in my car. It was about 8:30 p.m. as I drove across the bridge. I thought about the women with whom I had just made art. There were only two women in the unit, one was under 21, and one was older, maybe 30. I was only supposed to be working with women under 21, but this was a special unit. Both of these women had multiple conflicts with other incarcerated people and with officers. This was quasi-solitary. It was a full-size unit—a day room with eight steel tables and four stools each, bolted to the floor, and two tiers of cells, but only two women living in it. The older woman painted with me at one of the tables. She told me that she also made art with a program for women who were survivors of domestic violence. "I wasn't abused, but I go anyway because I like the program."

The younger one was restless and pacing. She had been in court that day. I don't know what the outcome of court was, but I know it meant that she had to wake up at 3 a.m. to get on the bus to go to court, that she didn't eat anything until lunch time, and she spent the whole day in the "pen"—a cage in the basement of the court. Lunch consisted of something like one slice of bologna between two slices of white bread. She got back to her unit around 7 p.m. She had missed dinner. She was hungry. She was mad. And pacing. She started banging on the door and shouting that she wanted something to eat. The correctional officers ignored her, and she got angrier and angrier. She grabbed the pay telephone and yanked the hand piece off and threw it on the floor. She shouted that she wanted them to call the captain.

I sat painting with the other woman, and we both monitored what was going on in our peripheral vision. I began to pack up the art materials.

The captain finally showed up about 15 minutes later, and the young woman started arguing with the captain. The captain said there wasn't any more food. It was all cleaned up and put away. The young woman told her to get some food from the break room. The captain said she wasn't going to do that. They stood near the door, where the captain could easily dart out if the woman got violent. I sat watching the conflict, with my bags packed on the table in front of me. I was not going to walk over there in the middle of the argument and ask them to open the door to let me out. It seemed disrespectful and also unwise.

The older woman shouted to the captain. "Get this civilian out of here before you have to spray!"

The captain looked over at us. Then she looked at the young woman. Then back at us and nodded. "Open the door," she told the officer. I picked up my bags and walked out.

I walked out. But the young woman did not. The older woman did not. They weren't going anywhere. Maybe the captain gave the young woman some food. Maybe the captain sprayed her with chemical agents. Maybe the older woman got involved in the dispute. Maybe it was a long, terribly violent night.

I walked out of the jail, got in my car, and drove home. I had a nice dinner that my partner had made for me, with a glass of red wine. I felt drained and sad.

They slept in the cells, alone. Were they afraid? Uncertain about their future? Not knowing who was thinking about them?

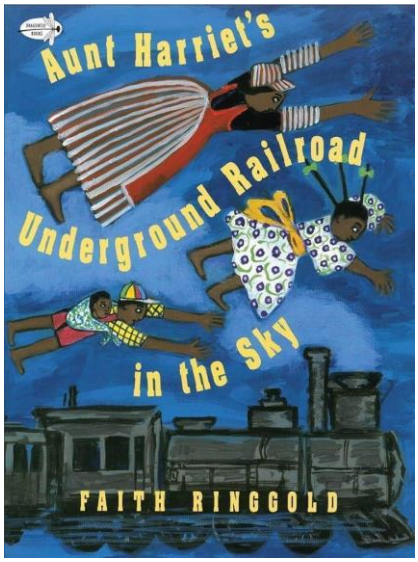
I had questions for myself as well. What is the value of what I do there? How do I help the women? Am I doing the most I can with the time I spend with them? Am I just another civilian on the treadmill, helping the system limp along?

I want to learn how to be a better art teacher. Not someone who teaches people to be compliant and obedient, but someone who teaches people to think freely and wildly, to imagine better worlds.

Now, instead of me in my car, imagine me and all the women in the jail, flying up out of the jail into the night sky, like Cassie in Faith Ringgold's book *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. Picture us sailing over the Triborough Bridge, swooping onto the roof of a Washington Heights apartment building, and joining a family party of adults sitting around a table, eating and playing cards while children sleep under the stars on sleeping bags, like Cassie in Ringgold's book *Tar Beach*.

Figure 1

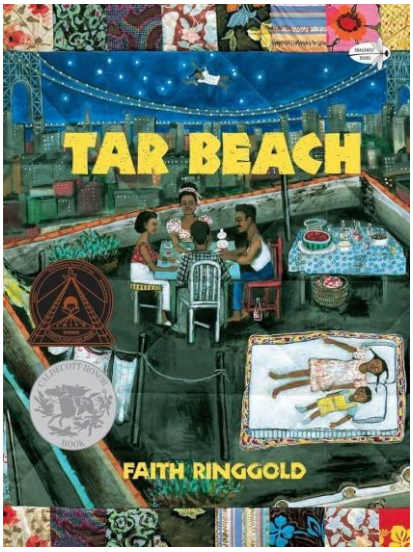
Front Cover of Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky



From *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (cover), by Faith Ringgold, 1992, Crown Press.

Figure 2

Front Cover of Tar Beach



From *Tar Beach* (cover), by Faith Ringgold, 1991, Random House Children's Books.

Faith Ringgold, an artist, educator, and activist, used art to advocate for justice. Beginning in 1967, she created a series of paintings called *Black Light*. Inspired by the Black Power movement, she celebrated Blackness. Throughout her career, she celebrated Black life and called out American racism.

Even though her work received critical acclaim, museums, galleries, and buyers were slow to embrace her. Ringgold responded by presenting her work in other venues, like performance art and protests, posters, and children's books.

In 1969, Ringgold joined the Ad Hoc Women's Committee to protest the Whitney Biennial, which included 95% male artists that year. With the Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), she protested the United States pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 1970 for including only white male artists. She created a series of posters supporting political causes, such as the *Women Free Angela* to support Angela Davis, who was accused of murder, and *The Committee to Defend the Panthers,* supporting the Black Panther Party who were targeted by police (Ringgold et al., 2022).

In 1971, Ringgold received a grant to create art for a public institution. She chose to make a painting for the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island. Measuring 8 x 8 feet, the painting portrays women in a variety of traditionally male careers, such as bus driver, construction worker, drummer, and basketball player. The design for the painting arose from conversations Ringgold had with women who were incarcerated in the jail.

Figure 3

Faith Ringgold's For the Women's House (1971)

Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, NY

Through her art, Ringgold took action to promote justice for oppressed people. She engaged in political struggle. She listened to the voices of incarcerated women and included them in her painting. Her art is an example of an "emancipatory, anti-racist, and decolonizing visual research project" (Azzarito, 2023, p. 39). Ringgold's intertwining of art and activism is a model for social justice action, teaching, and research. Since I first learned of her work in the 1990s, when I was an MFA student in painting at Hunter College in New York City, I have always been drawn to and inspired by Faith Ringgold's artwork and activism.

Background

For almost 10 years, I have been teaching art to incarcerated people. I work for a university that provides educational programs in prisons and jails. Jails are carceral facilities where people are detained after being arrested and before being tried. Prisons are facilities where

people are incarcerated after they have been found guilty, to serve their sentence. My role is to organize educational programs for people in the local jail. I serve as the liaison between the university and the jail administration for credit-bearing college courses and noncredit workshops. I identify professors and classes to offer at the jail and recruit volunteers to lead workshops. I work with the jail administration to organize permissions for professors and volunteers to enter the jail, recruit incarcerated students and workshop participants, and obtain clearance to bring teaching materials into the jail. I also lead visual art workshops. At the jail I have met talented, intelligent, and kind people who are detained in unsafe, unhealthy, and inhumane conditions. Over the years, I have become an abolitionist committed to ending mass incarceration and supporting people who are experiencing incarceration through teaching art.

Education can be emancipatory, helping people explore how powerful social forces shape and limit their lives and helping them discover their power, talents, and abilities to make positive social change (Freire, 2005). Referring to arts education specifically, art educator Maxine Greene wrote that imagination and the arts allow us to become conscious of the deficiencies and the "rifts and gaps" (p. 112) in the world and to reimagine it. Artists imagine the world differently than it is, sometimes visualizing a better reality. Imagination is the catalyst of change.

Studies have found that participation in arts programs can have a therapeutic effect on incarcerated people, including improving mental health, reducing aggression, and reducing recidivism (Brewster, 2014; Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016; Meekums & Daniel, 2011; Smeijsters & Cleven, 2006). However, art education can do more than mere rehabilitation. Visual arts and artmaking can be an important tool for liberation (Azzarito, 2023).

The literature suggests that educators who teach in prisons have different motivations. Some educators think of their role as helping make the prisons run more smoothly by teaching

students to be more compliant (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004). Others see their role as supporting incarcerated students in developing social and emotional skills to reduce the chances of recidivism (Brewster, 1983; Johnson, 2008; Oesterreich & Flores, 2009). Still others seek to instill in their students a heightened critical understanding of the social systems that create health, education, and economic inequities and how those systems support mass incarceration. Some educators want to help their students to find the power and political agency to change systems that reinforce inequities and to rebuild systems to champion social justice (Green, 2010; Kotin et al., 2013).

My experiences teaching in jail have taught me that my students are often kinder, more considerate, more intelligent, and more curious than the stereotypes of incarcerated people that circulate in the media. My students have made me want to be a better teacher who can support them in achieving a better future for themselves and their families. My incarcerated students have taught me about resiliency and spiritual strength as well as how deeply broken our justice system is. I am keenly interested in learning about the experiences of other art educators who teach in prisons.

It is for this reason that I conducted this research. To put this research in dialogue with my own experiences teaching art in jail—as it inevitably must be—I have taken a post-intentional phenomenological approach.

Problem Statement

This post-intentional phenomenological study explored the experience of educators who teach art in prisons. Using such an approach, I was able to reflect on the stories of art educators in the entanglement of the unique positionalities of the students, the educators, and myself as a

researcher, and the prisons' complexities, to offer a nuanced understanding that allows for multiple interpretations and meanings.

The prison context presents a number of unique complexities for teaching. Prisons are places where authoritarian rules dominate. They are "total institutions" (Goffman, 1958), where people are isolated and every aspect of their lives is controlled. People who are incarcerated have no autonomy because their civil rights have been eliminated. Individuality is restricted. Prisons are intentionally dehumanizing. Prison administrations may prefer that students learn basic job skills rather than a liberal arts education, perhaps suspecting that critical thinking might encourage students to challenge the rules. Though specific circumstances may vary, my experiences are that the power relations between corrections officers and students and teachers create a constant undercurrent of tension. Teachers do not have academic freedom in prisons because what is taught and how teachers teach are subject to the rules of the prison, including censorship of reading materials and regulations around teacher-student interactions. For example, friendliness and familiarity between teachers and students are usually discouraged. Teachers are expected to maintain an authoritarian hierarchy in the classroom. What and how they teach are controlled. Security restrictions limit the materials, time, and space for teaching.

Despite these circumstances, art educators commit to teaching art in prisons. Within this context, art teachers are perhaps the most likely of educators to chafe at the rules, yet they continue to navigate these challenges.

Prisons have a culture of deprivation, domination, and dehumanization that may impact educators' experiences. Prisons prioritize punishment and control, and anything that distracts from those goals, including education, is unwelcome. Prisons see art materials and books as possible security threats. Educators are often only grudgingly allowed into prisons.

Teaching students in prisons may present different challenges than educators have experienced in other contexts. The students in prisons are perhaps the most underserved students in the United States. People who are impacted by incarceration are disproportionately people of color, people from low-income communities, and people with low levels of educational attainment. Because people of color are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system, and because educators are so often white middle-class women, race and gender differences may create difficulties in the interactions between students and teachers.

These complexities combine to create a uniquely challenging setting for education. They are well-suited for examination through a post-intentional phenomenological approach.

Post-intentional Phenomenology

Post-Intentional phenomenological (PIP) inquiry combines a phenomenological approach with post-structuralist philosophy (Vagle, 2025). PIP studies the lived experiences of participants within, through, and among the experiences of the researcher and the social construct that contextualizes their experiences. In PIP inquiry, the experiences of the researcher and participants and the context are seen as entangled, co-constitutive, and in flux. Interactions among the participants, researcher, and context shape and reshape, produce and are produced by the experiences of the educators.

PIP is especially useful for studying the experiences of art educators in prisons. In PIP inquiry, the researcher pays special attention to the social construct within which a phenomenon is situated, which in this case is the broken justice system and mass incarceration. PIP is "produced and produces, is provoked and provokes—through social relations in the world" (Vagle, 2025, p. 155). The social relations in a prison are complex and often in tension.

Using PIP inquiry, I was able to reflect on the stories of art educators in the entanglement of their students' unique positionalities and the prison system's complexities to offer a nuanced understanding that allows for multiple interpretations and meanings.

The Research Questions

For this study, I inquired how teaching art might take shape for educators in the prison system, given its complexities? A researcher using a PIP approach understands that the phenomenon is co-constructed by the experiences of the researcher and participants and the context. The experiences of the art educators shape and are shaped by the phenomenon. How do unexpected moments—the surprises that happen while teaching—co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom? These unexpected moments can draw attention to previously unnoticed events or interactions and reveal new insights and ways of understanding the phenomenon. How do non-human elements—for example, specific art materials or the prison environment—co-produce the teaching experience?

The PIP researcher considers the phenomenon in relation to a social context. In the following section, I provide a snapshot of the social context for this study—the disfunction of mass incarceration in the United States.

Mass Incarceration in the United States

To understand the urgency of art education programming in prisons, it is necessary to understand the magnitude of mass incarceration and its impact on communities. The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with over two million people behind bars. About a quarter of those two million people are in prison for non-violent drug-related offenses; another large segment is in jail awaiting trial on misdemeanor charges (Sawyer, 2020). In the United States, the demographics of incarcerated populations are characterized by striking

racial disparities, with a disproportionate number of people of color in prisons or under criminal legal system surveillance. Mass incarceration has ripple effects, from the individual who is incarcerated to their family and friends and to the wider community from which they come.

The path to incarceration begins early with the school-to-prison pipeline. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) explained, education is connected to property rights. Wealthy communities have better-funded public schools, and their schools are better equipped. Students in wealthy communities have access to higher levels of math and science courses, a greater variety of languages, and richer choices of extracurricular activities like clubs, music, and school newspapers—what Ladson-Billings called "intellectual property" (p. 65). This rich set of opportunities provides a variety of ways to connect with and enjoy education for students who have different learning styles and strengths (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Students from less-resourced communities do not have access to a rich menu of options in school. Their schools often lack the resources to provide these electives and extracurricular activities. Their diverse learning styles and needs are not met, nor do their schools have sufficient support staff such as education specialists, counselors, and tutors. Instead, they have school safety officers and metal detectors. Investments that should have been made in the education of children in low-income communities, but were not, result in social problems such as low wages, high unemployment, poor health outcomes, and higher crime rates. This lack of investment in education in low-income communities results in what Ladson-Billings called the "educational debt" (p. 9). The United States owes a debt to children from low-income communities for missed educational and economic opportunities because resources were withheld and redirected away.

Sociologists have labeled the process through which schools push children out of schools and into contact with the criminal legal system the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). Since the

1990s, schools have increased suspensions and expulsions to discipline misbehavior (Dutil, 2020). Zero-tolerance policies in schools mandate discipline not only for instances when students commit serious offenses, but also for more common and less serious offenses such as talking back, disrespect, and disorderly behavior. Statistics that control for variables such as economic status, sex, and the type of offense show that students of color are more likely to be harshly disciplined than white students. In addition, students who are expelled or suspended are more likely to drop out and encounter the justice system (McCarter, 2017).

Incarceration is not only devastating to those who experience it firsthand but also to their families and their communities. Families of people who are incarcerated bear a heavy financial and emotional load. The for-profit corporations who provide services like phone calls and commissary in prisons gouge the families of incarcerated people, who are likely to be low-income wage earners, with exorbitant fees and rampant over-pricing. Children of incarcerated people experience long-term negative effects on their health (Scommegna, 2014). They are more likely to be incarcerated during their own lifetimes. Communities suffer when a parent is removed from the home, and the remaining parent has to care for the child alone (Gjelsvik et al., 2014). Incarceration reinforces poverty.

In the United States, mass incarceration is fueled by racism, with people of color overrepresented in jails and prisons. From multiple dimensions, people of color are targeted by the criminal legal system. Neighborhoods are overpoliced, leading to more arrests. Statistics have shown that, though they are less likely to use illicit drugs than white people, more people of color are incarcerated for drug offenses. They are sentenced for longer times and more frequently for the same crimes that white people commit (Alexander, 2011). Because incarceration is so

common in some communities, it is an ordinary and completely anticipated part of life for some young people (Davis, 2011).

Once incarcerated, people are exploited by corporations and state governments. Prisons are a valuable market for for-profit companies that provide low-quality services at inflated prices. Communications, healthcare, and commissaries are all over-priced and poorly served (Sawyer, 2020). Incarcerated people often get paid pennies for each hour working for states and corporations. They harvest fields in California; they fight fires and clean up following hurricanes and other emergency situations, risking their lives. Yet they are not properly compensated (Purdum & Meyer, 2020).

The overlapping interests of corporate and state institutions—from police and corrections officers' unions to politicians who campaign on reducing crime, to private prisons and prison services providers—collectively are called the "prison industrial complex" (PIC) (Davis, 2011, p. 12). These forces perpetuate and magnify mass incarceration. The PIC creates financial and political incentives for the state to send poor people and people of color to prison for long sentences.

The disproportionate representation of Black and Brown people in prisons is the result of systemic injustices. For example, Leyva (Leyva & Bickel, 2010), a Native American man, wrote a first-hand account of his encounters with the criminal legal system. He described the context of childhood trauma that led to the choices he made to join a gang. Given the opportunities, the role models, and the social expectations available to him at the time, it seemed inevitable to him that he would spend time in prison. He also described his experiences while incarcerated, the humiliation and violence inflicted by the officers, and the threats and violence from other incarcerated people. According to Leyva, people who are incarcerated are debased, brutalized,

demeaned, and humiliated by physical abuse from prison guards, including strip searches and beatings, and emotional abuse, including solitary confinement, censorship, boredom, lack of mental stimulation, lack of human contact, and removal from families and loved ones. This treatment reinforces violence rather than rehabilitates the person. Against all odds, Leyva changed the trajectory of his life after his release. He earned a certificate in drug and alcohol counseling and founded a program that helps others reintegrate into society post-incarceration. Still, Leyva reported that the police continue to harass him, and he continues to feel stigmatized by the general public (Leyva & Bickel, 2010).

Leyva's story serves as a counter-narrative to the common understanding of prisons and "criminals." He showed us which circumstances lead to incarceration, what happens while people are incarcerated, and how life continues to be challenging after incarceration.

Researcher Positionality

My experiences teaching in jail have led me to abolition. As I understand it, abolition does not just mean eliminating prisons and punishment; it also means creating a society where everyone can thrive. It means replacing problematic existing social systems with more care-centered, community-building, supportive, and cooperative institutions. Abolition requires a paradigm shift away from individual self-interest and towards collective well-being (Harcourt, 2023, pp. 195–197; Kaba, 2021, p. 17).

Abolitionists, whether they advocate for abolishing prisons, policing, schools, or other systems, advocate for practices that create more justice and a world in which everyone can live as well as possible. Prison abolitionists advocate for the dismantling of punitive institutions and for developing restorative, caring strategies that prevent and heal harm (Davis, 2011; Gilmore, 2007; Kaba, 2021). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Gilmore & Murakawa, 2020) argued, "Abolition is

about abolishing the conditions under which prison became the solution to problems, rather than abolishing the buildings we call prisons."

Education abolitionists similarly reject mere reform and strive instead to break the historical patterns of inequity and oppression, in order to create a new approach to pedagogy that allows every child to achieve their true potential (Spaulding et al., 2021). Abolition education means caring for students by creating a "homeplace" where souls are "nurtured, comforted, fed" (Love, 2019, p. 99; also see hooks, 1990). Referring to such spaces, bell hooks (2014) wrote about the segregated schools she attended as a child, where the teachers were "committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our 'minds.'… My teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial" (pp. 2–3).

Abolition education means creating an environment that nurtures freedom. Educators who care prioritize critical engagement and liberation over empower their students with the knowledge and confidence to liberate themselves. "But one does not liberate someone by alienating them," Paulo Freire (2005) added "Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in a person. Liberation is a praxis: action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Liberation is not something that teachers can give to students, but something that teachers and students pursue, discover, and achieve together.

Abolition education also means engaging with students in joy. Joy is crucial for teaching and central to freedom (Love, 2019, p. 119). Surviving the prison environment is a struggle, and maintaining a passion for learning and creativity is practically impossible without joy. Joy is created when students and teachers share responsibility for learning, and when learning happens

in a nurturing community that explores ideas with a serious purpose (hooks, 2014). Joy nourishes the soul and uplifts the spirit.

For almost 10 years, I have been teaching art to people who are incarcerated. In the process, I have become a prison abolitionist. My personal beliefs and experiences influence my research about art education in prisons. I believe that the punitive justice system is ineffective and fundamentally broken and that an entirely new system must be built to deal with the harm that some people cause to others. Abolition calls for changing from a punishment paradigm to a focus on healing. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) wrote that abolition means not only closing prisons but also making sure that all communities have access to healthcare, economic opportunity, adequate housing, and education. Gilmore proposed to replace existing social systems with more care-centered, community-building institutions.

My personal experiences as an abolitionist art educator in jails impacted all aspects of this study. The participating educators' thoughts and feelings shifted throughout the research process, and, through our conversations, so did mine. We rambled. We went off on tangents, and then together we explored them. Their memories and mine were connected in new ways. New insights into past experiences emerged for them and for me through our act of talking, telling, discussing. Even recounting their stories to me changed their minds about what they remembered, and what they did or continue to do, and why.

In addition, my identity as a white woman affected this research. Working in a jail and seeing how many people of color and people from low-income communities are incarcerated made me more acutely aware of how much my privilege is due to chance and fate. One's self-understanding of one's identity is deeply contextual. I was born into a middle-class white family in the Midwest during a time of relative peace. I am a cisgendered heterosexual person. I am

mostly neurotypical and physically healthy. Though I made decisions and choices that led me to where I am today, on this side of the prison bars, in this academic setting, many of those choices were available to me by luck and privilege, while they were not available to others. Life experiences are indeed determined by the interplay of fate and individual will.

My life experiences and those of people of color are different. When I listen to a story told by a participant who is a person of color, I cannot imagine what it is like to live the same experience. They may have different assumptions and knowledge based on their life experiences. Their life experiences may have shaped their understanding of the world so that they see racial discrimination and inequality with more sensitivity and insight than I do, as a person who has not had racism directed against them. I can listen with empathy and openness, but I cannot relate in the way that a researcher who is a person of color might. There is also a level of trust that people of color may not readily give to a white person. Many people of color, including research participants, may not respond or open up to me the way they might to someone who shares their race.

While much of identity is determined by social context, social context is created by human society. Society both shapes us as individuals and is shaped by us as a collective. Society can be changed to be more equitable and to support thriving for everyone, not just the fortunate ones. As Maxine Greene (2009) reminded us:

> To commit to imagining is to commit to looking beyond the given, beyond what appears to be unchangeable. It is a way of warding off apathy and the feelings of futility that are the greatest obstacles to any sort of learning and, surely, to education for freedom…. We need imagination. (p. 397)

Abolition democracy, as envisioned by W. E. B. DuBois (2012) is foundational to prison abolition. It is not enough to end mass incarceration. Abolition democracy calls for the abolition of racism and poverty, and the building of a freer society that provides civic and political

equality. To create this society, education, healthcare, housing, food, and other public services have to be reimagined.

I approached this research project with the belief that art and imagination can play an important role in rebuilding our society into one that supports the freedom and flourishing of all people. Those beliefs interacted at every moment with my research and with the data, making this study inextricably post-intentional in its phenomenological approach.

Overview of Chapters

Following this introduction to my research, Chapter 2 reviews the background literature related to prisons, education in prisons, art pedagogy, art education in prisons, and the experiences of art educators in prisons. Chapter 3 introduces phenomenology as a philosophy. I then describe the post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) methodology, the approach that I used in this study. In Chapter 4, I introduce the four art educators who teach in prisons who participated in the study. In Chapter 5, I think with theory and reflect on passages from each of the participants to consider how they care for their students. In Chapter 6, I reflect on the broader implications of the experiences of the art educators. How might teaching art in prison be a meaningful experience for educators? What new questions arose through this research? In Chapter 7, I refocus attention to the urgency of abolition and the importance of art education. In an Epilogue, I engage in a personal post-reflexion on art as an intellectual activity and an abolitionist practice.

Chapter 2: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT (LITERATURE REVIEW)

This chapter presents the literature that is relevant to the teaching of art in prisons, including:

- a brief history of prisons;
- the development of educational programming for incarcerated people;
- the experiences of teachers in prisons;
- a brief history of art pedagogy;
- the history of art education for incarcerated people; and
- studies of art teacher experiences in prisons.

The primary goal in post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) inquiry is to study the provocations and productions of the phenomenon (Vagle, 2025, p. 157). A conventional substantive literature review may "compromise our openness to what we might learn from the inquiry" (p. 24). Vagle suggested a less comprehensive literature review. However, a more substantial literature review is required in the context of the prison. In the United States, mass incarceration is too effectively hidden from view. Without an adequate history and description of mass incarceration, the average reader will not understand the social construct within which the phenomenon exists. Rather than being seduced by convention, I propose this literature review as an integral part of the phenomenological material.

A Brief History of Prisons

The prison as we know it today in the United States is a unique system involving the mass warehousing of people, many of whom are convicted of minor offenses and a disproportionate number of whom are young men and women of color. It is increasingly clear

that the functions and rationales for mass incarceration in the United States today are misguided. The detention of people as punishment—alongside other forms of punishment such as corporal punishment or fines and fees—has a long and varied history (Foucault, 2015). Today, prisons seem inevitable and necessary to many people, but how did prisons become so common? How did we come to rely on prisons as the solution to social problems?

In Europe before the 18th century, most crimes were punished by corporal or capital punishment (Johnston, 2009). In the 16th to 18th centuries, houses of correction were established, in which criminals were imprisoned and forced to engage in labor. The conditions were crowded, filthy, and unhealthy. In the late 18th century, John Howard traveled the world studying different forms of prisons and published *The State of Prisons* (1777–1792). He argued for improved conditions, with confinement in cells at night and productive labor during the day. Two competing forms of prisons developed in the United States: the Philadelphia model and the New York model. The Philadelphia model adopted Howard's suggestions in building the Eastern State Penitentiary, where prisoners worked and slept in isolated cells. In theory, prisoners would not be corrupted by other criminals and would learn the value of hard work. This system was criticized as being expensive to administer. It required many individual cells, and the work that prisoners could do was restricted (Johnston, 2009).

The New York model, or the Auburn System, rejected the goal of prisoner reform. Prisoners were strictly controlled, not permitted to speak to each other, and given harsh corporal punishment for breaking rules. In prison workshops, products were built for sale so that the prison could be self-supporting and might even turn a profit. The Auburn System was widely copied in the United States (Johnston, 2009). Prison labor became an important part of

production. When labor shortages existed, industries could use cheap prison labor to produce goods.

In *Discipline and Punish,* Michel Foucault (1977) argued that modern prisons, emerging in Europe in the 19th century, replaced earlier forms of punishment like torture and dismemberment with psychological forms of discipline (also see Gutting & Oksala, 2013). Foucault maintained that the purpose of modern prisons is to punish and correct, disciplining people to make them conform to societal norms. In Foucault's genealogy of the prison, beginning in the 19th century, psychiatry was applied in criminal law, shifting focus from the crime to the soul of the criminal, from the action to the actor, and identifying certain people as "delinquents" who may be dangerous. The modern prison does not just punish by depriving those incarcerated of liberty; it categorizes them as "delinquent subjects, types of people with a dangerous, criminal nature" (Gutting & Oksala, 2013, n.p.). In other words, prisons define and form the subjecthood of individuals. Foucault (1977), concluding that the function of prisons is to produce criminals, argued that prison reforms such as ending corporal punishment do not ameliorate prison conditions but instead refine punishment—in his words, "not to punish less, but to punish better" (p. 82). Prisons create "docile bodies," or people whose actions and thoughts can be controlled.

In the United States, this phenomenon combines with racism to criminalize Blackness. Following the Civil War and the end of slavery, Southern states needed a new source of free labor and reinvented slavery by creating laws that criminalized Black lives (Alexander, 2010). Crimes like loitering or being unemployed were enforced against Black people. Punishments included forced labor through "convict leasing" or on chain gangs—working in fields on

plantations, building roads, or housekeeping for a White family (Haley, 2016). The roads the prisoners built were essential for rebuilding local economies after the Civil War.

The United States today is experiencing mass incarceration and now has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Between 1973 and 2009, the prison population in the United States increased by 700% (Nellis, 2024). Today, almost 70% of people who are incarcerated are people of color. This disproportionate impact is due to historical racism, policing policies that disproportionately target people of color, and charging and sentencing decisions that result in stiffer punishments for people of color (Nellis, 2024).

Many researchers have suggested that incarceration is counterproductive, with prison sentences often carrying collateral consequences that contribute to rates of recidivism. Financial burdens for people with criminal records can include court-imposed fines and fees. Employers frequently discriminate against people with criminal records. People with criminal records are often ineligible for benefits like food stamps and housing (Ghandnoosh et al., 2024).

Mass incarceration in the United States is increasingly seen as a failure. It is characterized by a history of racism, beginning during the time of the antebellum South. People of color, especially Black people, are disproportionally arrested, convicted, and sentenced. The collateral consequences of incarceration prevent people from successfully returning to society post-incarceration. Prisons have a terrible record for preventing crime, deterring crime, or rehabilitating criminals, yet America keeps building more prisons and incarcerating more people (Forman, 2017). Prison reformers and abolitionists argue that society must find more productive ways of responding to harm and reducing recidivism. This is the tragic context within which this study was conducted.

Education in Prisons

Education in prisons has numerous potential benefits for society and incarcerated people. Many studies have shown that educating incarcerated people reduces recidivism (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Esperian, 2010; Hall, 2015). People with higher levels of education are more likely to find legitimate employment. Education also increases social and emotional skills, strengthening effective, non-violent conflict resolution strategies. Participants in higher education coursework develop critical thinking skills to analyze themselves and the world around them (Pelletier & Evans, 2019).

Prison education began as a rehabilitative effort. During the 1800s and early 1900s reform movements, prisons sought to resocialize inmates (Johnston, 2009; Roberts & Lejins, 1971). The first prison school in America was established in Philadelphia in 1798. In 1825, in Boston, the Boston Prison Discipline Society introduced revivals and Sabbath Schools to area prisons. Sabbath Schools were taught by clergy and introduced basic literacy by reading the Bible, and these became "customary features in the Northern United States" (Roberts & Lejins, 1971, p. 4). Religious education was thought to make the prisoners more "spiritually enlightened" (Linden & Perry, 1982, p. 44). In the mid-1800s, secular education that aimed to create better citizens began to be more common in prisons (Linden & Perry, 1982). New York State authorized two educators for each prison in 1847 (Johnston, 2009), and Eastern Penitentiary in Pennsylvania hired a scholar schoolteacher and established a library in 1844 (Roberts & Lejins, 1971). In Maryland, correctional officers taught literacy. Education was seen as a part of reforming the individual, "to discipline the mind and fit it to receive and to involve in the life and thoughts and principles that constitute their possessors' good citizens" (from the Report on the International Penitentiary Congress of London, 1872, as quoted in Roberts &

Lejins, 1971, p. 7). College programs began to be offered in prisons in the 1960s, with the belief that adult education could contribute to the "maturation of those inmates exposed to it," provide job training, and improve behaviors and attitudes (Weir, 1973, p. 44).

Modern prison education comes in many forms and with many agendas. Types of education vary from vocational training that aims to provide people with employable skills; general education that seeks to help students acquire their high school diplomas or pass equivalency exams; and college courses that culminate in associate or bachelor's degrees, and occasionally master's or even doctoral degrees. The success of these programs depends in large part on the quality of the educational experience offered (Gehring, 1997).

Research suggests that educational opportunities can reduce recidivism. In a major review of 18 studies, Davis et al. (2013) found a 13% higher chance of employment post-incarceration for people who participated in educational programs while incarcerated (p. xvii), and a 43% lower chance of recidivating (p. xvi). Programs that are intensive, offer peer support, and include follow-up for job placement and continuing education post-release are especially promising.

Educators' Experiences

In assessing educational programming in prisons, it is crucial to draw a distinction between rehabilitation, empowerment, and emancipation. The goal of rehabilitation is to reduce violence, lawbreaking, and recidivism. Empowerment is often considered a way of achieving rehabilitation. 'Criminal behavior" is often thought to be rooted in low self-esteem and traumatic childhood experiences, like poverty and violence. Empowerment is believed to give an individual a sense of control over their life and future so that they can choose a better, more socially constructive path. Both empowerment and rehabilitation address the cause and cure of

criminality as being situated within the incarcerated individual. They ignore the social context in which crime occurs. In addition, empowerment and rehabilitation feed a paternalistic narrative around incarcerated people. They perpetuate a savior narrative for educators, wherein the educator "gives" students their "voices" and "gives" them the skills and knowledge they need to change and become productive members of society. I defined emancipatory education as education that provides the tools for learners to examine society critically and take action to change it for the better.

The literature on the experiences of educators in prisons can be analyzed through three themes: (a) adopting the attitudes of the prison industrial complex, (b) obstacles to teacher effectiveness, and (c) transformative experiences.

The Prison Industrial Complex

The prison industrial complex (PIC) refers to the systems of incarceration that society has developed to address social problems like poverty and mental health. These same systems serve as economic engines for corporations who invest in them and in the communities where they are built, and create jobs for individuals who work in them. At the same time, the stigma of being formerly incarcerated reduces opportunities for directly impacted people to get jobs, housing, and healthcare or to solve the other problems that led to their incarceration in the first place. In short, PIC perpetuates the system. Those who profit from imprisoning people rationalize their roles by demonizing the predominantly Black and Brown people who are incarcerated (Davis, 2000).

Researchers have studied the perceptions of educators in carceral settings toward their students. In a case study of eight volunteer educators in rural county jails, Ritchey (2014) found that educators entered the jail with negative perceptions of the students. Even before entering the

facility for the first time, teachers' expectations of a violent environment with threatening students had been influenced by TV portrayals of jails and prisons. The attitudes of the prison staff supported this impression. Wright (2005) defined this attitude as the "prison culture"—authoritarian, fear-based, and hierarchical, with an "Us vs. Them" mindset. The prison administration, staff, and officers often model a cynical attitude towards students. The attitude is described as militaristic and surly (Wright 2005). Orientations mandated by the corrections administration for new teachers tend to describe inmates as dangerous and manipulative (Matthews, 2000, p. 179). Teachers who internalize this message enter the classroom in correctional facilities expecting students to be a threat to their personal safety. The punitive controlling environment is a challenge to teachers' identities as caring people. When teachers adopt the prison administrations' and officers' view of the students as threatening and violent, the positive learning environment is undermined.

Prison culture and classroom culture are hybridized in prison education to meet the needs of students as well as the demands of the prison administration (Spaulding et al., 2009). The authoritarian, fear-based, and hierarchical culture of prisons is opposed to the supportive and caring culture of teachers. Teachers have to adapt to the restrictions imposed by security, which prioritizes punishment and diminishes the potential for education or rehabilitation. In some instances, veteran teachers enforce the prison culture for novices (Bhatti, 2010; Wright, 2005), reminding them to avoid friendly relations with prisoners. Some teachers adopt institutional disinvestment in inmate education, in one instance "allowing inmates to teach their classes, while working on crossword puzzles during the three-hour teaching module" (Currier, 2018, p. 66).

Some educators see their students as prisoners and criminals rather than as learners. In an essay based on personal experiences, Zaro (2007) promoted an alternative to the traditional

curriculum that emphasizes knowledge and skills. He prioritized reducing reoffending and recidivism through "cognitive development," which he defined as expanding awareness of responsibility, reducing impulsiveness, and raising awareness of consequences to behavior, which he believed includes building interpersonal skills, expanding worldview, developing interpretation of social rules, and building empathy. While liberation pedagogy strives to awaken students to their oppression and to strive for freedom, Zaro oriented education towards assimilating students to the carceral goals of submission and compliance. He aimed to assimilate students to societal expectations, just as he has assimilated to institutional expectations.

Obstacles to Teaching

The prison environment itself limits students' opportunities to learn. Alarms, searches, and security personnel shortages cause students to be late or miss class and create an "atmosphere of systemic unpredictability" (Fesette & Levitt, 2017, p. 105). Prison staff have the power to undermine the work and sometimes even "actively sabotage" programs (Hewish, 2013, p. 214). One educator reported an officer saying,

> 'My kids don't get a free education, but these scums do…. What can they do with a college degree in computers anyway? A bunch of murderers and rapists...I don't get it.' The rudeness of this comment to a virtual stranger was shocking, but it shows how close this feeling of disdain is to the surface, especially within the walls of a prison. (Fitzmaurice, 2019, p.13)

Rogers, Hinshaw, Holding, and Jacobi (2017), four researchers who teach literacy in prisons, identified the "total institutional environment" (p. 81) as an impediment to effective teaching and research. Prison administration rules ban all erasers, limit writing utensils to four-inch pencils, and suggest that even lined paper is a privilege. When access to writing materials is restricted because of security concerns, it also limits the ability of students to write and, through

writing, to reflect and to communicate. The restriction of freedom is not limited to the body but also includes the mind (Jurich et al., 2001; Rogers et al., 2017, p 77; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Students who are incarcerated are often unprepared for academic success for reasons such as inadequate education prior to incarceration, learning differences, or mental illness. People who are incarcerated are disproportionately under-educated. In a Bureau of Prisons study (Harlow, 2003), 68% of state prisoners did not have a high school diploma. Studies have found that there is a link between failure to finish high school and the likelihood of incarceration, a phenomenon that has been called the School-to-Prison Pipeline (McCarter, 2017; Sclosser, 1998; Wald & Rosen, 2003). The studies found that increased police presence in schools has led to higher rates of court involvement among youths, higher rates of suspensions, and higher rates of dropouts. In addition, suspensions have disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx students (Wald & Rosen, 2003).

Most teachers in prisons do not have the special training required for working with neurodiverse learners. The Bureau of Prisons (Harlow, 2003) found that among incarcerated people without high school diplomas, 66% had a learning disability. Among adolescents in incarceration and detention facilities, 49% were identified as having special learning disabilities (Mallett, 2014, p. 375). Bhatti (2010) reported that teachers had “feelings of outrage and helplessness” over students’ learning differences. Without training in special education and psychology, teachers are understandably overwhelmed in the classroom.

High rates of mental illness create barriers to academic success. In a report for the U.S. Department of Justice, Bronson and Berzofsky (2017) reported that 26% of adults in jail and 14% of adults in prison suffer from severe psychological disturbances (SPD). In addition, 44.3% in jail and 36.9% in prison have a history of mental illness. Among adolescents in incarceration

and detention facilities, 48% were identified as having emotional disturbances (Mallett, 2014, p. 375).

The third barrier to education in prison is teacher burnout. Teacher burnout is defined as feelings of exhaustion, the development of a cynical attitude, and a sense of hopelessness and inadequacy in the classroom (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016, 2017). When teachers are tired, cynical, and alienated, they are unlikely to inspire excitement about learning in their students. Burnout contributes to a high rate of teacher attrition, which leads to poor learning outcomes for students (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The working conditions in prison accelerate burnout. In addition to the hostile environment and high numbers of students with special needs, educators lack adequate resources. Teaching resources like books and videos are censored because of alleged security concerns (Dippel, 1992; Edwards-Willey & Chivers, 2005; Wright, 2005). Prison and jail libraries are chronically understaffed and censored. Internet research is not possible in prisons. Technology such as audio-visual equipment, when allowed, is often broken. The lack of adequate resources contributes to the exhaustion and alienation of educators (McCarty, 2006).

Teachers experience isolation and marginalization. They are not included in communities of educators working in traditional settings. Inside the prison, officers may be hostile to education for incarcerated people and unsympathetic to the educators. Teachers are strongly discouraged from becoming familiar with students (Bhatti, 2010). With no professional relationships with teachers in traditional settings, limited interaction with staff at the facility, and relationships with students discouraged, educators have a limited social network with whom to reflect on their work. Because of their isolation, shared strategies for avoiding burnout—team building, mentoring, networking with other teachers—are limited. Currier (2018) found a high

degree of apathy among the teachers in prisons (p. 133). When asked about what a quality correctional education program would look like, one teacher replied, "'That is an amazing question,' and then laughed, remarking, 'I don't know. I've never really thought about it'" (Currier, 2018, pp. 68–69).

Teachers who are experiencing burnout question the value of their work. The environment may lead teachers to question the value of teaching in prison (Rogers, 2017). When teachers remain engaged in educating students and resist the pressure to assimilate to prison culture, they can serve as critical witnesses to the prison conditions, raise awareness, and foster dialogue between inside and outside the prison walls.

Transformative Experiences

Given the challenges of prison teaching, why do educators continue to do it? Many articles have reported that educators in prisons were transformed by the experience and learned that education can be a powerful agent of change (Arthur, 2017; Abrahams et al., 2012; Congdon, 1984; Wolfe, 2021). The educators saw the full humanity of people who had committed crimes and how their students defied stereotypes. Teachers were inspired by the students they met, finding them "smart, funny, and bitingly satiric" (Toor, 2020, n.p.) and "spiritual and philosophical" (Luke, 2018, n.p.).

Teachers felt responsible for providing quality education for incarcerated people and saw a "potential for activism through education" (Macaranas & Walsh, 2020, n.p.). It was noted that if quality education had been provided to the people before they were incarcerated, they might not have been incarcerated at all (Applebaum, 2013; Matthews, 2000; McCarty, 2006). Prison students compare favorably to traditional university students (Bannon, 2013; Dippel, 1992;

Edwards-Willey & Chivers, 2005; McCarty, 2006). Faculty find it rewarding to see the transformation that education makes in the students' lives.

The narrative of education as a tool for reducing recidivism is politically expedient but overly simplistic. It assumes that responsibility for incarceration rests solely on the individual incarcerated person and neglects the systemic problems in society that contribute to crime. After getting to know people who are incarcerated, educators may challenge the stereotypes about "criminality." Prison teaching can change the perceptions of the "self" and others. Educators learn about the failures of the criminal legal system and develop an appreciation for the deeper complexities of the criminal legal system (Arthur, 2017).

Prison educators experience personal self-actualization, responsibility, and growth (Bannon, 2013). The experience broadens teacher perspectives, not only gaining knowledge about the criminal legal system and how "structural racism creates trauma to entire communities" but also about what it "means to be human in a much broader sense" (Fesette & Levitt, 2017, p. 103). Toor (2020) noted the benefits she gained from teaching in corrections: "Aside from the warm fuzzy feeling of doing a good deed, volunteering to teach a group of adults with vastly different backgrounds is not only a way to broaden your CV but will force you to reflect on your own work, skills, and place in the world" (page proof). Teachers in prisons can benefit from the experience of teaching in prisons as much as their students can benefit from learning.

In an ethnographic research project, Flores (2015) interviewed 12 educators working in three juvenile detention facilities. Flores called their pedagogical approach an act of "creative resistance" because of the ways they undermined the punitive carceral system. The diverse mix of white, Black, and Latinx teachers adopted a race-conscious pedagogy in which they

acknowledged privilege and discrimination in open discussion with students. They included racial inequities and racial struggle as a part of the curriculum by teaching about leaders from Black and Latinx communities like Malcolm X and Delores Huertes. Critical learning was emphasized over rote learning. Students were encouraged to question and challenge rather than passively accept what they are told. Such pedagogy values active learners who have the potential to participate in establishing and molding a healthy democratic society. It does not prioritize developing the habits needed for manual labor, such as punctuality, discipline, and acceptance of authority—habits that are encouraged in much of public school education. Rather than vocational preparation, teachers who practice creative resistance prepare students to resist and transform the systems that have oppressed them.

Summary

This literature review demonstrated that some teachers adopt the mindset of the prison industrial complex (PIC), some experience burnout because of the obstacles in this unique setting, and some achieve a positive attitude towards their students that is vital to creating a productive and supportive learning environment.

The stakes for educating people who are incarcerated are high. Most will someday be released, and education is the best path to successful reintegration into society. For education to be successful, teachers must be prepared, committed, and supported. Understanding teacher experiences in prisons is a crucial step toward ensuring that prison education prepares citizens to return to society. Education can inspire learners and teachers to become empowered citizens who advocate for a more equitable society. Such citizens are essential to dismantling mass incarceration and the PIC and to creating a safer society where everyone can thrive.

The prison environment creates a hierarchical relationship between the teachers and students. With care and sensitivity, educators can overcome this barrier and create transformative learning experiences for their students and themselves. If teachers are not reflective, they can inadvertently reinforce the power imbalance and may perpetuate the oppression of their students rather than support their self-emancipation (Fleetwood, 2020). A review of art educational practices from the past can demonstrate the power of art education for indoctrinating students, as well as liberating them.

Art Pedagogy

The history of art education in the United States is characterized by a tension between reinforcing the status quo and being subversive. At times, art education has functioned as a tool to promote conformity, and, at times, it has been seen as a way of imagining new ways of living and constructing society.

19th Century Art Pedagogy in the United States

In the 19th century, art education was seen as a way of assimilating immigrants and non-white people into European American culture. Boarding schools for Native Americans used art education to socialize children to Euro-American values and replace their indigenous forms of art. Settlement houses sought to develop employable skills and assimilate European immigrants into American culture (Stankiewicz et al., 2004).

Art education also addressed the need for industrialization (White, 2004). Through the industrial drawing movement, men learned drawing skills needed for work such as architectural design and scientific illustration, woodworking, and metalsmithing. In these cases, drawing was seen as "practical" and an economic contribution. At the end of the 1800s, drawing instruction books became popular and profitable for their authors and publishers. State legislatures in

Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, and New York began requiring the study of drawing as part of the curriculum in public schools (Stankiewicz et al., 2004, p. 39).

At the end of the 19th century, as women began to work in factories and outside of the home, handcrafts were taught to reinforce women's traditional roles. Home economics programs were established in public schools to teach girls sewing, embroidery, and cooking to become more accomplished housekeepers, reinforcing the gender roles (White, 2004, p. 57). At the same time, the upper classes saw artmaking and appreciation as refined leisure activities that both embraced a European heritage and developed a uniquely American identity, building a sense of community and civic pride (Stankiewicz et al., 2004, p. 42). Self-expression and free speech were seen as democratic values.

20th Century Art Pedagogy in the United States

At the turn of the 20th century, progressive education led by philosophers like John Dewey developed education curricula that sought to promote a stronger democracy by creating citizens who were prepared with skills such as "problem-solving, compassionate imagination, creative expression, and civic self-governance" (Hildebrand, 2024, n.p.). Dewey wanted to democratize art, making it accessible to all and building shared cultural experiences. Dewey sought to reintegrate art into daily life. He was concerned with how to make more of life's experiences artistic (Hildebrand, 2004).

According to Dewey, the artist creates meaning in artwork by engaging with the physical qualities of the materials, refining and clarifying them together with the meaning of those qualities. "Art is a product of culture, and it is through art that the people of a given culture express the significance of their lives, as well as their hopes and ideals" (Field, n.d., n.p.). Art is an experience that is completed by the participation of the viewer/listener. It is the product of the

"interrelated processes of making and appreciation" (Hildebrand, 2024,). Art is a form of communication between the maker and the viewer and has a social role in imagining and creating human identity.

Progressive education today seeks to reflect on what ethical art education means, reach new artists and audiences, and advocate for political and social change. It expands the goal of making art more democratic and integrating it into daily life by tapping into its potential to imagine and create human identity.

Drawing on theorists like Viktor Lowenfeld, Paulo Freire, and Edward Said, among others, Olivia Gude (2007) suggested "foundational principles" for ethical and intellectual art education (p. 7). Gude emphasized the importance of play in stimulating creativity and freeing students from overdetermined curricula. Play opens us to the unexpected and unknown. Through the exploration of the self, Gude suggested that students can develop a critical analysis of how identity is shaped by culture. By investigating community themes, students encounter difference.

Progressive art educators understand the meaning of artworks as emerging from specific social and historical contexts. They question "the centrality or normativeness of one's own (also culturally specific) point of view" (Gude, 2015, p. 10). Unquestioned acceptance of the dominant narratives of artmaking and art history excludes non-white, non-heteronormative, and differently abled artists from the story of our shared culture.

Dewhurst (2023) defined Social Justice Art Education (SJAE) as art education that uses critical discussion, reflection, and action to build community power and social equity. In a form of liberatory education, social justice educators and their students investigate and deconstruct the world to rebuild it so that all people can access the resources needed to achieve their full potential (Dewhurst, 2023, p. 9).

"The core aim of social justice education is to transform the status quo—the fractured landscape of institutional discrimination, systemic violence, paralyzing poverty, and silenced opposition—into a world where men and women are able to be fully human" (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 366). Social justice educators affirm and support their students in all their intersectional and nuanced racial, ethnic, gender, and ability identities. Social justice pedagogy attempts to go beyond rehabilitation and empowerment to build possibilities of equity and freedom.

Understanding that racism permeates every aspect of society, social justice arts educators work to identify and work to overcome racism in themselves, their classrooms, and their schools. Arts-based learning can transform teachers and students from passive consumers of knowledge into critical learners and creators of knowledge (Kraehe & Brown, 2011).

Art Education in Prisons

Art education in prisons can contribute to the rehabilitation, empowerment, and emancipation of students. The goal of rehabilitation is to reduce violence, lawbreaking, and recidivism. When formerly incarcerated people are rehabilitated, they resort to non-violent means to resolve conflicts; find lawful ways of acquiring necessary resources like food, shelter, and healthcare; and avoid contact with police. Artmaking can be a positive outlet for expressing emotions and building social-emotional skills to resolve conflict without resorting to violence. Empowerment, when a person feels control and competence, is often considered a means for achieving rehabilitation. When incarcerated artists set and achieve goals to learn a new skill like drawing or painting or complete a major work like a mural, they build confidence and experience the satisfaction of completing challenging goals. Emancipation, on the other hand, focuses on changing oppressive systems. Emancipation reinforces the critical perspective required to create social change to reduce harm and create a more equitable society (Inglis, 1997).

Rehabilitation

The rehabilitative impact of arts programming has been studied in depth. Art can serve as a coping mechanism for life challenges. It is a safe outlet for releasing the stress of incarceration and the pain of trauma that many experience before and during incarceration (Bain & Eisen-Martin, 2017; Gussak, 2016; Lea et al., 2019) and support healthy coping practices post-incarceration. Creative arts teach patience and persistence.

In a quantitative study comparing participants in arts programs with non-participants, Brewster (2014) found that the benefits of arts are cumulative, with the shorter length of participation resulting in less impact on rehabilitation. He documented changes in attitudes and behavior through a "Life Effectiveness Questionnaire" that measured habits that increase the likelihood of success in other educational pursuits and in positive interpersonal relationships, such as time management, motivation, initiative, social competence, self-reflection, and self-control. Brewster found that the longer the individuals participated in arts programming, the greater the growth of their life effectiveness skills, including improved relationships between incarcerated people and correctional staff, strengthened connections with family members, improved communication skills, and the likelihood of pursuing other academic or vocational programs.

Arts programs are correlated to reductions in violence and increases in compliance with prison regulations (Brewster, 1983; Johnson, 2008). Rather than suppressing their emotions, participants in arts programs can find acceptable ways of expressing their frustrations and fears (Brewster, 2014; Johnson, 2008; Oesterreich & Flores, 2009). In particular, youth with behavioral issues are found to be drawn to arts programming (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004). As a safe and healthy form of self-expression, the arts provide an alternative to negative

emotional outbursts and build community among participants. They contribute to defusing potential conflicts and tensions (Clements, 2004).

For example, a music program led by two student teachers from a local college provided people incarcerated in prison with the chance to participate in a choir (Abrahams et al., 2012). The choir members appreciated the opportunity to express joyful and sad emotions by writing lyrics and singing. They reported that the program made them feel more peaceful and calmer. They also developed confidence in their abilities by singing simple folk songs, learning music theory and notation, developing the skills for singing in three-part canons, improvising, and writing original works. They created a supportive community where the singers felt confident to take risks and grow.

The arts can support building stronger relationships. Arts activities that require collaboration build community, generating caring and supportive relationships (Gussak & Ploumis-Devick, 2004). Teamwork contributes to empathy and reconciliation. Incarcerated artists often engage in constructive criticism and dialogue around their work. They are likely to express empathy and be mutually supportive (Fitzmaurice, 2019). Art is an alternative form of expression for those who struggle with verbal communication (Johnson, 2008).

Current perspectives on rehabilitation hold that certain behavioral changes and life skills are valuable for desistance or reduction in criminal behavior. These behaviors and life skills include effective coping skills for addressing life challenges, a positive worldview and self-identity; increased motivation, concern and caring for others, and habits of future planning (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). These skills are acquired through social-emotional learning and self-reflection, which are supported by art education (Brewster, 2015).

Empowerment

In criminal justice discourse, "empowerment" most commonly refers to a psychological quality of a person's sense of autonomy, self-confidence, and control over one's future (Pollack, 2000; Young, 1994). Research has identified the positive impact of arts programs on psychological well-being, whether an art therapist or a teaching artist runs the program. Benefits include heightened self-esteem, feelings of accomplishment and self-efficacy, or a person's confidence in setting and achieving a goal (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016).

Participating in arts programs enhances a positive worldview (Oesterreich & Flores, 2009). Arts programs tend to operate in a democratic, supportive, and sensitive atmosphere, providing participants with an environment that supports a hopeful outlook (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). Participants who learn vocational skills in arts programs may be more likely to express optimism about employment possibilities post-incarceration.

Creative arts can build a positive self-identity. Incarcerated artists can explore their emotions through self-reflection and vulnerability and develop new insights (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). The arts can provide an enjoyable low-stakes path for reconnecting with education and contribute to resilience (Bain & Eisen-Martin, 2017; Gussak, 2016; Lea et al., 2019). Incarcerated artists develop self-confidence when they improve their skills and their peers appreciate their work (Johnson, 2008).

Participants in arts programs are more likely to pursue further educational opportunities (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). Academic skills can be strengthened through arts programming, motivating and preparing students for academic learning by improving their work ethic and enriching critical thinking and verbal skills (Brewster, 2015). In addition, educational attainment is correlated with an improved self-image (Ronel & Elisha, 2011).

Gussak (2016) wrote about the distinction between art therapy and art that is therapeutic. For Gussak, art therapy addresses trauma and illness through the process of artmaking, and the product is secondary. Art therapy has five benefits. First, some people struggle with verbal communication and may benefit from art as an alternative method of expression. Second, art may be a more culturally acceptable form of expression, especially in the hostile environment of prisons. In addition, people who excel in art can earn respect from others. Third, art provides an opportunity for emotional escape. Fourth, art is a safe way of being vulnerable. It is an alternative to physical and sometimes violent forms of self-expression. Fifth, art can facilitate honesty and openness. Because art is not explicit, people can feel safe externalizing their emotions.

On the other hand, therapeutic art focuses equally on the process and the product. In a case study, Gussak (2016) looked at the benefits for incarcerated people who collaborated to the design and completion of a mural on the wall of a chapel within the prison grounds. The participants developed a sense of purpose and ownership of the project and finished it with minimal instruction from the teaching artist facilitators. They worked as a team, with each member accepting responsibility for their contributions and respecting the contributions of others. They felt pride and self-worth in completing the mural, and the staff at the prison began to see them as individuals and to respect their humanity. For Gussak (2016), the degree of therapeutic benefits of arts in prisons depends on how the teaching artists or art therapists approach the process.

Arts programs can empower students by offering them choices in subject matter and techniques, thus building confidence (Clements, 2004). When students are provided the opportunity to make choices, when their opinions are valued and affirmed, and when they are

given the freedom to imagine and create their vision for the future, they aspire for a future that is not limited by their present circumstances (Green, 2010; Kotin et al., 2013). They perceive possibilities for success rather than fear failure. They can accomplish goals, giving them the feeling that they can control their futures.

Empowerment and self-efficacy, an individual's belief that they can plan and accomplish personal goals, are needed for rehabilitation to be successful. Arts therapy programs have been used to help incarcerated women reimagine and reconstruct their selfhood (Johnson, 2008), giving them the power to redefine their identity. Improving social skills and institutional compliance is not adequate for achieving lasting rehabilitation. For rehabilitation, individuals must choose to change themselves rather than be changed by systems of social control (Clements, 2004).

Most research on arts programs in prisons focuses on changes in the behavior of incarcerated people, such as building positive interpersonal relationships; improving time management, motivation, initiative, social competence, self-reflection, and self-control; and developing pride and self-confidence. While these findings are significant, they do not address the societal context. These studies focused on how art programs change individual behaviors and acculturate people to comply more with institutions and social expectations. Such research may contribute to the normalization of the carceral system and ignore how society contributes to harm. The conclusions reinforce the priorities of the carceral institutions by valuing obedience and compliance rather than self-determination and critical thinking. The systemic causes of incarceration remain unquestioned.

Emancipation

Art can contribute to emancipation, creating conditions for individuals to cast aside the limitations placed on them and actively advocate for change for themselves and others. Incarcerated artists can use creativity to reflect on issues that matter to them. Using art, they can use diverse learning styles and strengths to express themselves and communicate with others. They can share their experiences in ways that inspire empathy and reach new audiences.

Bain and Eisen-Martin (2017) offered an example of liberatory pedagogy in a study of "Lyrical Minded," an arts program offered to court-involved youth in California. The program included education in music history, production, and performance. Students developed leadership skills through collaboration and mutual respect. By engaging through a culturally relevant interest—hip hop music—the students developed critical analysis skills of music and the negative stereotypes and limitations imposed on them by society and institutions like schools and the police. They assumed agency for writing counter-narratives of themselves and their communities and challenged the institutional systems that disempower and marginalize them. The authors included the lyrics the students wrote in the case study, allowing them to speak for themselves and represent the program's impact on them.

An example of liberatory pedagogy is the Phoenix Players Theatre Group in New York State. Drawing on the theories of Brazilian educational theorists Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire, the Theatre Group used theater to serve political and social goals. This collective is run by incarcerated people and supplemented by outside teaching artists (Fesette & Levitt, 2017). The teaching artists rejected the role of experts and conceived of their role as witnessing. They supported leadership development among the participants. They resisted recreating the power dynamic of the powerful and powerless and recognized that they gain as much as they give. The

authors acknowledged that their presence was at the invitation of the incarcerated people who held leadership roles. Through a dialogic process, the Theater Group strove to become more aware of how the systems that imprison them work, creating physical and mental cages. They developed original improvisation games that engaged their distinctive talents and confronted their unique circumstances. Building democratic relationships was paramount. Aware that the prison is authoritarian in every aspect, they created a free and egalitarian culture within their group. By creating original theater performances based on personal experiences, they addressed both personal traumas and societal harms. Liberatory pedagogy honors the wisdom that students have gained through life experiences and creates a mutually respectful relationship and shared power between the teacher and students. It strives to support more engaged citizens who analyze and advocate for social good.

Mass incarceration, coupled with racism in the criminal legal system, creates a complicated context for arts educators to navigate. Student/teacher relations are necessarily framed by systemic racism. The School-to-Prison Pipeline has trapped many of the incarcerated students, leaving them with a distrust of formal education. Incarcerated students are more likely to have experienced multiple traumatic events in their youth, resulting in psychological harm that can impede trusting relationships and learning. Nonetheless, numerous studies have suggested that general education and the arts specifically can contribute to reducing incarceration rates and can improve the lives of people who are incarcerated.

Art Educators in Prisons

As expected, art educators have a diverse range of approaches to teaching in prisons. Some want to treat their students like any student on a college campus. Some believe it is necessary to design a curriculum adapted to the unique environment and the needs of the

individual students. While each prison has unique rules making it difficult to generalize, the only training that most prisons require for art educators is security training. There are no nationwide standards for training or certification for teaching art in prisons.

Phyllis Kornfield was a prison arts instructor for 30+ years. She published a book of her students' work and organized a touring exhibition. She lectured about teaching in prisons at numerous college campuses. In an in-depth series of interviews with Michalski (2019), Kornfield explained her approach to teaching in prison. First, she wanted her students to "discover the parts of themselves they have never been aware of, or the best parts of being human" (Michalski, 2019, p. 72). She refused to discuss artmaking's "therapeutic" aspects, preferring to focus on her students as artists. "'All I'm interested in is helping each be the best artist he or she can be'" (Michalski, 2019, p. 76).

Kornfield saw her students as genuine artists who needed a disciplined approach to develop their skills. She developed a set of practices to create a positive, creative environment. Students signed in to the classroom to affirm their commitment to being artists. She forbade talking during class because she felt that conversations were distracting from the focus on artmaking. She never discussed prison life with her students or the crimes they were imprisoned for. She said, "I never try to find out what they were in for. I feel it is irrelevant. I don't want to know what a guy did. How could I meet with him the next day afresh?" (Michalski, 2019, p. 73). She always wanted to see her students as artists and avoided any conversations that might undermine that identity. Kornfield felt that strict rules established a productive, creative class. Anyone who broke a rule was asked to leave. Very rarely, when the rule-breaking was especially serious, she would ask them not to return.

Appleman (2013) taught creative writing in a men's prison in Minnesota, where the majority of her students were incarcerated for serious violent crimes. She taught in prison in the same way she would have taught on a college campus—with a similar pedagogical approach, assignments, and class structure. She encouraged her students to write autobiographical stories and claimed that when the men told their stories in their writing, it had a "humanizing effect" on them. She arranged to publish an anthology of their writing, saying that doing so was a liberatory pedagogy practice in Paulo Freire's tradition. Proceeds from sales of the books went to apology letter workshops, victim/perpetrator meetings, youth offender mentoring, and the like, as a form of "restorative justice" (Appleman, 2013, p. 29). Her response to teaching in a prison was conflicted. She wrote:

> I try to treat them with respect and regard that all students in a classroom deserve, and yet I can't forget that they are here in this awful place because they have been found guilty of doing awful things. They are not the good guys, I remind myself. But they seem good to me. (Appleman, 2013, p. 29)

Publishing the work of incarcerated students can create an ethical dilemma for an educator. Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) identified the ethical responsibilities of educators who teach in prisons. They supported providing an opportunity for incarcerated people to represent themselves because doing so would counter stereotypes, acknowledge complexities, and present a more nuanced understanding of crime and incarceration. However, they advocated "an ethical approach to representation without perpetuating the likelihood of personal or community harm" (p. 70). For Hinshaw and Jacobi, an ethical approach included discussing the complexities of publishing with the writers beforehand:

> Such practices include building rhetorical awareness about the politics of representation through deliberate conversation before circulation occurs, the implementation of transparent guidelines for institutional expectations and regulations for textual publications, and the use of clear and understandable permission-to-publish

> consent forms. We also advocate making available alternative venues for publication, as well as a promotion of writing. (p. 70)

Sarah Shotland (2019) taught creative writing in a women's facility in a county jail. The course was not for college credit, and students volunteered to participate. Some would come just once; others returned for years. She built a curriculum that intended to interest someone participating in the workshop for the first time as well as someone who has taken it multiple times would enjoy. She strove to meet students' different needs, motivations, and ambitions. Shotland wanted the class to be both rigorous and encouraging. There were no grades or degrees, so students were self-motivated.

Shotland found that teaching in jail required her to be flexible and to do many things at once. Her students had a variety of learning styles and levels of preparation. Shotland wrote that 90% of incarcerated women had experienced sexual violence in their lives. The profound trauma that they had experienced impacted the classroom dynamic. Shotland found that the creation of a quiet space to contemplate had the effect of surfacing trauma. In addition, while detachment from the emotional content of writing is common on university campuses, but Shotland found that not to be true in jail. Discussing the difference between public and private writing was essential—writing to be shared and writing for oneself.

Traditionally, writing workshops are consistent groups of writers who write regularly and share work in advance (Shotland, 2019, p. 94). However, Shotland learned that was impossible in jail. The workshop participants did not have a dedicated space and time for writing, as writers do on the outside. The distractions in jail were intense. Loud noises, interruptions, delays, discomfort in the physical environment, too-hot or too-cold temperatures, weird smells, and medications make it hard to concentrate.

Shotland (2019) developed a pedagogical approach specific to teaching in prison. She had an "anticipatory set plan," meaning she intentionally created the environment's tone and tenor. She developed an "embodied pedagogy" (p. 93), acknowledging that writing is a physical practice. She created individualized writing prompts in sealed envelopes that she distributed as writers entered the classroom. These envelopes gave writers a physical thing to do: a transition from being an "inmate" in the jail to a writer in the workshop. She slowed down the beginning of the class to create a space between the workshop and the rest of the prison. She learned to value the power of silence.

While it is common for authors to listen quietly in writer workshops on the outside, like a fly-on-the-wall, while others discuss their work, Shotland's workshops centered on the writer. Readers asked questions of the writer. The writer had the right to refuse to answer any question. Because it was difficult for participants to write outside of the workshop time, Shotland included writing time in the workshop.

A brief survey of educators' narratives presents a variety of approaches to teaching. Kornfield was strict and taught the incarcerated artists in the same way she would non-incarcerated artists. She rejected the therapeutic aspects of artmaking and made a point of not knowing what crimes her students were convicted of. Appleman did not change her teaching approach either. However, she was aware of the crimes her students were convicted of, which seemed to impact her perception of them. On the contrary, Shotland emphasized adjusting teaching practices for the environment and trauma's impact on the classroom.

Conclusion

In the United States, the purpose of incarceration is punishment and retribution, while rehabilitation and education are secondary. Prisons are designed to be punitive and secure,

keeping communities and prison staff safe from “criminals.” Prisons do not provide people who are incarcerated with the tools to survive once they are released. Instead, prisons reinforce the trauma and violence that people may have experienced before incarceration (Leyva & Bickel, 2010).

Arts educators who teach in carceral facilities face many obstacles yet also attain numerous rewards unique to the setting. Understanding their experiences can shed light on who is teaching in prisons and what kinds of arts education are offered. Collecting their stories can contribute to creating counter-narratives to standard conceptions of prison education.

Chapter 3. THE FLOW AND SWELL (METHOD)

I conducted a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) inquiry to study the phenomenon of teaching art in the prison system. I was guided by the following research questions: How might teaching art take shape for educators in the prison system, with all its complexity? How do unexpected moments—the surprises that happen while teaching—help co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom? How do non-human elements—for example, specific art materials or the prison environment—co-produce the teaching experience?

In this chapter, I provide a short background to phenomenological research. In order to do phenomenological research, "one must know the philosophy" (Vagle, 2025, p. 158). Next, I provide an overview of PIP inquiry. This is distinct from transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, extending the hermeneutic/interpretative phenomenological approach by incorporating aspects of post-structural philosophy. PIP focuses on the participants' ever-evolving stories of experience. I want to hear their stories; I want to understand the phenomena that are shaped as a result of their experiences teaching art in prisons—with their students, the prison personnel, the materials, and the social, political, and structural conditions that "flow and swell" (Vagle, 2025, p. 144) through these teaching experiences. I want to learn how their experiences, values, and beliefs about artmaking and teaching art are shaped, provoked, and produced in the context of their ongoing teaching experiences, among their interactions with students, prison staff, and the prison system. Finally, I describe the five-component process (Vagle 2025) for PIP research, and how I collected and analyzed the material for this study.

Background

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand a phenomenon by studying it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology assumes

all knowledge is acquired through conscious experience. Our experiences create reality (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 97).

Philosophy of Phenomenology

The two main types of phenomenology are transcendental or descriptive, which is associated with the philosopher Husserl and hermeneutic or interpretive, which is associated with the philosopher Heidegger.

As developed by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century, phenomenology is the study of consciousness. It studies experiences of various types, such as seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, feeling, and acting, from the first-person point of view. Consciousness is always "intentional" in that it is always conscious "of" something (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 97). In transcendental phenomenology, Husserl focused on the pure or transcendental consciousness—in other words, the experience of a phenomenon by the individual person in isolation from any context of the world around them (Smith, 2018).

Martin Heidegger laid out his understanding of phenomenology in his book *Being and Time* (1927). For Heidegger, "lived experience is an interpretive process situated in an individual's lifeworld" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91). The "lifeworld" refers to the world as it is directly experienced in everyday life, encompassing individual, social, perceptual, and practical experiences. Heidegger was interested in the actions of humans in the world. His focus in studying experience was on the interaction between a person and the world. Hermeneutic philosophy is an ontological understanding of the world, focusing on "being" rather than "knowing." A person's experience of a phenomenon is not separate from the world. Consciousness is created through "historically lived experiences including a person's individual history and the culture in which he/she was raised" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 94). Heidegger

argued that people and their actions are always "in the world," so we should interpret our actions and their meanings by studying them within the context of the world.

In transcendental philosophy, a person "knows" the world through their conscious perception of the world. In hermeneutic philosophy, a person "is in" the world, and their experience is created by their relation with/to the world.

Phenomenological Inquiry

Phenomenological inquiry learns about specific phenomena as people experience them. It can contribute to understanding art educators' experiences in prisons. While there are many variations of phenomenological research, most have developed from the two traditions of transcendental or hermeneutic phenomenology.

Transcendental Phenomenological Inquiry

In the transcendental research tradition, the researcher develops an understanding of a phenomenon through the lived experience of people. Knowledge of the world lies within the individual. The researcher brackets their own experiences out of the research during data collection and analysis to understand and describe as closely as possible the conscious experience of the participants. In this tradition, a researcher collects data, generates themes from analyzing significant statements, and develops descriptions of the phenomenon. Researchers look for the phenomenon's essence by identifying what is the same across different descriptions (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91).

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Inquiry

In hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, consciousness is understood to be created through "historically lived experiences including a person's individual history and the culture in which he/she was raised" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 94). It is often called interpretative

phenomenological inquiry because it emphasizes interpretation and analysis. The researcher does not bracket the researcher's subjective position; their knowledge and experiences are valuable guides to inquiry (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 95). Researchers in the hermeneutic/interpretive tradition acknowledge that the observer is part of the world and is not bias-free. Scholars "describe engaging in a hermeneutic circle wherein the researcher reads the data, constructs a vague understanding, engages in reflective writing, then re-engages with the text with revised understandings" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 95). Through reflection, the researcher interprets the experience of the participants.

Summary

Transcendental phenomenological inquiry focuses on finding within the participant experience the "essence" of a phenomenon. The researcher brackets out excess knowledge about the site, social constructs, and so on, and only studies the participant data.

Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry sees the phenomenon as located in the interaction between the "lifeworld" and the participant. The participant's experience is determined by and determines the nature of the phenomenon.

A Constant State of Becoming: Post-Intentional Phenomenological Inquiry

PIP extends the hermeneutic/interpretative phenomenological approach by incorporating aspects of post-structural philosophy. It is distinct from earlier forms of phenomenological research in that it does not seek an "essence" of a phenomenon, nor does it attempt to "bracket" out excess knowledge. This section introduces post-structuralism and explains how it enriches the PIP approach. I also explain the design of this PIP study.

Post-Structuralism

PIP inquiry incorporates post-structuralist philosophy to further open the research to unexpected insights and stray from conventional practices that might limit a researcher's ability to see beyond assumptions. "Post" does not refer to "after" or "in opposition" to intentionality. Instead, it refers to "experimenting with some post-structuralist ideas" (Vagle, 2025, p. 141).

To clarify, I offer a brief explanation of what "intentionality" means. In traditional phenomenology, intentionality refers to "how we are meaningfully connected to the world" (Vagle, 2025, p. 36). Phenomenological research studies "a phenomenon and the intentional relations that manifest and appear" (p. 36). Phenomenological researchers study how people are meaningfully connected with the world. For Husserl and transcendental phenomenology, the intentionality of a particular phenomenon will have "essential" structures or qualities. For Heidegger and hermeneutic phenomenology, phenomena are "manifestations" that "come into being" through intentional relations. For Heidegger, intentional relations are always interpretations of manifestations. Unlike earlier forms of phenomenological research, a researcher using PIP does not believe phenomena are stable or have an "essence." In PIP, intentional relations are created through dynamic interrelations that "tie participants, the researcher, the context, broader social issues and matters, the produced text, and their positionalities together" (Vagle, 2025, p. 40).

PIP embraces Deleuze and Guattari's both/more approach to intentionality. The participant is not a stable subject, and a PIP researcher does not try to understand the subject's "intending" on the world (Vagle, 2025, p. 145). The subject/participant is constructed by the world and constructing their world. Intentionalities are "brought into being by embodied subjects" (p. 145) among and through interactions with the world. They are thought to be "in a

constant state of becoming" (p. 141). Post-structuralism and PIP inquiry are committed to destabilizing and subverting oppositions, binaries, and critiques (Vagle, 2025, p. 141).

In *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, Mark Vagle (2025) described PIP as "partial, situated, endlessly deferred, and circulating through relations" (p. 141). He defined PIP as studying the interrelations of the researcher, the participants, the text, the context, and the social and political issues.

This definition fits well with my interest in the phenomenon of teaching art in prison. When I teach art in jail, I bring certain skills and materials, and the participants bring their skills and wisdom, and together, we create new knowledge through art experiences. The environment has a substantial impact on our collaborative learning experience. Who gets incarcerated is impacted by social and political issues such as racism, income inequality, and under-resourced communities. Studying prison art education is well suited for PIP because it is an approach that is open to gathering material from multiple participants and sources and reflecting on a phenomenon and how it is produced while accounting for social and political contexts. Phenomena and experiences can simultaneously have multiple meanings, depending on the context and prior experiences of the participants. Vagle explained Deleuze and Guattari's *lines of flight* as meaning "taking off," leaks, intensities, or flows and swells (p. 144). By examining how things connect, we can discover "plural lines of flight" (p. 144) that elude, flee, and entangle over space, context, and time. Lines of flight resist establishing a stable definition of lived experience and knowledge. In a PIP analysis of the phenomenal material, the researcher "chases" these lines of flight by asking questions to discover new perspectives and to resist falling into habitual patterns of thinking (Vagle, 2025, p. 171).

A single incident can be told in different stories with multiple meanings, and all can be "true." A teacher might tell the story of the incident differently each time she tells it, depending on who is listening and why she is telling it. Does she want me to understand the lesson she was leading, or does she want me to know something about a specific student? I can interpret a story in multiple ways by focusing on different aspects of the story. The educator's version of the story, I assume, is different from what the student would tell. Suppose I think about the power relations between a teacher and student. In that case, I might begin to read "between the lines" and wonder if the teacher misinterpreted or misrepresented, if the student was honest about their reaction, or if the student was "code-switching" or trying to impress the teacher or another student. Depending on the lens I look through at any given moment, the text I produce and the way I produce the phenomenon will vary.

In PIP, the phenomenon is experienced by the individual within and among a social apparatus (Vagle, 2025, p. 155). The phenomenon is shaped, provoked, and produced by the context (p. 160), which, in the broadest sense, includes social norms, policies, or dominant narratives, and in the narrowest sense, includes physical spaces, places, situations, and moments. In the prison context, the broad context for the phenomenon of teaching art might include the criminal justice system, the surveillance and security apparatus of the prison, and popular culture depictions of incarceration; the narrow context might include physical carceral facilities such as classrooms; the correctional officers in a specific situation; the individuals who are incarcerated in all their complexity (the men, women, people of color, people with mental health challenges, people with physical disabilities, etc.); and the individual teachers and their beliefs about incarceration, art, freedom, and the lesson plans they bring to the class, and the researcher. The

phenomenon of teaching art in prisons resides among all of these "multiple and varied contexts" (Vagle, 2025, p. 159).

A key concept of PIP inquiry is post-reflexivity, through which the researcher explores how their prior knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs co-produce the phenomenon. For example, as an art educator who teaches in jail, my own experiences shape this research project. Post-reflexion is an ongoing process that happens before, during, and after the research process. Post-reflexion includes attending to moments of connection/disconnection, assumptions of what is "normal," the beliefs to which we are committed, and moments of shock (Vagle, 2025, p. 168).

Post-reflexion is distinct from researcher reflexivity, as it is used in traditional phenomenological research. Researcher reflexivity is defined as "consistently examining how one's positionality, perspectives, backgrounds, and insights influence all aspects of a study" (Vagle, 2025, p. 22). A researcher reflects on how their biases may distort the findings or analysis. To reflect is "to block and redirect; to make (something) manifest or apparent, or to realize, consider; to produce a mirrorlike image" (*Merriam-Webster*, 2025). In traditional phenomenological research, the researcher's positionality is thought to be stable and to inhibit their ability to "see" outside of their assumptions. Post-reflexion emphasizes that the researcher's positionality is "in flux (ever-changing) and contextual" (Vagle, 2025, p. 22). A reflex is an action that is performed as a response to a stimulus and without conscious thought (*Merriam-Webster*, 2025). The researcher is not stable but instead is responding to the many aspects of the phenomenon, which are, in turn, responding to the researcher.

A researcher using a PIP approach studies the interrelations of the researcher, the participants, the text, the context, and the social and political issues, with each of these parts

contributing to the lived experience of the phenomenon. The principles of PIP, as a methodology, focus on the "becoming" of the phenomenon.

Design of Study

Vagle (2025) suggested that researchers follow a five-component approach to PIP inquiry. The five components are:

1. Identify a post-intentional phenomenon in context around a social issue.
2. Devise a clear yet flexible plan for gathering phenomenological material.
3. Make a post-reflexion plan.
4. Explore the phenomenon using theory, material, and post-reflexion.
5. Craft a text that engages the provocations and entanglement of the phenomenon. (p. 154)

In Chapter 1, I introduced the phenomenon of teaching art in prison. In this section, I elaborate on components 2 and 3. I introduce component 4, exploring the phenomenon through theory, which is further implemented in Chapters 4 and 5. I develop the post-reflexion in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Component 5 is reflected in the completed dissertation document.

The Post-Intentional Phenomenon

In this study, I examined the phenomenon of art teaching in the prison system through the lived experiences of art educators who teach in prisons. As a PIP, the phenomenon is constantly in flux, with interactions among the participants and researcher and the context shaping and reshaping the experiences.

The prison system is a complicated setting with relations of power and domination that shape the participants' teaching experiences. The prison administration prioritizes security over learning. Every prison has its own set of rules and restrictions. In general, reading materials such as books are censored, although which books are censored varies from prison to prison, and even from week to week within the same institution. Teachers' access to art materials like pencils,

paper, paint, among others, is restricted for security reasons, though which art supplies and what quantities are allowed varies in each instance. The reasons for censorship can seem arbitrary. New rules seem to be created in the moment by the corrections officers. The atmosphere can be oppressive.

Teachers often remark that the students in prisons are very different from those on a traditional campus. People in prisons are more likely than the general population to come from low-income communities, have lower educational achievement, and be people of color. Rates of mental illness are higher in prisons than in the U.S. population, with "up to a third of incarcerated people having a serious mental illness" (Warth, 2022, n.p.). They are dealing with the stress and trauma of incarceration. However, teachers often remark on their students' enthusiasm to be in class and learn. They report that their students seem more engaged than those in the outside world.

Prisons are dangerous and violent places. While many people who are incarcerated come to prison with pre-existing mental illnesses, the prison setting exacerbates symptoms. Suicide rates are almost double in prisons compared to the U.S. population, at 26 vs. 14 per 100,000 people. The homicide rate in state prisons is 2.5 times higher than in the U.S. population (Wang & Sawyer, 2021). Those who witness violence often "experience post-traumatic stress symptoms, like anxiety, depression, avoidance, hypersensitivity, hypervigilance, suicidality, flashbacks, and difficulty with emotional regulation" (Widra, 2020, n.p.). Prisons are dangerous places, but there is seldom violence in the classroom. Incarcerated people have a rule among themselves that the classroom is a special place, and bringing violence into the classroom is taboo.

Unexpected moments—the surprises that happen while teaching—can help co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom. The prison environment is rife with unexpected moments. Classes can be interrupted or canceled for security reasons. A new rule that prohibits materials can upend lesson plans. Students may be dealing with traumatic events that make concentration difficult. Students can also be surprising, with brilliant insights that may be informed by their life experiences. Teachers in prisons can learn to adapt their teaching plans day by day to respond to the interruptions and needs of the students.

Non-human elements—for example, specific art materials or the prison environment—may co-produce the teaching experience. Sometimes, restrictions can inspire creativity. When art materials are restricted in a prison, the teachers and students can be forced to improvise. Materials already in the classroom or belonging to the students can become art materials. In part because of the restrictions, the power of traditional art materials can be much stronger. A tray of paints is more vibrant and alluring in a prison where beauty and color are lacking. To become lost in the texture and color of paint or in the challenge of manipulating paper and tape to create a sculpture is an escape from the room where one is standing. The pleasure of making art is more intense when joy is scarce.

By remaining attuned to theory and theoretical principles as a way of engaging iteratively in "working" the data, I studied how the experience of teaching art in prisons is shaped by the complexities of the prison, by the unexpected moments, and by the non-human elements in the art classroom.

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and emails. To find the participants, I drew on networks of organizations such as:

- nonprofit service providers who work with incarcerated people;
- universities that offer for-credit college courses in prisons and advocate for increased access to college for incarcerated people;
- arts organizations that provide programs in prisons; and
- individuals with whom I am personally acquainted who teach art in prisons.

I sent introductory emails describing my study and followed up with phone calls. The criteria for participants included that they have taught art in a carceral setting for at least 1 year and have an interest in creating just and equitable classrooms. There are no national standards or certifications for teaching art in prisons, so formal credentials were not a criterion for participation.

During the initial recruitment phone conversation, I explained that the study had received IRB approval from my university. I reviewed the informed consent forms, explaining that I would maintain confidentiality and protect participant identity by using pseudonyms for individuals and locations (see Appendix A). I also told the educators that I would share the transcripts with them to ensure accuracy and privacy. I asked if each teacher would be willing to participate. If they agreed, I sent them the informed consent using Docusign, a software program that manages electronic agreements with electronic signatures.

Vagle (2025) suggested that researchers select participants who can provide a rich and thorough description of the phenomenon (p. 162). For this study, I interviewed four art educators who comprised a diverse group. I used pseudonyms for the participants. Diane was a white woman who taught art for 22 years in men's and women's prisons. She had an MFA in studio art and an MA in Creative Writing. Mary was a white woman who had an MFA in studio art and had been teaching in a men's prison for about 3 years when I spoke with her. She had previously

taught young women in a juvenile detention facility. Jack was a white professor, had a PhD in art education, taught art education to undergraduates at a college, and had been teaching in a men's facility for 3 years. During COVID, he began offering remote learning with curricula designed by his art education students at a local college. Marvin was a person of color who had started leading art programs while he himself was incarcerated. When I spoke with him, he was teaching art in a men's facility and supporting college programs in several prisons and for formerly incarcerated people on a college campus. Diane, Mary, and Jack were all visual artists; Marvin was a writer. Diane and Mary lived on the Northeast coast of the United States, while Jack and Marvin lived on the Northwest coast.

I had difficulty recruiting educators of color to participate in the study. In my experience, the vast majority of art educators who teach in prison are white women, resulting in a small pool of potential people of color who could be participants. In addition, art educators of color may have been skeptical participating in a study conducted by a white woman and declined to respond to my calls for participants.

I searched the internet and asked informants if they could connect me with an art educator who taught in prison who was a person of color. I found one art educator of color who teaches in prison by searching the internet, but they did not respond to my inquiry. I was able to recruit one person of color—Marvin—through word-of-mouth. I did not think to ask Marvin how he identified; I assumed he was Black, and I later realized that he may have been Hispanic, Afro-Latino, or some other identity. Perhaps my lack of curiosity was due to my belonging to the dominant racial category.

Gathering the Phenomenological Material

I gathered material by interviewing educators, reading about the artworks that the educators introduced to their students, researching the prison context, and writing in a post-reflexion journal. I interviewed four art educators, asking them about their experiences, including their classrooms' physical space; interactions with corrections officers and students; lesson plans; and beliefs about incarceration, art, freedom, and other topics. I researched information about the artworks they shared with their students to better understand why they chose them and to reflect on the stories they told about student responses. I gathered information online about the social norms, policies, and dominant narratives about incarceration in the United States. Throughout the research process, I wrote post-reflexions that made connections among the stories the participants told, the artworks in the stories, the prison system that shapes the stories, and my own experiences teaching in a jail. See Table 1 for the data types that I gathered for this study and the sources from which I collected these data.

Narrative Inquiry as a Model for Gathering Material. I modelled my interviews after a narrative inquiry approach because it provided a framework for gathering and retelling the participants' stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry results in mutual storytelling. The participant shares their experiences, and the researcher retells the stories, acknowledging their role in the retelling without dominating the story. It has a collaborative nature, which empowers participants and builds a sense of community (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). The researcher collects stories about past experiences and listens for imagined futures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

Table 1

Data Types and Sources

Data Type	Data Sources	Relevance
Texts and documents	A variety of websites, such as prison websites, legal journals, newspapers, and investigative reporting from non-profit organizations to gather contextualizing information	…provides context
Conversations	Semi-structured conversations with teaching artist participants guided by a protocol	…provides narratives of personal experiences of teaching art in prisons
Artworks	Images of artworks that the educators introduced to their students	…provides a richer understanding of the educator's teaching practices and the classroom context
Post-reflexion notes	My personal experiences and subjective reactions to the conversations as recorded in my fieldnotes and research journal	…provides awareness of how my subjectivity and situatedness influence all aspects of the research transparency

In retelling the stories, I incorporated excerpts and minimized the edits, while striving to make the excerpts accessible and enjoyable to the reader. I included sections of the transcript verbatim to maintain the original speech habits and styles (Kim, 2008). According to Clandinin and Murphy (2009), experience is "ongoing (continuous), fluid, shifting, and changing as both researchers' and participants' lives are lived out in situations shaped by social, cultural, institutional, and linguistic narratives" (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 601).

I recorded the conversations I had with the educators and turned the recordings into transcripts. Then, I shaped the transcripts into stories. I wrote into the stories, interweaving them with theory and recollections of my own experiences teaching art in jail. I supplemented the stories with context, such as background information about incarceration, art, and pedagogy. I wrote into the stories "as a form of restless inquiry" (Vinz, 2024, p. 54). I did not "explain" what the stories "mean." Instead, I looked for portals to open them to multiple meanings. I "move[d] away from legislating meaning and toward contradictory voices, counternarratives, and competing understanding" (Lather, 1992, p. 488).

I am mindful that one story can be told in multiple ways by the same teller, depending on the reason they tell the story, their mood, and their audience. In retelling the narratives, I was shaping a version of the participants' experiences that was multiple and in flux. The stories of the educators, the other people with whom they interact, and the non-human aspects of the phenomenon are all entangled, co-creating the phenomenon.

The Conversations. I interviewed four art educators over 3 months. The frequency at which I spoke with them varied, primarily because of their availability. Diane and Mary were enthusiastic to talk with me about their teaching experiences. Both mentioned that they enjoyed having someone to talk with who understood their experiences because I also teach incarcerated

people. Jack is a professor at a university. In the spring of 2024, student protests, as occurred on many other college campuses, disrupted Jack's teaching and created additional administrative responsibilities. His availability to talk with me was limited. I was introduced to Marvin through word-of-mouth. When I met Marvin, he was completing a master's degree and working several jobs, so his time was also limited.

All of the interviews were conducted over Zoom. While I would have liked to interview the educators in person, they live in geographically diverse locations, and commuting for in-person interviews would have further limited my ability to talk to them. Zoom technology also made recording and transcribing the interviews more efficient.

I spoke with some of the educators multiple times and spoke only once with one person. Table 2 presents a breakdown of length and frequency of each interview with each participant.

Table 2

Interviews

Educator	Interviews
Diane	2 interviews, one hour each, Zoom recorded 3 interviews, 30 minutes each, Zoom recorded 4 voice-recorded journal notes, 10 minutes each
Mary	1 interview, one hour, Zoom recorded 2 interviews, 30 minutes, Zoom recorded
Jack	1 interview, one hour, Zoom recorded
Marvin	1 interview, one hour, Zoom recorded 1 interview, 30 minutes, Zoom recorded

As in all work in a carceral setting, confidentiality is a priority. This study received IRB approval from my university. I know that participants may endanger their relationships with the prison administrations if their involvement in a study becomes known. The protocol outlined in the IRB application was designed to maintain the confidentiality of all participants, the identity of the institutions where they teach, and all their students. All names in the study are pseudonyms, and I limited identifying characteristics to the extent possible. I provided participants with preliminary transcripts to ensure that no private information was disclosed. Participants signed a letter of informed consent that explained the precautions taken and assured them of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. See the Appendix A for a sample informed consent.

Post-Reflexion Plan. In PIP, post-reflexion is an opportunity for a researcher to explore how their own experiences co-produce the phenomenon (Vagle, 2025, p. 167). It is a form of writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). PIP researchers post-reflex before, during, and after gathering phenomenological material to identify what assumptions they hold and what surprises may exist in the data (Vagle, 2025, p. 167).

My post-reflexion process began with transcribing the interviews using Otter.ai. I corrected the transcriptions, removing inaudible parts and unnecessary words such as “like,” “uh,” and so on. As I corrected the transcripts, I became familiar with them and wrote follow-up questions. Thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 2023) helped me locate my assumptions about what seemed surprising or normal and pay attention to moments with which I instinctively connected or disconnected (Vagle, 2025, p. 184). I used an iterative process of transcribing interviews, reflecting, rereading the interviews, conducting follow-up interviews, and further reflecting throughout the research process.

Writing in a post-reflexion journal, I delved more deeply into the conversations. I connected the educators' stories and my experiences teaching art in a jail. I read widely about criminal justice policy and the carceral system to understand the broad context. I tried different theoretical lenses to understand the educators' experiences and how the context and meaning might shift through time and from various perspectives. I referred to the theories of critical pedagogy, new materialism, and abolition that I introduced earlier, but I also tried out other theories that seemed relevant to the different narratives. I reflected on my reflections in an iterative, entangled, non-linear process (Vagle, 2025, p. 173).

Thinking with Theory

PIP does not rely on a theoretical framework but instead "thinks with theory" (Vagle, 2025, p. 172). Vagle wrote that a theoretical framework can be limiting, a "structure that filters what you can and cannot say in your analysis" (p. 158). Thinking with theory is more flexible, emerging "as assemblage, attaching itself to philosophy rather than the dogmatic image of thought in conventional qualitative research" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023, p. 2). Jackson and Mazzei (2013) articulated "thinking with theory" as a generative action that is fluid and multiple. A PIP researcher should identify theories that they want to think with early in the research process, but remain open to other theories that may be generative as the phenomenon comes into view. As an abolitionist, I am committed to liberatory education. However, as I engaged in the iterative process of reading, reflecting, rereading, and reflecting again, I remained open to thinking with other useful theories for interpreting and analyzing the materials.

In this study, I drew on concepts from three theories in particular: (a) abolition theory, (b) critical pedagogy, and (c) new materialism. In this section, I present each of the three theories that I thought with throughout this dissertation, beginning with abolition theory.

Abolition

Angela Davis (2011) saw prison abolition as a necessary step towards society becoming something new, something better. We cannot abolish prisons and just expect the newly freed people to be all right. There is too much trauma before, during and after prison. Abolitionist decarceration includes providing housing, nutrition, healthcare, education, and mental health counseling. Society can be restructured to prioritize healing, not punishment. Abolition requires a paradigm shift—away from punishment and racial capitalism, towards healing and equity. Abolishing democracy as it exists (in some form) today, and replacing it with a more caring-centered, community-building paradigm. Guided by Davis's understanding of abolition, I think about how art and education can contribute to caring for people who are incarcerated, but also how art can help us think in new ways that break with the known.

Abolitionists, whether they advocate for abolishing police, prisons, schools, or other systems, are advocating for replacing existing systems with new systems that create more justice. Abolitionists experiment with what is yet to come. They critique the dominant systems and expose how injustice and inequalities are perpetuated through these systems. Prison abolitionists advocate for the destruction of prisons and for developing restorative, caring strategies that prevent and heal harm. Similarly, abolitionists in education strive to break the historical patterns of inequity and oppression and create a new approach to pedagogy that allows every person to achieve their true potential. Ruth Wilson Gilmore said, "Abolition is deliberately everything-ist; it's about the entirety of human-environmental relations" (Kushner, 2019, n.p.).

An abolitionist education has a liberatory agenda. It uses a culturally relevant approach, focusing on the brilliant contributions of scholars and artists that reflect the diversity of the students. The curriculum should include the full "histories of all people...including the joy, love,

resiliency, ingenuity, creativity, brilliance, pride, resistance, and ways of mattering in this world" (Love, 2019, p. 217). It creates joy as a survival strategy and a tool for resisting oppression.

Abolitionist teachers undermine power dynamics between institutions and learners (hooks, 2014; Spaulding et al., 2021). Conventional "banking" education methods should be replaced with collaborative learning. Educators center students in the classroom, undoing the traditional hierarchies between teachers and students. Students teach, and teachers learn (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 15).

Abolitionist teaching creates a homeplace (hooks, 1994) for learners. Damaris C. Dunn wrote, "This can be a community center, a dance studio, a library, a church, any place that centers and nurtures the spirit and calls on Black children to (re)member" (Spaulding et al., 2021). Abolition pedagogy can leave formal educational spaces to build knowledge in alternative spaces (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 296). An art class in a prison is an example of an alternative space.

White teachers who aspire to be abolitionists recognize the presence of racism not only in their classroom, in the prison, and in the criminal justice system, but also in their own lives. Elizabeth Claire Spaulding (Spaulding et al., 2021) wrote that white teachers need to "connect with race, deconstruct our racial identity, and engage in healing" (p. 12) before they can become abolitionist teachers and co-conspirators in the fight for freedom and justice rather than mere allies.

Art nurtures the soul. Abolitionist teaching is "dependent on art for resistance, (re)membering, joy, love, healing, and humanity" (Love, 2019, p. 99). Connecting art, creativity, and imagination, Maxine Greene saw imagination as a function of freedom (Stillwaggon 2016,

p. 28). Artists imagine the world differently than it is, sometimes visualizing a better reality. Greene (2007) wrote:

> We know that imagination reaches towards a future, towards what might be, what should be, what is not yet. Or, as Dewey once described, it is the capacity to look at things as they could be otherwise. Or it may be conceived as a 'passion for the possible.' Indeed, Emily Dickinson wrote: 'Imagination lights the slow fuse of possibility.' (p. 3)

Imagination is the catalyst of change. Art education can be a liberatory, abolitionist practice.

Thinking with abolitionist educational theory in a prison art classroom, I look for moments when teachers uplift the stories of artists who are from the same backgrounds as the students, and encourage students to feel pride, self-love, and joy. I focus on teaching strategies that introduce collaborative learning and undermine power dynamics in the prisons. I look for teaching moments that create a homeplace, where students feel safe and affirmed. I watch for instances when teachers engage in honest, vulnerable conversations about race that open the path from being an ally to a co-conspirator. Race is one important factor in understanding the phenomenon of art education in prisons. Several anecdotes addressed race, but this was not the primary focus of this study. This research project attempted to make a wholistic study of the experiences of art educators in prisons, how the prisons shape their experiences, how surprises might reveal new insights, and how the physical aspects of art education can co-create the experiences. As an abolitionist art educator, I am attentive for stories when imagination and creativity open possibilities for alternative futures.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy and abolition share many principles. In thinking with critical pedagogy theory, I focus on a few key concepts—liberation pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, the importance of community and emotions in the classroom, and acknowledging race.

Freire (2005) proposed a liberatory pedagogy that valued the lived experience of students as an important form of knowledge. Drawing on the wisdom of his students, he used dialogue and problem-posing to guide learners to question what they are taught, recognize injustice, and transform society. He created a subversive educational model that sought to empower the oppressed with the knowledge and confidence to liberate themselves. “But one does not liberate someone by alienating them. Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in a person. Liberation is a praxis: action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Liberation is not something that teachers can give to students but something that teachers and students discover and achieve together.

Extending Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, educator bell hooks (2014) wrote about engaged learning and intersectional feminism, highlighting the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and other social categories. She deconstructed and challenged systems of power and asked educators to prioritize critical engagement, empowerment, and liberation. Teachers and students share responsibility for the learning experience. hooks emphasized the importance of emotions and community in the classroom. She recognized that critical analysis may inspire powerful emotions as it leads to insights and growth; therefore, emotions are an essential part of engaged learning. hooks (1994) challenged educators to be open to students expressing emotions (p. 155).

Individuals can find support and solace in the community (hooks, 1994, p. 170). Sharing power and valuing everyone’s contributions supports robust communities. Building strong communities among teachers and students, especially in prisons and jails where Black and Brown people are disproportionately represented and teachers are disproportionately white women, can be challenging. hooks cautioned that racial dynamics in communities cannot be ignored. Teachers should be transparent and open in acknowledging race. It is essential to reflect

on “Whiteness” as well as Black and Brown identities to work toward an unbiased and inclusive environment (hooks, 1994, p. 104). White educators need to think about their privilege and reflect on their actions.

hooks (2014) urged teachers to embrace emotions as an essential part of engaged learning. Displays of emotion are discouraged in bourgeois culture, which values conformity and dispassion. Professors are often afraid of emotions because they fear losing control of the classroom. hooks challenged educators to be open to emotions in the classroom in order to encourage engaged learning and build community and cross-racial understanding.

Emotions are a natural by-product of the excitement of learning. Critical analysis can inspire powerful emotions, including passion, joy, hurt, and pain. “When we bring our passion to the classroom, our collective passions come together, and there is often an emotional response, one that can overwhelm” (hooks, 1994, p. 155). Shifting paradigms is painful, but it is a necessary step in liberatory learning.

hooks (2004) wrote about the need for an “open critical dialogue” across races, “where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of our experience” (p. 110). In his book Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence, Derald Wing Sue (2016) extended hooks’s discussion of emotions in the classroom to understand the avoidance of talking about race. Sue described the “academic protocol” as valuing dispassionate inquiry as being objective and legitimate (p. 26). The academic protocol can have the effect of stifling discussions of race, which can provoke powerful emotions.

> Race talk on the part of people of color is about bearing witness to their lived realities, their personal and collective experiences of subordination, and their stories of racism. The academic protocol discourages these sources of information and considers such

> anecdotal materials as opinions and less legitimate data (facts) to be explored. (Sue, 2016, p. 26, citing Bell, 2003; also see Bryan et al., 2012)

For White people, discussions of race can stir feelings of discomfort, guilt, and shame. "For Whites, to acknowledge or see race is to risk the possibility of being perceived as racist, so great effort is expended to avoid talking about race in order to appear fair and unprejudiced" (Sue, 2005, p. 26). White people may fear that they will say something potentially offensive or hurtful during a race conversation. "Below the fear of appearing racist lies an even more dreaded one: the realization that Whites harbor biased and prejudicial attitudes, albeit unknowingly" (Sue, 2005, p. 31). White people have historically benefitted, and continue to benefit, from the oppression of people of color. The privilege they—and I—experience is a source of embarrassment and shame, and we may fear that we have internalized racial bias and are not as "good" and "fair" as we hope we are. Openness to emotions in the classroom can welcome passionate, engaged learning. It can also instigate honest and difficult conversations, and, ultimately, build community and trust.

Critical pedagogy can contribute to creating an abolitionist classroom. I used four essential principles from critical pedagogy as a lens to read and reflect on the data: liberation pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, the importance of community and emotions in the classroom, and acknowledging race.

New Materialism

New materialism asks us to pay close attention to *what things do to people*, not just what things mean. It focuses on "the intimate relationship between two so-called opposites" (van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010, p. 157), suggesting that the dualism between the human and non-human, the animate and inanimate, is an illusion. One such duality is between the individual and the

collective, or what Vagle (2025) might call the social apparatus (p. 155). While an educator teaches individual students, they all learn together. The social apparatus within prisons is a system of domination. Within and as a part of this social apparatus, the educator and the students teach and learn among each other. The physical structure of the prison and the political and cultural systems that define crime and enforce punishment are non-human presences in the art studio and classroom. The teacher is one individual among many humans who are working and learning amidst non-human entities.

In the arts, the human and non-human can refer to the artist and art materials. Art materials are inanimate material objects that may "take action" on artists. The quality of art materials is an essential aspect of creative practice (Barrett & Bolt, 2013). An artist works with paint to create an image, but, sometimes, paint can be unruly and resistant. Artmaking grounds the maker in the present, through physical engagement with "embodied acts with materials" (Burton, 2001, p. 36). In a dialogue between artist and material, the sensory experience of art materials connects the maker to the world. Through the physical properties of the materials—the viscosity of paint, the resistance of steel, the warmth of wood, and the fluidity of clay—the artist and the materials are transformed. The aesthetic experience occurs as "a relationship 'between'—between the human and non-human, the material and immaterial, the social and physical" (Barrett & Bolt, 2013, p. 6).

Using a new materialist approach, Hood and Kraehe (2017) suggested that we "take seriously our interconnectedness with things—lingering within wonderment" (p. 33). In this research project, new materialism helped me to think about how each of these things/bodies—people, art materials, prison, and so on—intra-act to create the educators' experiences teaching in prison.

Summary

Abolitionist educators aim to replace oppressive educational systems with classrooms where all learners are valued and supported. Critical pedagogical strategies such as liberation pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, building community, welcoming emotions in the classroom, and acknowledging race can advance abolitionist goals. Abolitionist teachers value their students' cultures; introduce collaborative learning that undermines power dynamics; create a classroom that is a homeplace where students feel safe and affirmed; and recognize the power dynamics that race, gender, and class create in the classroom. Art is an essential part of abolitionist thinking. Art feeds the imagination for envisioning a new future and a different world.

Freire advocated for a liberatory pedagogy that aimed to tap into the wisdom of students through discussion. hooks highlighted the importance of teachers and students sharing responsibility for learning, creating a non-hierarchical community in the classroom. Community is a resource for resisting and persisting against oppression. She welcomed displays of emotions in the classroom because emotions are a part of engaged learning. She contributed an intersectional lens to Freire's liberatory pedagogy, asking teachers to be transparent about gender, race, and power in the classroom.

New materialism is a theory that helps us understand how art changes the learning experience. It helps to account for the non-human entities that art educators encounter. The social apparatus (the criminal justice system, the prison administration, and the cultural norms of the prison, for example), the prison, the art materials, students, artists, teachers, and even the researcher co-create the teaching and learning experience, entangling the phenomenon. This tangle of humans and non-humans can respond to the abolitionist calls to change everything: to

focus on individual and collective healing and well-being and to replace existing social systems with more care-centered, community-building institutions.

Analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process that began before the first interview, with a preliminary selection of theoretical frames, and continued throughout the research process with an ongoing post-reflexion journal.

After each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings using Otter.ai. I reviewed the transcripts against the audio, correcting any mistranslations, punctuation errors, and other discrepancies. This initial reading familiarized me with the transcripts. I reread the transcripts, marking the unexpected moments, things that did not seem to fit, and stories that left me feeling uncertain or uncomfortable. I explored these stumbling blocks to find if they led to new insights. I wrote follow-up questions for future conversations and made notes in my post-reflexion journal.

I put the narratives in dialogue with key concepts of abolition, critical pedagogy, and new materialism. I wrote reactions to these conversations, questioning how the teaching stories reflected or did not reflect abolition and critical pedagogy. I reflected on how the non-human agents in the stories co-created the teachers' experiences. I also analyzed my post-reflexions, which were the beginnings of interpretations, assumptions, and insights. I questioned my own thoughts and how they reflected or did not reflect abolition and critical pedagogy, and how my stories co-created the phenomenon.

This iterative process continued throughout the writing of this text. It was and is an ongoing analysis, even as I write this sentence, posing questions but never arriving at final answers.

Validity

In qualitative research, a valid study accurately reflects the reality it aims to represent. Validity is the demonstration that studies are credible. Qualitative research employs techniques such as member checking, triangulation, thick description, peer reviews, and external audits to verify validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124). Researchers use strategies for determining validity that are appropriate for the lens and paradigm of their research (p. 124).

This project employed a PIP approach, which used a critical paradigm to study a phenomenon through the lens of the researcher. Researchers using a critical perspective should "uncover the hidden assumptions about how narratives are constructed, read and interpreted" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Critical perspectives on narratives are framed by the "historical situatedness…based on social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender" perspectives within the phenomenon (p. 126). In qualitative research, researcher reflexivity, in which the researcher self-discloses their assumptions, beliefs, and biases that may shape their inquiry, allows the reader to bracket researcher bias, and by understanding their positions, identify the potential influence of bias on the results.

PIP extends researcher reflexivity as post-reflexion. Post-reflection recognizes the entanglement of subject and researcher, as well as the human and non-human agents, among and within a phenomenon, which co-produce the phenomenon. In PIP, Vagle (2025) advocated replacing "bracketing" with "bridling," or creating a dialogue that might highlight "multiplicity and differences" (p. 83). The researcher reflects on and exposes all of the agents in the tangle of agents that co-constitute the phenomenon.

Validity is also "the conditions of the legitimation of knowledge" or the "regime of truth" (Lather, 2007, p. 118). Validity can be a practice that forces a stable and rigid meaning on a

phenomenon. As a researcher engaging in PIP inquiry, I assumed that phenomena are unstable and in flux, co-produced by multiple agents. I followed Lather's (2007) suggestion to embrace a validity of transgression that examines how the research and the text create the phenomenon. I did not "look harder or more closely, but see what frames our seeing—spaces of constructed visibility and incitements to see which constitute power/knowledge" (p. 119). I followed Lather's suggestion to "reframe validity as multiple, partial, and endlessly deferred" (p. 119) and subjective rather than objective. Validity stems from engagement and self-reflexivity rather than distanced objectivity.

I was particularly drawn to Lather's (2007) description of a "voluptuous" validity that goes "too far" (p. 127). I hoped to avoid contributing another "boring" qualitative study and to write a text "that makes a difference" (Richardson, 2000, p. 924) by going "too far" with post-reflexion and the politics of abolition. Researchers working from a post-structuralist perspective often see validity as a relic of positivism. Post-structuralists may propose counter-narratives that challenge the certainty and authority of positivism, opening up new ways of thinking and revealing new insights. In post-reflexions, I inserted digressions and interruptions in this narrative that included stories from my experiences as an educator in a jail. I may go "too far" in drawing connections between the stories the educators told me and my experiences teaching incarcerated students and interacting with staff and administration in a jail. I provide context to the stories with references from scholarly publications, a published narrative by an incarcerated artist, and with anecdotal personal knowledge about the carceral system. I explored questions about the stories and silences of the study participants. Rather than assert accuracy or truth, I invited a profusion of potential, conflicting, and unstable narratives. Maybe validity in this text

was more promiscuous than voluptuous, saying “Yes, yes, and yes,” including too many texts, voices, thoughts, and possibilities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the philosophical background of phenomenology and phenomenological inquiry. I introduced post-structuralism, the philosophical foundation of Vagel’s (2025) PIP inquiry. I outlined the design of this study using Vagle’s five-component approach. I introduce the four art educators I interviewed in more depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: THREADS IN THE TAPESTRY (FINDINGS)

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe in more detail the study participants, also shedding some light on the research questions. In addition, I explore some ways of producing the phenomenon. Four art educators told me stories of their experiences teaching art in prisons. In Post-Intentional Phenomenon (PIP), one is not studying individual participants or the objects of their experiences (Vagle, 2025, p. 165). The stories they tell and the way I shape them in the retelling are threads within the tapestry that is the post-intentional phenomenon. In this study, the other threads include the students, the art materials, the prison, officers, prison staff, the carceral system, and my experiences as the researcher.

Diane: Art as a Portal

Diane was an artist and author, storyteller, painter, collage artist, sculptor, and performance artist. Diane attended art school in the 1970s. She was a white woman nearing retirement age when we spoke. Throughout her career, she made art that addressed social issues like war and sexism. Her work was in the collections of several major museums, and she taught art at several universities. She has published short stories and non-fiction essays.

In the 1990s, Diane and her husband moved from a large city to a more rural community for family reasons. In this community, as in many rural areas of the United States, there were several prisons. She began teaching art workshops in a men's prison and then switched to a college program in a women's prison. She taught in the college program at the women's prison for over 20 years.

We spoke numerous times over the spring semester and summer. She also sent me voice recordings that she made immediately after teaching, while the experiences were fresh in her

memory. During the months we spoke, she was teaching a class in the prison that combined studio art and creative writing.

Diane joined the Zoom conversations from a table in her art studio. She wore small round glasses and often wore a wool cap (she explained that her studio was cold). The light was bright but gentle. Drawings and papers with written text hung from a line behind her. Occasionally, she would reach out of the frame to grab an image to share with me, for example, a photocopy of a painting that she had shared with her students.

Diane's Positionality

In telling a story about a guest speaker, Diane revealed her own complicated feelings about her whiteness. As she told it, the guest, whose father was from Nicaragua, told Diane that she is always recognized on the street as Spanish. Diane explained, "People come up to her and speak Spanish. But she doesn't see it. And I said, 'Oh, it's like my husband who says he's got a Jew-dar. He can tell who is Jewish because he is.' It's an interesting thing. There's nothing for me. Somebody would have to come up to me with mayonnaise and go, 'I'm Presbyterian, too.'"

Diane was poking fun at herself—saying that her culture is represented by mayonnaise. Diane called her whiteness "nothing." She did not identify herself as white; she joked that her affinity group is Presbyterian. Whiteness is often framed as invisible because it is the standard in the dominant culture for "normal" (Sue, 2016, p. 10).

However, Diane is aware of how racial dynamics complicate her classroom. As a feminist, she was excited to talk about women artists, but talking about artists of color was more difficult. She said that in the writing class she teaches:

> A lot of people—especially white people—are so uncomfortable saying, *This is a white artist or a Brown artist or a Black artist.* There's no training that's been brought to our faculty, and I think there should be because we're predominantly white. Something has really, really changed. It's not just the Western canon you throw at folks anymore. But a lot of things have cracked up from Black Lives Matter and #Metoo. And so, we have to talk about it, but I don't talk so much about it. I will say to them, I'm an old feminist. And for me the fact that we have so many women artists to talk about is thrilling. Now you've upped it. Okay, good. So now it's up. So that's fine. Let's not let the Black men take over this one. Be careful. Check it at the door.

Talking about race in multiracial settings is often uncomfortable (Valentine et al., 2012, as cited in Sue, 2016, p. 21), and Diane told me that she wished the college in the prison would provide training for faculty, who were predominantly white. When the discussions about course materials would touch on race, some students responded with silence.

Yet, despite Diane's claim that "I don't talk so much about it," she frequently invited race into class discussions. She introduced many artists of color whose work explicitly addresses racial issues—Titus Kaphar, Dread Scott, Kara Walker, to name a few. She may have been uncomfortable, but she talked about race anyway.

Honoring Student Agency: A Matter of Critical Pedagogy

Diane was open to her students' cultural knowledge and preferences. She told a story about a student who wrote an assignment in a kind of patois.

> I thought, wow, this is so strong. I mean, this is her way of describing the artwork she's looking at and it's filled with a lot of slang. Something's 'fire,' and it's 'med' (which my grandson told me means it's just medium). I thought, *Well, why can't you write about art that way?* So, I spoke to her, and I said, 'Your piece really just kind of haunted me.' I kept thinking that, as the art world opens up to many more people than it has, opens up its arms and embraces people, that we might fall away from academic writing.' I said, 'In your English class, stick to academic writing because that's what you're learning and that will help you. But when you're in here, let's play a little bit with the slang because I think that's a good door to open, to let people be interested in reading.'

Diane was enthusiastic about her student bringing her own opinions, style, and culture into the assignment. Diane was looking forward to a future when "the art world opens up to many more people," and her students will be welcomed.

Diane also had her students work in "Co-labs," where one group of students shared reading materials about one artist while the other group shared reading materials about a second artist. Then the two groups taught each other what they learned. Through dialogue rather than lectures, students develop a comfort and skill in developing a personal judgment of an artwork, demonstrate respect for each other, and establish a shared commitment to learning (hooks, 1994, p. 186).

Talking About Politics: Thinking with Abolition

Diane was committed to bringing political discussions into her classes. She taught a class that combined studio art and writing about socially engaged art. "To use art as a portal, which I would love for art to be. Talking about political things and making statements…it's just so much more challenging. I'm so much more excited to teach this. Also, my own art practice has changed." Socially engaged artists she shared with her students, such as like Kara Walker, Titus Kaphar, and Dread Scott, introduced discussions about historical forms of oppression like slavery as well as contemporary forms of racial oppression like the criminal justice systems. Her curriculum was abolitionist in that it addressed issues impacting her students and their communities (Love, 2019).

Mary: World-building

Mary was a young white artist who worked as a staff member in a digital art lab at a liberal arts college, taught a course at the college, and taught art 1 day a week at a men's prison. In her studio practice, she worked primarily in collage and video. In her art, she critiqued the

violence in our world and imagined and created worlds that do not exist yet. She has also curated exhibitions of art by formerly incarcerated artists in public spaces. Mary had never "really thought about" incarceration before she began teaching in a prison about 5 years ago. She had been making art about the military-industrial complex and referencing video game imagery, creating imaginary worlds. She had a long-standing fascination with systems and deconstructing how they work and in "world-building." When she was first invited to teach in a prison, she quickly realized that prisons are another type of industrial complex. She realized, "Oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. Thinking and strategizing how to build other worlds. Yeah!" As she continued to work in the prison, her art began to focus on the systems and materials of consumption and production inside the prison—including commissary and prison labor.

Mary's Positionality

Mary identified as an abolitionist. She told me:

> I put my whole life, as a matter of practice, into being an abolitionist. It's based on what I have seen. The men know that. That informs our conversation. That builds the community and the mutual understanding of circumstances and trust. The trust is really important…. Teaching in the prison and getting to know the men, that is why my whole art practice became about abolition. For a long time, I had to sit with it, because I thought, 'I'm a non-incarcerated white girl from Southern California. What business do I have making artwork about prisons?' But it ended up that working with incarcerated populations became an alignment with everything that mattered to me.

She continued:

> And then you realize how deeply entrenched all this is in this whole cycle. And you're thinking, *Oh, shit. Okay, well, at least I can do what I can with my means.* To at least build relationships and connections and awareness, because I wasn't aware before I started teaching in prisons. I didn't get it.

As her awareness grew, Mary started to make art about prison systems. She reflected on her identity as a white woman. She told me that she had to sit "with it" because she realized that with her privilege as a white person, she did not want to be patronizing, to believe that she had

greater knowledge than those who are directly impacted. She wanted to respect the knowledge of those who have first-hand experience of the justice system and make space for their voices to be heard.

Enacting Freedom: Enacting Critical Pedagogy

Mary told me about a recent trip to Spain, where she experienced the architecture of Gaudí. She said, "Gaudí was just observing nature. I felt I'd actually want to live there. His buildings are healing. The banister is built like a whale's skeleton. It makes so much sense. I've always thought about nature and systems and cellular structures and how things are built. Even at a quantum level, thinking about matter and how it's all constructed." She decided to share Gaudí's work with her students. (The following section introduces Antoni Gaudí and his architecture to offer historic context; see Figure 4 for one of his designs in Spain.)

Figure 4

Antoni Gaudí, *Park Güell*

Photographer: Fernando Suárez, Copyright: © Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural de España. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte. Permanent URL: whc.unesco.org/en/documents/127237

Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926, in Catalonia, Spain) was fascinated with nature, beginning when he was a child and spent time at his father's family farmhouse. This interest became a consistent theme in his architecture (Basilica de la Sagrada Familia, n.d.). He completed his studies at the School of Architecture in 1878 in Barcelona. Though he died young, in 1926, he had a powerful influence on architecture around the world. He completed numerous buildings that today are considered masterpieces, including the Bellesguard Tower, Park Güell, the restoration of Mallorca Cathedral, the church on the Güell Estate, Casa Batlló, and La Pedrera. His most impressive achievement, The Church of the Sagrada Familia, was incomplete at his death (Casa Batlló, n.d.).

Nature was central to his creative process. Gaudí's architecture did not imitate nature; nature dictated texture and form. Esther Raventos-Pons (2002) described his work in this way:

> Nature is an important element in Barcelona's Park Güell (constructed between 1900 and 1914). Through two iron gates we enter into a magical garden where a grand stairway leads us to a large hypostyle hall. This hall supports a large upper plaza delimited by a continuous balustrade bench that twists in a serpentine manner. The park extends beyond these structures through viaducts and paths that merge with nature. (p. 201)

Mary was moved by the way that Gaudí incorporated natural forms in his architecture, and she was eager to share his work with their students. She said to me:

> We started drawing this past week. I asked them to observe the room and then take the shelf or the cabinet and redesign it based on something from nature. And I pulled out a bunch of beautiful images of natural things. We started to redesign these spaces. And then I said, "Let's just do this, and then let's make a book of your redesigns….

Mary's experience in Spain with Gaudí's architecture reminded her of the capitalist obsession with productivity. Everything has to be useful and orientated towards efficiency and production. But in Spain, she experienced architecture that was aesthetically pleasing and stimulating. Aesthetic appreciation and creativity are important ways of knowing and

understanding the world. The Gaudí architecture gave her that experience, and she wanted to share that with the men in her art studio.

When teachers engage in critical pedagogy, they teach with the goal of creating a more just and equitable world, and they enact freedom and equality in their teaching (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). Critical pedagogy analyzes the world and systems of power to expose how inequities are perpetuated, and to explore how systems can be changed to create a more just world.

Mary's thinking about systems informed her teaching. Gaudí's architecture made her reflect on the systems in the United States, and how the demand for capitalist growth determines the physical environment. When she introduced the natural world to the artificial world of the prison, she intervened in the prison environment. She asked the students to redesign their environment to include elements of the natural world. The natural world is an ecosystem that maintains a balance where all living beings can survive and flourish. She suggested that the men incorporate the natural world in redesigning the prison; she asked them to design an environment that satisfied their need for beauty and nature. An environment that includes nature affirms more of their humanity. It may help them reflect on other ways that their humanity has been restricted by their environment, both in prison and when they were free. It might lead to reimagining the social world in a way that values the humanity of all people, rather than increasing wealth and power for a few.

Mary explained to me that in the United States, everything is about utility. "This is the height of the supply chain, industrialism, and fast-making and easy boxes. And we're not thinking about what we're designing or why. It's just about getting something where it needs to go. And the prison is also a utility space."

Reimagining the World: Designing Abolition

To Mary, abolition starts with the design of the world—to design buildings in a way that offers a more positive relationship to the world and affirms the human need for beauty, nature, and peace. She said, "That's where abolition takes shape for me. It's the ideology behind what we design. Abolitionist thinking starts there." American architecture is utilitarian and focused on the needs of industry, such as supply chains and efficiency, and does not consider the needs of people. Mary is interested in how systems work, and abolition requires changes in systems—the justice system, but also the value system that prioritizes capital production over human well-being. The systems that determine our built environment exert power over us. The environment is currently designed to prioritize production and to shape people to fit that agenda. The first step to changing the system is to recognize how it works. The second step is to imagine how it could be different.

Abolitionist thinking requires using creativity to reimagine the world—the physical world around us, such as buildings, furniture, and clothing, and the social world, such as community, government, and business—in order to create an ecosystem where all people and living things can thrive. Art is a way of imagining this new system. For example, by drawing the prison art room and reimagining the design incorporating natural elements, the men begin to recreate the prison, imagining a place that is beautiful, healing, and joyful. They are also imagining a society where they have control over the world in which they live.

Simple actions can transform a space. Once when I was teaching art in jail, I encountered a man who had drawn over all of the walls and ceiling of his jail cell. The other men in the housing unit were proud of his artistry and told me about it. I could only see into the open door from a distance. Using a pen he bought in the commissary, he had created an intricate, finely

rendered collection of scenes. He resisted the uniformity that incarceration tries to impose by transforming his cell with drawings, inventing a fantasy world and expressing himself in all his individuality.

Art strengthens abolition practices. Art—visual art, music, dance, among other art forms—is a radical tool for expression and healing (Love, 2019, p. 100).

Jack: Pop Culture

Jack was an artist, musician, and professor at a rural state university, where he taught art education. Jack had a PhD in Education and taught at a university for over 10 years. He was a white man. His first experience teaching incarcerated people was during COVID, when he worked with undergraduate art education students to develop remote learning programs in art for men at a high-security prison. More recently, he began leading a group of art education students in providing art programming at the same prison. He also partnered with an organization that designed intensive 2-week programs to certify incarcerated people to facilitate art programming.

Jack was increasingly involved with arts programs in prisons. He applied for a grant to support incarcerated men to create murals in the prison, and he was seeking funding to document existing murals. Jack submitted another grant application to support developing an art history curriculum specifically for carceral spaces that respected and contextualized the aesthetic preferences and cultural practices of incarcerated students.

I spoke to Jack once, and he joined the Zoom conversation with a virtual background that I believe was the inside of a spaceship from Star Wars. He wore a tie-dyed t-shirt and had long hair and a beard. His face was very expressive as he spoke, as he furrowed his brow in concentration, lifted his eyebrows in surprise, leaned into and away from the camera to emphasize enthusiasm. He spoke in a very casual and relaxed way, using words like “dudes,”

"folks," and "bummer." He also wove in sophisticated theory such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book, *What Is Philosophy?* and the terms "affects and percepts." He was extremely kind and polite. Toward the end of our conversation, he thanked me "for bringing some attention to a really important art educational space."

Jack's Positionality

Jack told me:

> I tie a lot of my own existential stuff into my artmaking. I want to always be thoughtful and acknowledge the idea that I've been so privileged, not even just in the 'acknowledging your own privilege' sense. But I've been really privileged in the access to the arts that I have had in my life. Whether it be elementary school or after-school programs. My mom enrolled me in guitar lessons, all that stuff, and that stuff is just what keeps me excited and happy to be alive. And the idea that other folks either might have a fraction of that privilege or might not have that access at all, is constantly reinvigorating for me because it's just a battle. A driving concern is how can we make sure that folks have at least the opportunity to engage with the material and conceptual means of thinking about who they are and defining how they see the world and communicating how they want the world to be. That's how I define what I want for folks—is for everybody to have that opportunity and that access.

Beyond the privilege of being white and middle class, Jack is aware that he is fortunate because his parents supported his interest in art from a young age. He participated in afterschool programs and took music lessons—experiences which he found to be a source of happiness and joy throughout his life; he knows that other people have not been so lucky. One reason that he teaches in the prison is that he wants to make it possible for everybody to have the opportunity and access to the arts that he had.

According to Ladson-Billings (2006), people from low-income communities are owed an educational debt because of how schools are funded. Jack knows that people from low-income communities have limited access to the arts. He sees the importance of the arts for creating self-identity and for reflecting on reality and on alternative visions for the future.

Jack said that art is how he thinks, explores his own identity, and imagines how he wants the world to be. He wants other people to have these tools to explore their own identities in the world as well. The value of the enrichment opportunities is beyond learning skills and information, but about developing self-knowledge, embracing one's culture, and defining one's culture and place in the world.

Embracing Experience: A Matter of Critical Pedagogy

Jack told me that he wants to develop an art history curriculum for incarcerated people that

> provid[es] a rich multicultural" content. He elaborated, "We are thinking about how we can develop an art history curriculum that is acceptable based on the prison's restriction of content but that provides a rich multicultural…. Multicultural is such a dated term.… Right now, a lot of pieces they've made have imagery from Star Wars fights and minions and stuff. TV pop culture stuff. So thinking about an art history curriculum that contextualizes all that stuff; that doesn't denigrate or undermine loving what you love. I want to build a curriculum that places things in a context so that we can expand and consider the context of all the stuff that they're already thinking about visually.

Jack values the experiences and cultures of his students.

Django Paris (2012) would call this culturally sustaining pedagogy, where "consistently marginalized students are repositioned into a place of normativity—that is, that they become subjects in the instructional process, not mere objects" (p. 95). Jack respects the interests and passions of the learners (Dewey, 1997; hooks, 1994) and plans to learn about the culture of the students.

When Jack includes the popular culture that his students enjoy in his curriculum, he values their distinctive voices that have been formed by their memories and cultures. hooks (1994) wrote that this kind of critical pedagogy of liberation embraces the experience and

cultural knowledge of students as "relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process" (p. 88).

People-First Language: In Relation to Abolition

In our conversation, Jack referred to "folks experiencing incarceration." He was using abolitionist, person-first language. The National Institute of Health Style Guide (n.d.) defined person-first language as follows: "Person-first language is a way to emphasize the person and view the disorder, disease, condition, or disability as only one part of the whole person. Describe what the person 'has' rather than what the person 'is.'" Person-first language recognizes the humanity of the whole individual, and acknowledges every person is more than any condition—whether the condition is an illness or disability, or social, like incarceration. As Bryan Stevenson (2015) wrote, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done" (p. 17).

Formerly incarcerated scholar and leading abolitionist activist Eddie Ellis (2020), in *An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language*, asked that people stop using terms like inmates, convicts, prisoners, and felons to refer to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. He asked that, in order "to assist our transition from prison to our communities, as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves" (n.p.), people refer to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated as people. "PEOPLE currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE" (Ellis, 2020, n.p.).

Marvin: Education and Freedom

Marvin began his educational journey while he was incarcerated, serving a life sentence. While incarcerated, he earned six associate degrees; no bachelor's degree programs were offered at the prison. After living more than 20 years in prison, due to a change in the law, he became

eligible for parole. When he was released, a reentry services organization supported him in earning a bachelor's degree in social work. When I interviewed him, Marvin was continuing his education while working several jobs. He was about to receive a Master of Social Work degree and begin teaching as a lecturer in the School of Social Work at his university. He was working with the Arts in Prisons, a nonprofit he first learned about while incarcerated. Art in Prisons offered art programs to incarcerated people. In addition, Marvin worked with a nonprofit called Reentry Resources, helping incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students earn college degrees. He supported formerly incarcerated students at the local regional college, incarcerated students earning degrees in prison, and students who were taking courses at a community college while detained in the local county juvenile hall.

Marvin appeared on my computer screen via Zoom. He was in his office at the university. He faced the screen directly, though he looked to the side to talk, with his elbows resting on a desk. My image was probably on a screen to the side of his camera. Two tall windows behind him revealed the green leaves of trees pressed close to the glass and a bright white sky. The sun cast a bright light on the wall to Marvin's right. One of the windows was cracked open, so I assumed the weather was warm.

Marvin wore a blue button-down shirt and a tan corduroy jacket. He was bald, and the lights illuminating his smooth head and casting shadows under his eyes appeared to be standard fluorescent office lighting. He wore a short beard. He appeared to be African American, with warm medium-brown skin. As our conversation proceeded, Marvin maintained a very polite and professional demeanor. He began by explaining the programs that he worked with. He spoke quickly, with a few hand gestures, and his delivery was smooth and complete. He was practiced at describing his work. I have a similar monologue for telling people about the programs that I

provide. I pressed for more details about the programs, where they were offered within the prison, how often, and how many participants. Marvin, however, offered generalizations, and I had difficulty getting specifics from him.

Marvin told me that he contacted Arts in Prisons soon after he was released because he thought that the prison near his university needed art programming. He worked with others from his university and the Arts in Prisons organization to launch the program. He told me that, "We believe art is a human right and want to give the guys access."

What does "art is a human right" mean? Why does art matter? The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2013) elaborated on the right to artistic expression:

> Explicitly mentioned in provisions of both International Covenants, the right to freedom of artistic expression is a fundamental aspect of cultural rights. It includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds "in the form of art," the right "to enjoy the arts" and the creativity of others, as well as obligations from States to "respect the freedom indispensable for…creative activity"....
>
> By engaging people and encouraging their interaction through artistic and cultural expression, actions in the field of culture can open a space in which individuals and groups can reflect upon their society, confront and modify their perception of one another, express their fears and grievances in a non-violent manner, develop resilience after violent or traumatic experiences, including human rights violations, and imagine the future they want for themselves and how to better realize human rights in the society they live in. The increased social interactions, mutual understanding and trust that can be built or rebuilt through these initiatives are essential to achieve a range of human rights goals and to respect cultural diversity.

According to John Dewey (1980), art is "the "greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity" (p. 25). If, as Dewey believed, art is the ultimate expression of humanity, then it must be a human right and should not be limited or suppressed.

Of course, the humanity of incarcerated people is limited in many ways. For example, incarcerated people are restricted from seeing and speaking to family members. Opportunities to

see the sky and other forms of nature are limited. Censorship of books and newspapers constrains opportunities to learn and to think. The opportunity to create is restricted through scarcity of materials and space. However, art education programs provide the opportunity to make art and to flex creativity and imagination.

Art stimulates the imagination to visualize what is "not yet." Maxine Greene (1995) argued that arts should be central to school curricula because "encounters with the arts have a unique power to release imagination" (p. 27). Not only do art experiences awaken the imagination, but they can also trigger a "startling defamiliarization of the ordinary" (p. 4). This questioning and imagining are vital to an abolitionist project, which asks us to rethink our assumptions about the necessity of prisons and to image a world without prisons.

Art expands our perception of the world around us beyond the senses of vision, sound, scent, and touch. Our imaginations enable us to experience empathy for people we do not know. The arts awaken us to the reality of life. Art counters complacency and dull acceptance of "what is" by stirring us to wonder why things are the way they are and how they can be different.

Marvin's Positionality

Marvin grew up in a community that was disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration and, like many of his friends and neighbors, he became incarcerated. He was sentenced to life in prison. While incarcerated, Marvin was highly resourceful and motivated. He realized that if he became involved in rehabilitative programs, he stood a chance of being released. He spent thousands of hours in rehabilitative groups.

> I was going to group every day after work for over a decade. It wasn't something I just started a few months before release. But in all the groups I did, and many of them were phenomenal, they gave me a better understanding of who I was as a human being. I appreciate that. That's something you have to argue before the Board of Parole hearings.

> Each group had something I took away from it that was helpful and helped me get found suitable for release.

Marvin made this effort even though, for much of the time, the laws made it unlikely that he would ever be released. One of the program providers he was involved with advocated for reforms that helped to change the law and made it possible for him to be eligible for parole.

Marvin credited the programs for giving him insight into himself, which was a significant transformation that the parole board was looking for. But he also gained insight into how society is structured to disadvantage people of color. This critical analysis of society motivated Marvin to help his community—the people he grew up with and the people who are incarcerated—because he saw how, through learning, he was becoming free. Marvin told me:

> I believe in ending mass incarceration one degree at a time. The more people who are in prison and earning college degrees…because in the State, one of the biggest feeders to the prison system is recidivism rates, which is super high, over 60%. And then once they're educated, it's less than 1%.

Marvin became an advocate whose goal was to create more freedom and justice (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 237).

Marvin knew that upon his release, he would need help. He had been incarcerated for over 20 years, and he needed to rebuild his life. Marvin contacted the programs that he had worked with while incarcerated and was able to find meaningful work. He decided to pursue his bachelor's degree because he knew that people with bachelor's degrees are less likely to experience re-incarceration, in part because they are much more likely to be able to earn a living wage.

Engaged Pedagogy: A Matter of Critical Pedagogy

While incarcerated, Marvin was trained as a facilitator by Arts in Prisons to lead creative writing workshops. Post-incarceration, he worked with the same organization to provide art

programs for incarcerated people. He developed educational experiences that created pathways to learning—participants developed their artistic practice and skills and set up "conditions for further growth" (Dewey, 1997, p. 33). The participants were becoming better artists, and they were learning to become teachers of art. Marvin's facilitation created an "engaged pedagogy" that asked students to participate actively in learning (hooks, 2014). He learned from his experiences in prison the value of making space for the participants to be leaders in the learning. While he was still incarcerated, he switched roles from participant to facilitator. Now he was facilitating future facilitators.

Marvin experienced a liberatory education. He developed a critical consciousness about the world. He saw beyond the way things are—the "current states of things"—and imagined a "future that would not merely reproduce the present" (Giroux, 2020, p. 179). He took action to challenge the way things are and demand a more just, equitable future.

Values and Abolition

Marvin resisted directly embracing abolition as a goal. However, he was explicit about his desire to help incarcerated people access education. He told me:

> Education has a proven track record that when someone who is formerly incarcerated comes and educates themselves and earns a bachelor's degree, they're not going back to prison. All the data says that. Across the entire country, I think it's less than 1%, when you look at all the research. And a huge part of that is they're able to earn a livable wage. There are still 40,000 collateral consequences associated with a criminal conviction, but at least a bachelor's degree gives you more of an option of earning a livable wage.

Marvin believed that art education programs help people get out of prison. "And in prison is where my people are," he said. "A vast majority of people who grew up in the community I was from either end up passing away as a result of gang violence or ended up in prison with very long prison sentences. So, I look at it like they're my community members. If I can do something

to get them closer to home, I feel I have a moral imperative to do so." Marvin may not have claimed to be an abolitionist, but his values were aligned with abolition.

Conclusion

I interviewed four educators about the experiences of art educators in prison. They were diverse in age, educational background, and life experience. Diane was a white woman artist with work in collections of major museums and a published author, with an MFA in studio art and an MA in creative writing. Mary was a younger "emerging" white woman artist with an MFA in studio art. Jack was a white male professor of art education, an artist, and a musician. Marvin was a formerly incarcerated man and a person of color whose creative writing practice was on hold while he pursued a master's degree and worked several jobs.

Their approaches to teaching reflected various examples of critical pedagogy. Diane embraced engaging students in learning through discussion. Mary's teaching analyzed the world and systems of power to expose how inequities are perpetuated, and to explore how systems can be changed to create a more just world. Critiquing the utilitarian design of the prison as inhumane, she invited her students to redesign the prison in a way that might address the human need for beauty and nature. She asked them to reflect on other ways that their humanity has been restricted by their environment, both in prison and when they were free. Jack expressed a theoretical understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy with an awareness of the class dimensions of culture. Marvin's critical pedagogy was rooted in his lived experience. When he was incarcerated, Marvin experienced a liberatory education. An "engaged pedagogy" helped him to develop leadership skills, claim agency in his learning, and develop a critical consciousness about the world.

Of the four educators, only Mary explicitly identified as an abolitionist. Marvin refused the abolitionist label but spoke movingly about his desire to see incarcerated people be released and return to their communities with meaningful work that provided a living wage. Jack did not talk about abolition, but he employed abolitionist people-first language. Diane did not claim to be an abolitionist, but when she spoke about how her students were treated by prison staff, she felt a solidarity with them that showed a disillusionment with and a criticality of the prison system.

Although all of the educators expressed care and respect for their students and a frustration with the arbitrary and senseless circumstances of the prison, only Mary self-identified as an abolitionist. She said, "Teaching in the prison and getting to know the men is why my whole art practice became about abolition." My experience was similar. Though I was critical of the criminal justice system for as long as I can remember, it was only after working in a jail that I became dedicated to abolition. Getting to know the people who are incarcerated, the environment where they are imprisoned, and the circumstances that landed them there, I came to the conclusion that the prison system is unjust and cruel and makes communities less safe.

Although three of the four educators did not claim to be abolitionists, they are all likely to be allies in reducing incarceration. Abolitionist and organizer Ruth Wilson Gilmore argued for building coalitions with "all different kinds of people, in all different kinds of situations" (Kushner, 2019, n.p.) to join forces to reduce incarceration. These artists and educators are creative, imaginative people who care about their students. They all acknowledged the injustice their students were experiencing. Whether the educators imagine themselves as abolitionists or not, "the idea that you imagine a world without prisons, and then you work to try to build that world" (Kushner, 2019, n.p.) *is abolition*.

Chapter 5: PLAYING WITH STORIES (DISCUSSION)

Introduction

The post-intentional phenomenon (PIP) in this research is an entangled web of the educators who told me stories about their experiences, their students, the art materials and artworks, the physical spaces of the classrooms, the prisons, and the larger social constructs of the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIP also included me as I listened, asked questions, and made connections with my own experiences ~~of~~ teaching in jail. All these parts together were entangled and co-produced the PIP.

In this chapter, I share some of the educators' stories. With almost 9 hours of recorded conversations, I could not include every story in this manuscript. Instead, I chose stories that offered especially rich material to "play" with. Vagle (2025) wrote that the task is to "bring one's careful reading of these phenomenological materials into dynamic and playful dialogue with the theories" one has chosen to think with (p. 170). I interpreted "play" as the creative and imaginative manipulation of the materials. The stories do not have one inherent "meaning" but are instead materials, like art materials, with which one interacts and creates, opening multiple possibilities. As the researcher entangled in this production, I played with different ways of producing the phenomenon. The stories were in flux, and it "becomes difficult to determine the narrator and the narratee" (Vagle, 2025, p. 141).

I played with and "think with theory" about stories from my conversations with the art educators. I drew on theories of abolition, critical pedagogy, and new materialism. Post-reflexing on their stories, I wondered questions and arrived at multiple answers. I did not propose one "correct" answer. Instead, I was interested in the "constant state of becoming" (Vagle, 2025, p. 141).

It is worth revisiting my research questions here. How might teaching art take shape for educators in the prison system, with all its complexity? The stories the educators told me contained clues and insights into how surveillance and control, hierarchies, and power *shape and are shaped by* their teaching. How do unexpected moments—the surprises that happen while teaching—help co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom? I paid special attention to surprises because they are moments when new insights may slip into view and when the agency of people and non-human entities reveal themselves. Surprises destabilize the dominant narrative. They expose the expectations of the educators and me, disclose our biases, and help us see beyond our assumptions. How do non-human elements—for example, specific art materials or the prison environment—co-produce the teaching experience? In the arts especially, material objects "take action" on a subject. An artist works *with* paint to create an image, but sometimes paint has a mind of its own. An educator works *within* a teaching environment. Especially in prison, where systems of domination rule, an educator does not control the classroom.

Each story can be thought through theories, arriving at multiple, simultaneously different and possible productions. I reflected on the stories through an abolitionist lens, looking for liberatory teaching practices and how creativity can build resiliency and imagine better futures. I used a critical pedagogy lens to attend to how educators respect their students' wisdom and ways of knowing and communicating. I used a new materialist analysis to study how human-environmental relations, including the prison system's social apparatus and the artworks' material qualities, shape art educators' experiences.

Diane: A Better Use of My Brain

During COVID, Diane continued to teach at the prison remotely through video. With more free time, she earned a master's degree online in creative writing. In our conversations, Diane was very passionate about teaching writing about art, a college course she was teaching at the women's prison. She said:

> This is such a better use of my brain than teaching studio art. I know you're an artist. But you're also a scholar. So, you know about the left side/right side. All these years of teaching studio art, and sometimes I taught art history, it felt sometimes just so much like art therapy. I'm not that into art therapy. Now that I am teaching writing about art, we get into discussions, through the window of art, about the world. We use art as a portal, to talk about politics and make statements. It's just so much more challenging. I mean, I'm so much more excited to teach this than I ever was. Now I'm almost more invested in my writing than artmaking. It's really much more interesting.

Diane had an ambitious intellectual approach to teaching. She was developing new skills and new teaching practices to keep things interesting for herself and her students. She was not an educator who teaches the same class year after year because it is easy. She enjoys a challenge.

They Hated Every Bit of It

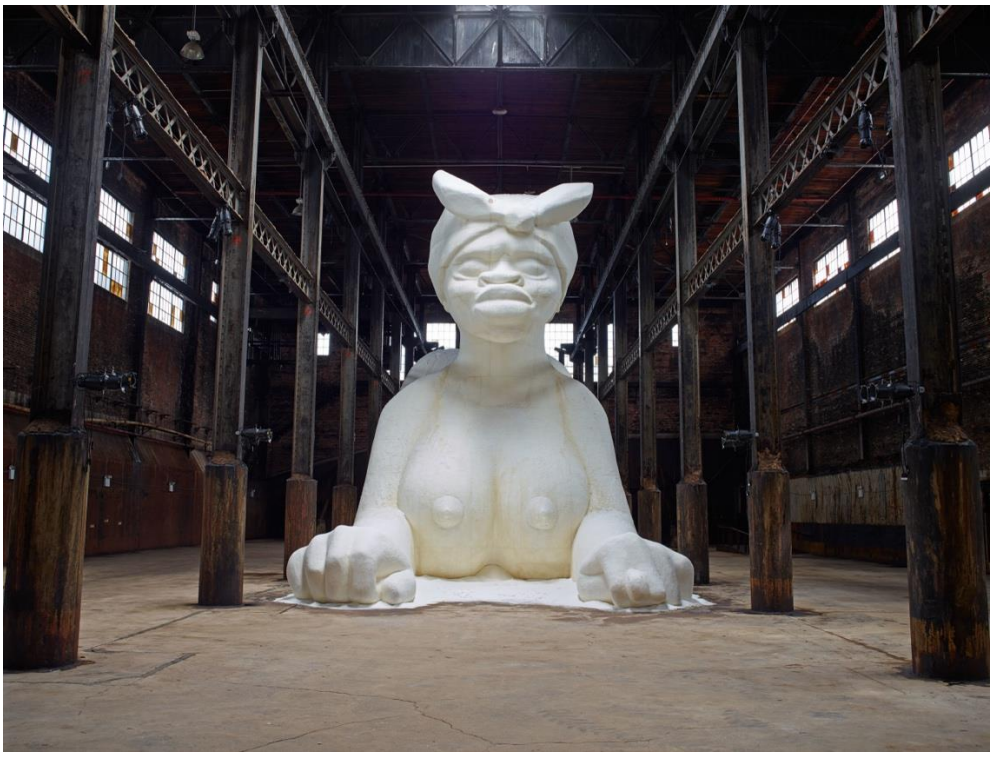
Diane had a guest speaker who introduced Kara Walker's (2014) massive installation/sculpture *A Subtlety: Or…the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant in an abandoned Domino Sugar refinery*.

The image instigated a heated debate and an unexpected moment in class. This raised a central question for my research: How does the complexity of the prison environment, including the racial disparities and power relations; the artist, the artwork, and its specific materials and scale; the teacher's past experiences; and the history of the slave trade, intra-act to create the

teaching and learning experience? (To provide context for this discussion, I introduce Kara Walker and her artwork; see Figure 5.)

Figure 5

Kara Walker. (2014). A Subtlety…



Kara Walker. (2014). *A Subtlety: Or… the Marvelous Sugar Baby an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant in an abandoned Domino Sugar refinery.* [Sugar, polystyrene, plastic, molasses]. New York City. (Photography: Jason Wyche)

Artist Kara Walker is known for her controversial imagery of race, gender, sexuality, and violence. In 2014, Walker created a large-scale public project, *A Subtlety: Or…the Marvelous Sugar Baby an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant in an abandoned Domino Sugar refinery*. The installation

included an immense (35' x 28'6" x 75') sculpture of a sphinx with the face of a woman with African features and exaggerated exposed breasts and buttocks. The sugar-covered sculpture responded to and reflected the history of its site and the history of the sugar trade and enslavement (Smith, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

The sculpture was overtly sexualized and racialized, and Diane's students hated it. Diane said, "They hated the sexploitation pose of the sculpture; they hated the mammy wrap. They hated every bit of it."

Diane was surprised by their reaction. Diane described how it happened:

> My guest passed out all these pictures of the *Sugar Baby,* and it was like the barometric pressure just went up in the air. And Cassie, one of the students, is very outspoken…. And she's got her head up like this. She was like, 'No, I don't like this.' And only the students of color spoke. Three of them specifically said that it was a stereotypical, exploitative version of women.

Diane tried to contextualize the artwork, telling the students that the artist is African American, that the mammy face was a self-portrait of Kara Walker, and that she is a very well-respected African American artist with MacArthur Genius Grant. The students were firm. "They were not freaking having it…. But this group was not letting a middle-aged Black artist pull off that *Sugar Baby*."

Diane wanted them to give the work some more thought. She explained that the guest speaker had not contextualized the work, so the students did not appreciate the historical references:

> Here, Walker was putting three things together, well, four. Her self-portrait, sexploitation, Black women, and the Sphinx. I mean, looking at it through Cassie's eyes, a 25-year-old woman, I could totally see why she was offended.… And in fact, the artist Betye Saar had gotten very mad at Kara Walker. I didn't know this till I was teaching it. Betye Saar said, 'We worked so hard to get rid of these stereotypes, and then you just bring them in on a plate.' And she started a letter-writing campaign.

Since the beginning of her career in the 1990s, Walker's work has been controversial for the way that it addresses slavery, racism, violence, and sexual violence. Her early works were murals of scenes from the Antebellum South. Enslaved people, Confederate soldiers, and White women in period clothing were represented as caricatures in sexually explicit and dystopic interactions. Black women were drawn as sexy "mammies," with exaggerated buttocks, breasts, and lips. Black children and women were depicted as being raped, mutilated, tortured by White people, or seeming to engage willingly in lewd sexual acts. Her work was received enthusiastically by the art world, calling it "peculiarly—and uncomfortably—alluring" (Nate Thompson, as quoted in Pindell, 2009); "perverse interracial co-dependency" (Ken Johnson, *The New York Times*, June 27, 2002, as quoted in Pindell, 2009); "beautiful-scary images keep pieties and prohibitions alike on the hot seat" (Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*, May 9, 2003, as quoted in Pindell, 2009); and "a liberating act" (Sabine Vogel, *Berliner Zeitung*, as quoted in Pindell, 2009).

On the other hand, some Black artists and intellectuals criticized it as offensive. They accused her of creating images that please the White art world, encourage racists, and degrade the Black community. Artists Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell collected these objections in a publication, *Kara Walker—No; Kara Walker—Yes; Kara Walker—?* (2009). They included essays by 28 artists, educators, writers, and poets as well as excerpts from reviews, interviews, and profiles which were either critical of, supportive of, or ambivalent about Walker's work.

Betye Saar said, "I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children, and that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the White art establishment" (quoted in Pindell, 2009, p. viii). Howardena Pindell described Walker's work this way:

> What does her image of a nude Black woman having sex with the skeletal corpse of a Confederate soldier accomplish, except to create a fiction that becomes a truth in the eye of a beholder eager to continue the lie of the racist? Or the work which shows a nude, pregnant African American with amputated legs, without any hope for help, presented with cartoon-like eroticism. Or the Black child gleefully having intercourse with a horse--who is that fiction for? (Pindell, 2009, p. ix)

A few days after the class, Diane sent me an audio recording. She wanted to tell me how the next class had gone. She had prepared extensively and asked the students to break into three groups to discuss three artists. The group that discussed Kara Walker included "Cassie, [who didn't like the work when she saw *Sugar Baby* the previous week], two who had studied Kara Walker before in a previous class, and one student who's new." Diane gave them a book on Kara Walker and explained "that the cover looked like a dancing, happy, happy enslaved person on a plantation, but in fact, it was a suicide." Diane reported that once the students got into it, looking at the book and the illustrations, they started to open up to Walker's piece. She asked them to write about the art from another person's point of view, not their own. Diane said:

> Cassie's piece was magnificent. It was so good. I asked her to work it up as a submission for honors day. She wrote as a grandmother taking her teenage grandson to look at the exhibition. The grandson's all smart-ass about it, kind of like Cassie's attitude last week, and the grandmother takes him aside and is kind of quoting some of the text about Kara Walker, integrating that into the piece. She explains that Walker is representing their history. It's a really strong piece, intergenerational, and contextualizes it very well and uses the material from the readings.

Diane was surprised and frustrated by her students' initial reactions to *Sugar Baby*. She felt they did not understand the work, partly because the guest speaker gave them no context. Diane emphasized that context is essential to understanding the art. Diane suspected that guest speakers who are new to the prison context "dummy down" lessons, a phrase that suggested that she finds such an approach patronizing and offensive. This attitude short-changed her students and did not provide them with adequate background to engage fully with the meaning of the art.

When an artwork comes from a cultural context different from the student's, withholding context can create an unfair disadvantage. Unfamiliar cultural traditions or art from a different time period can be misunderstood. In such examples, context provides learners with important information.

Sugar Baby, in particular, had a complicated iconography. It referenced antebellum white supremacist imagery and the history of the slave trade between England, Africa, and the Americas, the dangerous and cruel labor practices on sugar plantations, and ancient Egyptian art. It was unfair to the students for a teacher to make assumptions about their knowledge. The students may have had cultural reference points different from the teacher's.

A constructivist art pedagogy assumes that meaning in art is fluid and dynamic, created by learners through their pre-existing knowledge and based on experience (Hubard, 2015, p. 17). Students can look at art with fresh eyes, not blinded by expectations of the official meaning of art that unknown experts have determined (Burnham, 1995). Providing context can help students understand a work of art but might also prevent them from accessing a personal art experience. By withholding or delaying context, students cannot rely on someone else's opinion, but must think for themselves (Hubard, 2007).

The students had been offended by Walker's *Sugar Baby*. Their knowledge based on past experiences might have taught them to be skeptical of representations of stereotypical or sexually explicit representations of Black women. Their reaction surprised Diane. She had shared this work with students in the prison before but had not received this response. In an unsuccessful attempt to open their minds to the artwork, she "interjected" to explain the "mammy face was itself a portrait of Kara Walker." She told them that Walker is "a very well respected African American artist with MacArthur Genius Grant." But they were not swayed.

In the following class, Diane continued the discussion. She combined a didactic approach—providing background material about the art—with a constructivist approach—requiring the students to debate the meaning of the art. She had students work in small groups to discuss the art and provided the groups with some background material. Then, each group taught the others what they had learned. After that, they were asked to write an essay explaining their opinion, if it had changed, and why. She felt the class went very well. Walker's leading critic became a fan and wrote a fictional essay that advocated for Walker's art.

Diane was invested in providing her students with a rich learning experience. She shared the work of controversial and difficult artists and encouraged her students to think critically about the work. They had initial reactions, and she prodded them to think further and more deeply beyond their initial reactions. She provided the historical information the artists were referencing because she felt that would give the students a richer art experience. The students became more receptive to Walker's art.

Did Diane convince the students to agree with her interpretation of Walker's art? Did she advocate for Walker's art? Or did she give them the information needed to form their own opinions? A PIP approach would say there is no right answer to these questions but would follow multiple lines of flight to discover a profusion of possible questions and answers.

Post-Reflexion

I was surprised that Diane did not anticipate that Walker's sculpture might offend some students. I was also skeptical of her determination to "win them over" to appreciate Walker's art. I wondered what her students thought about the art in the end. I played with the story and came up with several possible scenarios.

In Diane's interpretation of Walker's artwork, Walker exposed how racism was rooted in American history and continues today. Critical pedagogy asks educators to develop an understanding of how society maintains injustice and inequities. Yet, by insisting on a particular understanding of the artwork, Diane undermined the students' initial responses. These initial responses may be just as valid as the response Diane was looking for, but she did not seem to recognize that.

In one interpretation of this story through a critical pedagogical lens, Diane dominated Cassie when she refused Cassie's interpretation of the *Sugar Baby*. She insisted that Cassie "rethink" her interpretation and provided Cassie with materials that showed her the "right way" of understanding the artwork. Eventually, Cassie either was forced to or was convinced to reconsider her interpretation and adopt Diane's understanding of the artwork, which is the dominant interpretation according to the majority of the white art world. According to Freire (2005), dialogue is an interaction between people who work together to name the world. It is a communal action. Freire rejected domination, where one person tries to impose their world view on another (p. 89). In this version, Diane imposed her view on Cassie.

In a third interpretation, Diane pushed Cassie to see beyond her first impression. Cassie's initial impression was formed by her experiences, by reality as it was familiar to her. Diane asked Cassie to think about the artwork as an object around which to engage in critical dialogue about racism in American history and in the present moment. With an enhanced understanding of history and the present, Cassie experienced the familiar through fresh eyes, having an informed encounter with a work of art that may "lead to a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary" (Greene, 1995, p. 4). Through dialogue with her classmates around the artwork, it is possible that Cassie developed a new awareness and analysis of social realities.

Cassie's final paper about the artwork contained two perspectives: first, the grandmother's perspective, which reflected the perspectives in the reading materials that Diane provided; second, the grandson's/her original perspective, which Diane described as "sassy." Though Cassie presented both perspectives in her essay, Diane thought Cassie was aligned with the grandmother. Maybe Cassie understood both perspectives, and perhaps she was code-switching—that is, she mirrored what Diane wanted in order to satisfy Diane, while at the same time holding on to her own opinion.

Alternatively, maybe Cassie transformed her reality by teaching the grandson/herself another perspective with a more nuanced critique of history and racism. First, Cassie rejected what she saw as the racism of the stereotypical portrayal of the Black woman. Through deeper reflection and dialogue with her classmates over the artwork, she may have developed a more nuanced understanding of the artwork. Maybe she saw the racist stereotypes in a larger historical context and how that context continues into the present. Are those stereotypes implicated in mundane quotidian practices like buying Domino's sugar at the grocery store? Are the abuses of Black labor merely in the past, or do they persist today? Do our consumer habits perpetuate those abuses?

I cannot say which of these scenarios is "true." I only have Diane's telling of the story, which is partial. Diane told some parts and left out some details. The story was her interpretation of events in "the now" of the telling, which may differ on a different day. Neither Diane nor I know Cassie's version of this story.

Diane did not speak about her teaching as informed by critical pedagogy. However, she provided a rich learning experience that provoked strong emotional reactions with culturally

relevant art. Cassie saw more in the art, not just what she was accustomed to but also perspectives that were new to her.

Race is a controversial topic in the prison environment. Diane did not shy from addressing it, but it did not always go smoothly. There were surprises and tensions. Diane's experience was shaped by the culture of the prison, just as she shaped and was shaped by the culture within her classroom. I respected her courage and her commitment to art and learning.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. The prison is a complex environment with rigid hierarchies and power relations, and complicated race relations. Diane repeatedly negotiated power relations in her stories of teaching in prison. She experienced tension between herself and Cassie over *Sugar Baby*. Cassie was offended by the sculpture and perceived it as being racist. Diane, a white woman, was initially surprised, though as she talked about it with me later, she understood how Cassie was offended. Diane and Cassie each asserted their viewpoints in a power struggle resolved through extended dialogue and discussion.

The complexities of the prison classroom, especially the racism that is reflected in the over-policing of specific communities and the disproportionate sentencing of people of color in the criminal justice system, contributed to the difficulty of discussing the representation of race in Walker's *Sugar Baby*. The historical references—slavery, the sugar trade, racism—stimulated strong reactions. The artwork and the racism the students saw in it drew a strong emotional response.

However, the complexities of the prison also made the conversation richer. The students did not passively accept Diane's presentation of the artwork. They were thoroughly engaged in debating the meaning of work. Diane did not avoid the topic of race, and she created a structure

that encouraged debate and dialogue. Students could assert themselves, and she and they had thoughtful conversations about an emotionally charged and complicated artwork. They negotiated a power relationship that accommodated dissent. They had a productive conversation about a racially charged artwork.

Unexpected Moments—The Surprises That Happen While Teaching. The unexpected reaction by the students to *Sugar Baby* helped co-produce an experience that created a shift in the classroom. Diane was at first surprised that the students hated Walker's sculpture. In response to their reaction, Diane dug more deeply into the artwork and asked them to think about it more. Strong emotional reactions are forms of thinking, even if they are not always verbal (Thrift, 2004, p. 60). By giving the students time to think and discuss and an assignment to think creatively, Diane provided a path for "expressing something going on that talk cannot grasp" (Katz, 1999, p. 4, as quoted in Thrift, 2004, p. 60).

A Quirky Thing to Be Good at

Diane had an unexpected moment when teaching her students about Gerhard Richter and Titus Kaphar. She told me:

> I'm oddly good at teaching in the prison. It's a very quirky thing to be good at. It's very quirky. I'm standing there in clouds last week thinking, 'I am so good at bits that I don't know what it is.' I seem to understand some sort of missing ingredient in the sauce, you know. For example, I got into a confrontation with a student the week before last. I asked them to compare and contrast Gerhard Richter's *Baader Meinhof* series and Titus Kaphar's *Jerome Project*.

(To ground the discussion, I introduce the work of Gerhard Richter and Titus Kaphar; see Figure 6.)

Figure 6

Gerhard Richter. (1988). *Erschossener 1 (Man Shot Down 1)*

From the Baader Meinhof series. [oil on canvas]. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA.

Gerhard Richter (German, 1932) is known for his abstract paintings and for using found and original photographs as source material for photorealistic paintings. In his series of paintings titled *18 October 1977* (commonly referred to as the *Baader-Meinhof* series), he used photographs from news publications as source material for a series of 15 photorealistic paintings. The *Baader-Meinhof* Group refers to three people who were arrested as members of the Red Army Faction, a German terrorist group that was active in the 1970s. The prisoners' deaths in prison were ruled suicides, though some suspected that the German state murdered them (Museum of Modern Art, n.d.; Richter, n.d.).

Figure 7

Titus Kaphar. (2014). *Jerome III*

Oil, gold leaf, and tar on wood panel. The Studio Museum, New York, NY, USA.

Titus Kaphar (USA, 1976) first became known for creating replicas of historical paintings and then altering them by painting over them, cutting them apart, or crumpling them to draw the focus of the viewer to who and what is left out of history, especially colonialism and slavery (Kaphar, n.d.). He aimed to tell a more honest and complete story.

The *Jerome Project* visually references Byzantine religious icon paintings, specifically Saint Jerome, the patron saint of librarians and scholars. While doing internet research on his father's prison records, Kaphar found mug shots of numerous Black men with the same name as his father, Jerome. He created a series of portraits of these men based on their mug shots on wood panels with gold-leaf backgrounds, as if they were Byzantine religious icon paintings.

Then Kaphar dipped the portraits in melted tar, partly covering them according to the number of years each man spent in prison (Studio Museum, n.d.). The tar might represent punishment, the time spent in prison, or it might symbolize the silencing of the men and the rights they lost. The tar also gives the men some degree of anonymity, unlike the mug shots posted online. Thinking about how the government uses the prison-industrial complex to address economic, social, and political problems, Kaphar created works that focused on the personal (his father's incarceration and the individual men who were incarcerated) and the systemic (the disproportionate number of Black men who are incarcerated, the punitive response of a society that gives excessive sentences, and the loss of civil rights that extend beyond the sentence).

Diane shared these works by Richter and Kaphar with her students and asked them to compare and contrast them. One student objected. Diane described the student as "bright, bright, bright as hell, but has a completely messed-up long sentence. And I've had her before, and she's very confrontational." Diane liked the student, she said, but on this day, the student was being very vocal, telling Diane, "You aren't giving me enough information. I need more information than this. I can't write a paper unless I have more information." Daine responded, "This is the information I have for you. I can't bring in a cart filled with information. I'm asking you to form an opinion. I don't want an academic paper." The student appeared to feel "very, very threatened by it." Finally, Diane said, "I'm the queen of this room, you know, this is my kingdom. And I'm

the queen. And I say, this is all the information you're getting." Diane told me that the student wrote "a damn good paper, because she couldn't rely on outside resources."

Diane had assigned the students to focus groups that she called "Co-labs." She gave each group information about either Titus Kaphar or Gerhard Richter. Then the groups made presentations for each other. Each group was dependent on the other, doing a good job teaching. The confrontational woman had to participate at a level she was not used to. "She had to listen to the other people and take notes. And then she had to come up with something that wasn't ironclad, because it wasn't an academic paper." Diane said:

> That felt really, really good, standing up to her and enforcing an issue. I told her, 'I won't provide more information for you. You have to leap over.' And she did. Yeah. And she did. And that's where I think it's a quirky skill. Because on the outside, you'd say, 'Go to the library, go to the internet, or find the information yourself.'

Diane thought that at a traditional college, the professor would not have asked them to rely on another student but would expect them to do research at the library.

Diane resisted her student's demands for more information. She told the student that she was not interested in an academic paper. Reading provides context for understanding art. However, Diane did not want the students to become dependent on "authoritative" answers about art. Context can create the impression that participant contributions are unimportant and superfluous, with a predetermined meaning. This suggests there is a right and wrong way to think about art (Burnham, 1995, p. 521). Diane did not offer "ironclad" answers. She wanted the participants to think for themselves. Through dialogue rather than research, the participants developed comfort and skill in developing a personal judgment of an artwork (Burnham, 1995, p. 524).

The *Jerome Series* disturbed the students: They were "very, very upset…not not buying it." They did not want the men's faces hidden behind the tar. Diane suggested that the tar referred to "tarred and feathered." Historically, it is "a punishment that was popular in colonial America. Tarring and feathering is a spectacle, a ritualized form of public humiliation" (Maurantonio, 2018, p. 56). The tar might then be interpreted as a visual manifestation of the social stigma and collateral impact of incarceration. Her students, however, did not see it that way: "Why would you cover up the person, the more time they've served? Shouldn't you uncover them? The more time they've served?" They preferred that the tar represent the end of punishment rather than the continuation of humiliation, as if the portrait was emerging from the tar. Diane told me, "Isn't that a good read? So maybe what I read about it was bullshit."

Post-Reflexion

When Diane wondered if what she read was "bullshit," I wondered whether she thought there was a "right" interpretation. She tried to call the artist's studio "because I wanted to know more about that piece, because it really spoke to the students as incarcerated people. Their reading was really good." Perhaps she called Kaphar's studio because she thought the artist could declare an authoritative interpretation of the artwork. Maybe she hoped the studio would validate what her students said. Or maybe by contacting his studio and telling Kaphar what her students said about his work, she intended to inform the artist and uplift what the students thought.

I was surprised by Diane's resorting to an authoritarian role when she told the student, "I'm the queen of this room, you know, this is my kingdom." Of course, I was not there, and I do not know how assertive the student was being. I can imagine there are times when a person—teacher or student—has to put their foot down. It does make me wonder, though, how the student

felt about Diane's claim of dominance over the classroom. It seemed to be in conflict with Diane's wish for the students to think for themselves. It must have been confusing for the student.

On the other hand, incarcerated people are used to having arbitrary rules enforced. That kind of arbitrariness is typical for prisons. It seemed that in Diane's class, they may have been accustomed to a bit more autonomy than they had elsewhere in the prison. They might have expected more control and more choices. In this way, the classroom can be a temporary "escape" from prison.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexities. Diane recognized that her student was "bright, bright, bright as hell," but that she was serving a sentence that was "completely messed-up." This is the reality of prison. People with talent and ability are unable to fulfill their potential because of unnecessarily punitive and harsh sentences. Diane sought to develop the potential of her students while the prison was trying to suppress it.

Prisons are characterized by the repression of intellectual freedom. When the student wanted more information, Diane said no. It was not possible for Diane to provide the resources for the student to write a research paper. There was no internet in prison, and the prison library was sparse. Diane recognized that students at a traditional campus would go to the library or the internet to find information. Her students had to rely on their own opinions because they could not do research. The prison shaped the teaching experience when it restricted information. Diane and her students reshaped the experience of censorship into a liberatory pedagogy that valued the wisdom of students equally with the authority of art experts.

Unexpected Moments—The Surprises That Happen While Teaching. When Diane told the student that she was the queen and refused to give her more information, she may have

been responding in surprise to the student's aggressiveness in demanding more information. She in turn demanded and enforced that the student think for herself. Moreover, Diane said that the student wrote a "damn good paper." She felt this affirmed that she has a quirky skill for teaching in prison. The student's aggressiveness was a surprising moment that allowed two hidden abilities to surface. The student wrote a "damn good paper," and Diane realized that she had a "quirky skill." She seemed to feel that she was able to strike a healthy balance between authority and freedom, between dominating and respecting students.

Human and Non-human Elements. In the arts, material objects especially "take action" on a subject. An artist works with paint to create an image, but sometimes paint has a mind of its own. An artist paints on a surface, but when the surface is concrete blocks of a prison wall, the surface has a role in creating the experience and the meaning of the mural. An educator works within a teaching environment, especially in prison, where systems of domination rule and an educator does not have complete control over the classroom.

Titus Kaphar's painting had a particularly rich materiality. It was a portrait in oil paint with a gold-leaf background and dipped in melted tar. It combined the elegance and richness of gold with the earthiness of tar. The painting is powerful in person, but it was not as convincing in the small color photocopy that was available to the incarcerated students. The non-human materiality of the art was diminished. The material object may not have able to "take action" on the viewer.

Physical materials are usually much more powerful in real life. I told Diane about an experience I had in jail:

> We did a collaboration with a museum in a jail and the museum educators shared the *Jerome Project*. They brought black construction paper, pencils, white charcoal, and gold leaf. It wasn't an expensive gold leaf. It was just very, very thin sheets of gold foil that

> we stuck to the paper using glue sticks. It was summer, and the facility was very hot. The gold sheets were very thin, the fan was creating a colossal draft, and the leaves of gold flew all over the place. It was beautiful.

The beauty of the materials has a bodily impact on the viewer. When Diane shared the artwork as color photocopies, the power of those materials dissipated. I wondered how the students could use their imaginations to compensate for the loss of the visceral impact of gold, tar, and oil paint.

He's a Herder

Diane told me that after over 20 years of teaching in the prison, she was not sure how much longer she could take "the meanness" of the prison. She told me about an officer who verbally abused her students. She said:

> I let my folks have an eight o'clock break. I think they're not supposed to be having smokes. (I don't know, the state's kind of foggy about that.) But if some people don't get a smoke break, they're pretty horrible. So I let them go out. And I heard this yelling coming from the hall. So I went out and the guard was giving my favorite student a really hard time, really yelling at her. And I was furious. And I guess she could tell how mad I was. And she just looked at me and she said, 'Let it go. Let it go.' And then he came up to me and he tried to enlist me, saying, 'That girl never wears a shirt all the way buttoned!' And she had a t-shirt underneath. She's not a flirt girl. And he said, 'And your students, they mill around, and they shouldn't be doing that. And you have to let me know. I'm not gonna let your students go out at eight o'clock.' He was giving me all this shit. And I didn't feel like I wanted to go 'fuck you!' But I didn't feel like taking it, either. I didn't feel like having to make this nice sigh and say, 'Thank you officer. In the future…'
>
> When I met this guy four years ago, he was a nice guy who was interested in the artwork and interested in the college. And he's become a herder. He's mean and petty, you know? I find that so hard with the correctional officers. They're one way with us and another way with the students. But I can see that I'm gonna have to be on my guard. I know that I'm reaching a real point with the cruelty of it. It's so cruel. It's just so cruel.

Diane observed that working in the prison has had a negative impact on the officer. He used to be kind and curious, but after 4 years, he treated the students as less than human. Diane also noticed that she was changing. She was having a hard time being polite in response to the

rudeness of the officer. She bit her tongue so that she would not speak her mind and possibly make the situation worse, for herself and for her student.

Teaching in a prison can harm the well-being of teachers who may experience vicarious trauma. They may experience cynicism or feelings of helplessness. They may become exceedingly angry over the overwhelming injustices in the prison experience (Clemans, 2004). Diane was losing her patience and was on guard against herself lashing out against the brutality.

Post-Reflexion

Diane's story about biting her tongue reminded me of a young woman I met in jail. Athena was a young, tall, and lanky woman. At the time, we were working with adolescents at the jail, so she was probably between 16 and 18 years old. She loved playing basketball and had super-high energy, finding it hard to stay in her seat. She could not be quiet and listen, but she was fun and everybody liked her. I liked her, even though she was very disruptive. One time, the counselor visited our workshop and brought a visitor. When Athena saw the visitor, she jumped up, ran over, and gave her a big hug. It turned out that Athena had been incarcerated in juvenile detention as a young child, and this woman had been her teacher. The teacher hugged her back, apparently fond of her as well. When Athena hugged that woman, it seemed to me that she suddenly became a very young girl again—a child, really.

Another time, we had to wait after the workshop with the students for an officer to walk us to the exit, while another would walk the students back to their housing units. While we were waiting, a captain came with two officers. Athena stood up and said hello to them. They walked up to her. They were all being friendly and talking, but were putting shackles on her wrists and ankles. Then, they put a belt around her waist and chained the belt to the shackles on her wrists and ankles. Next, they put thick black mitts over her hands. All the while, she was talking and

joking with them. The volunteers and I sat watching, shocked, but trying not to watch because we did not want to embarrass her or make it worse for her. The other incarcerated women were embarrassed and shocked but also pretending not to notice. Then, the four of them walked out, while the rest of us continued to wait for our officer escorts. When we left, I asked the officer, "What that was about? The shackles on Athena? I've never seen that before." He said that it was a new protocol in response to the law that had been passed that forbade putting young people in solitary confinement. Now, when young people got in trouble, they were shackled like this when they were walking out of their housing units.

In the car on the way home from jail, the two volunteers were traumatized. They were both young Black women, who said it reminded them of the engravings from the antebellum period of enslaved people shackled and advertised for sale. That had not occurred to me, but I immediately agreed with them. It had been a moment when the horror and dehumanization of the jail became obvious. But after the third or fourth time I saw someone shackled, I was no longer shocked. I was still offended by it, but its power to disturb me was already waning.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. When we watched Athena being shackled the first time, we bit our tongues, just as Diane but her tongue when the officer was yelling at her and her student. We knew that we could not say or do anything to stop this from happening, and if we tried, we would most likely only make matters worse. We wanted to protect Athena but did not know how.

As teachers in a prison, we both have power and are disempowered. We have power because teachers have power over students, and we can leave at the end of the day. We have many privileges and freedoms that our students obviously do not have. But we are also disempowered because we cannot object. We have to follow the rules without question, even

though the rules are appalling. The power structures of the prison ensnare the educators differently but as firmly as they trap the incarcerated students.

Detox

Diane worried about her students. “I’ve got one student I like so much and she’s so smart. And I’ve had her before and now this semester she’s so drugged up she can barely write. They come in after the medication drugs. Yeah. Yeah, that’s a weird thing.” Diane noticed that the prison was using psychotropic drugs to maintain control over incarcerated people. She had intuited what researcher Anthony Ryan Hatch called the “state-sanctioned forms of medical violence characterized by medically unwarranted prescription of drugs that make inmates more docile” (Yale School of Medicine, 2019, n.p.). Hatch was surely referring to Michel Foucault’s (1977) book on the birth of prisons, *Discipline and Punish*, in which the French philosopher detailed the myriad ways in which the modern penitentiary produces “docile bodies,” including through regulation of time and space. For example, at the jail where I teach, at three exact times every day, every incarcerated person is locked into their cells to be counted. All movement is restricted during “count” for an hour. Surprisingly, though, Foucault did not mention drugs as a way of rendering bodies docile. The prescribed psychotropic drugs in prisons are an efficient way of controlling bodies that can have tragic consequences.

Post-Reflexion

Diane’s story reminded me of a man I met in a book club in jail. The book club began at 4 p.m. and lasted for an hour and a half. This gentleman would always join us eagerly at the beginning of the club. He sat in the circle with the book in his hands, leafing through the pages and leaning forward to catch every comment and contributing with his own thoughts. Without fail, at point some during book club, usually towards the first 20 minutes, an officer called out

"Detox!" and this man stood up and said, "I'll be back soon." He lined up with other men to get medication. He returned after 15-30 minutes, but rather than rejoining the group, he stood in the corner staring numbly at the wall for the rest of book club. One day I expressed to another participant how sad this made me. The second man shook his head at me and said, "Most of these guys are going to leave here worse than when they arrived. The pharmacy will give them as much meds as they ask for."

I can understand incarcerated people turning to drugs to cope with incarceration. Incarceration is a nightmare, and drugs may be an escape. However, through the use of drugs, prison can become an institution that controls every aspect of an incarcerated person's life, both physical *and mental*. The prison's use of drugs to pacify the students is one thread in the tangle of experiences for educators teaching art in prisons.

Many of Diane's stories reminded me of experiences I had in jail. Our stories intertwined and created a tapestry of experiences of educators who teach art to incarcerated people. Our interactions with students, prison staff, and prison regulations added to the warp and weft of the tapestry. The tapestry grew as we shared stories, continued to teach, and engaged in reflexion on our experiences.

Mary: Creative Free Space

Mary taught in an art studio in a men's facility. When she first started teaching, she was required to submit detailed lesson plans to the facility for clearance. However, she quickly realized that her lesson plans were not appropriate. She told me that she was

> cultivating creative free space. I don't tell the prison administration that in any of my paperwork or lesson plans for approval. But really, I run it like grad school; you have your own ideas. When you're bursting at the seams with ideas you want to try, and you haven't been allowed to before, it takes a while to unlock it. But we are getting there now

> with the guys. One of the guys the other day said, 'This class saved my life. I forgot how much being an artist was a big part of my identity.'

That kind of feedback can make an educator feel that teaching in prison is worth all the trouble they encounter.

> So now everyone's just really working on their own independent projects, on their own pace, and for when they can come in. And I do critiques. We meet one on one. I usually make my rounds, we chat about what they're making, how to push the materials. I open every class now with an exercise, either an introduction to contemporary artists through a book that I bring in, and then I bring out with me. We pass the book around, sort of like story time. Or we do a writing exercise.

Mary worked with a consistent group of men. There were about 12 students in the class, which was the maximum the facility would allow, and there was a "huge waitlist." The men were proactive in getting to participate in the art program. She told me:

> The guys get really protective of the group. I have one guy who curates a lot of who comes in, because he feels like he's the advocate of the program. I mean, he could run it, honestly, if he wanted to. So, he's the one that talks to our recreation director, who is the supervisor of the art program. And he tells the recreation director, 'You should let him on the list.'

The power relations between the student and Mary, as the teacher, and maybe between the student and the recreation director, fluctuate. Mary appreciates the student's care and protection of the art class community. She knows that he has insider knowledge of who will be a good addition to the community. He also knows who will appreciate the opportunity and who will not put the program at risk by breaking rules. She may share power with him in the classroom. However, it is less clear that the prison administration values his opinion as much as Mary does. In my experience, prison staff can be unpredictable in receiving advice of this type. One day, they might be glad for insider information, while another day, they may be offended and hostile. Their reactions often seem arbitrary. In any case, the student's help in managing the

class dynamics and attending to the recreation director allowed Mary to focus more on teaching art and less on administration.

Maxine Greene (2007) distinguished between art appreciation (facts about artists, artworks, history, and context), art education (elements of craft and practice), and aesthetic education (empowering to engage actively with works of art) (p. 3). Mary shared art historical information with the men, curating which artists she brought according to what she believed may help them think about their own art. She met with the men one-on-one, providing art education about craft, such as advice about technical skills, mixing colors, drawing, or building sturdy structures for sculptures. She provided aesthetic education by talking with them about the conceptual content. The men thought deeply about how their art reflects their truth about the world around them. "Participatory involvement with many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured" (Greene, 1995, p. 379). Mary offered them the opportunity to have a graduate-student quality art experience.

The men developed an artistic identity—an opportunity that most people never have, incarcerated or free. Since most people who are incarcerated are from low-wage backgrounds, it is especially unlikely that they have had much quality art education. Once they break out of habits of the familiar, they can begin to discover "new avenues for action" (Greene, 1995, p. 379).

As I listened to Mary, I realized that, in contrast, when I work with people in jail, there is little chance for them to develop a personal artistic style. The programs I facilitate take place in the housing units rather than in classrooms, and anyone is welcome to participate. The group changes from week to week. There may be a core group that participates regularly, but others

only join us occasionally; some people are released after just a few weeks, and new people who have recently been detained join the group.

People join the program for different reasons. Some are excited to make art. I can see that they are already familiar with how to use the materials. Others join because there is so little to do, and the program brings some variety to their day. Many of them want to make a card or a painting to give to their families. The jail is an environment of scarcity, and the art materials are valuable possessions. Most are very excited to see the materials we bring in—bright, fancy patterned papers, soft felt in bold colors, African print fabrics, plastic gemstones, paper flowers, brilliant watercolor paints, fresh markers, and sharp colored pencils.

The women are starved for beauty. The jail is dull and hard—concrete block walls painted filthy white and dull pastel colors. Occasionally, the jail will repaint the walls in an attempt to make the space less depressing. Pastels can be clear and pure if you mix colors with bright white, but if you mix colors with greyish white, then the colors become dull and sad. Even after a fresh coat of paint, the walls look a little dirty and grimy.

The need for aesthetic pleasure is a natural human instinct. Since prehistoric times, when people made paintings on cave walls and stone carvings, humans have had a drive to make art. When we enter the housing unit, the women jump up and come over to ask us if we brought any gemstones. When we are packing up, they ask if they can keep leftover materials. The women show us that they keep the art they make and hang it on the wall next to their beds. They tell us they want to make a special card for a child whose birthday is soon. They are excited to make art.

Although only a few women already think of themselves as artists, it is my hope that all of them will have an opportunity to discover and explore their artistic talents. Every human has

the impulse to make art—it might be dancing, singing, making music, poetry, or visual art. By participating in our workshops, I hope they will rediscover their creative self.

The Microphone

Mary told me about two artworks that the artists in her class had made that were especially memorable. She told me:

> It was a student's first day in the class, and he didn't know what he wanted to make. At first, he was thinking about making a walker or some device to improve his walking abilities because he has a rare condition that affects his spinal cord. He and I were thinking about devices that could be added to his body. But then that turned into him wanting to make a microphone.

Mary explained that other people in the class helped him:

> One of the other artists in the class is good at folding paper and helped him out. It took him weeks to make it. It was all paper and tape. Rolled-up construction paper and butcher paper, paper you spread out on the table, rolled up with all the masking tape. We worked on the base for a long time, then he decorated it with different colored construction paper on the outside. It was orange, green and yellow, I think. He put a bunch of stripes on it. Then, the microphone itself came off the stand, and then the mic, the round part, was orange. He was proud of that.

The student had designed and built an interactive sculpture with help from the community in the classroom. It was an artistic and engineering achievement and a social accomplishment. Through intra-acting with the art materials, he became entangled in his new community.

Mary had been asked to document all the artwork in the class for the nonprofit that runs the arts programs, so she obtained permission from the prison to bring in a camera. When the men saw the camera, they asked to make a video. They used the microphone as a prop. Mary told me:

> Our class turned into open mic time. One of the artists in our class had written a lot of songs. He's been incarcerated for about 25 years, and he also runs the music programs in the facility. He sang a bunch of songs. Some of the men read their poetry. It was very impromptu. But, you know, it was really cute watching them all with the mic. It was really sweet.

The microphone and stand were made of paper, a fragile material. The sculpture was life-size, so building it sturdy, strong, and well-balanced to stand required skill and persistence. The artist then decorated the microphone with colorful paper to make it beautiful. He created an object that became a mediator for building community. The other artists activated the sculpture when they used it as a prop to perform for each other. The feeling of community provides solace and supports the classroom becoming a homespace.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. Prisons are characterized by a scarcity of material goods. Mary's student made a microphone sculpture out of the available materials—paper and tape. The materials were not the most practical for building the microphone because they were fragile and not rigid, and it was challenging to balance the microphone on its stand. However, the other classmates and Mary assisted the student, and he completed the microphone. The inadequate materials led to the class joining together to support the student, so a scarcity led to community building. The prison offers many challenges to the educators, but the educators rise to the challenge and sometimes can turn a barrier to learning into a portal for growth and community.

The student had decorated the microphone with colorful papers and stripes. Beauty is scarce in prisons. As total institutions, prisons try to enforce uniformity. Prisons try to make everything look the same. Officers and incarcerated people wear uniforms. Incarcerated people are restricted in what they can have. Many objects that are completely normal on the outside, like certain books or art materials, are considered contraband in a prison. A beautiful sculpture is even more beautiful when contrasted with this aesthetically impoverished environment.

Another scarcity in prisons is inadequate healthcare. I was surprised that two of Mary's students were suffering from physical disabilities. They both made artworks that responded to

their conditions. Mary felt that it was emotionally healing for them to be able to express themselves about their conditions through art. Prisons generally provide inadequate healthcare, and I wondered how the students accessed what they needed.

Unexpected Moments—The Surprises That Happen While Teaching. The impromptu talent show was a beautiful moment of community. The microphone catalyzed the men to perform for each other and share their music and poetry. The surprise I felt at this story made me realize that the men defied my expectations. I thought they would be too tough or too cool to be sincere and emotionally open with each other. That was probably a reflection of my bias about men in general. When Mary called it "sweet," I realized they were sincere, sensitive, and unguarded. This kind of moment can change the classroom dynamic and deepen friendships. Mary was lucky to be present. It is an honor for her to be included in a moment like that.

Human and Non-human Elements. Mary's experience teaching art in prison both shaped and was shaped by the non-human elements, including the physical aspects like the art materials such as paper and tape, and the prison environment, which enforced scarcity and surveillance.

Her student built a microphone out of paper and tape because those were the available materials. The students and Mary transformed these restrictions, however, and created a surprising, powerful performance.

Art tools can be used to imagine and create alternative places and ways of being. They are tools for creating speculative fiction, which imagines worlds where people have freedom and power. Cultural critic Mark Dery (1994) invented the term "Afrofuturism," defining it as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African

American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (p. 180). In the tradition of Afrofuturism, the students used their imagination to envision a future in which they survive traumatic circumstances, confront systemic racism and structural inequalities, and thrive.

The Catheter

A second memorable artwork was made by an artist Mary considered a close friend. He had a disability that required him to wear catheters, and he included some catheters in a sculpture. Mary described it to me: "He used a green prison shirt. It's rubbed in this glue stuff, and then he layered it, and now it looks like this gooey, slug, sci-fi thing. It's transformed, and the catheters become access points. It looks kind of medical, but it feels like something just came out of him." His medical condition was a vulnerable subject for him in prison and spoke to a larger conversation about disabilities in prison. Mary continued:

> For him in particular, he was allowing himself to be vulnerable, to put these in his work. He's letting go of something. And so, I felt for him, in his personal journey, that was a huge release for him. Being vulnerable in a men's facility is always a touchy subject. So, he feels safe in our class to do that. I felt that was a memorable shared moment of vulnerability.
>
> That's what a lot of the guys in our class have talked about. It is really nice to come here, to the studio. Because the energy and the toxic masculinity in the facility is hard to live in, to compete in, and to carve your space in. And because in our class we have a handful of men who have disabilities, physically. The guy I'm thinking about, who goes to the library a lot, has a disability. It's safe there. And also, he's interested in reading the *New York Times*.
>
> Yeah, because it's a community, at the end of the day, that you have to live in. And I think just finding your place in the community in general, as always, whatever community you're in, your identity changes.

According to Mary's description, the community in the art studio makes the men feel safe—physically and emotionally. A classroom community creates a sense of "shared

commitment and common good" (hooks, 2014, p. 40) and where students feel safe to share their experiences, to speak freely, and to strive for intellectual growth. A community supports the desire to learn.

Cultures of domination are oppositional to community (hooks, 2003, p. 163). Because much of the United States, especially in prisons, functions through domination, creating community requires work. A community does not require that all members be of the same ethnicity, class, and so on. In a progressive classroom, community is "life-sustaining and mind-expanding" (hooks, 2003, p. xv). It creates a space where teachers and students work as partners for liberation.

The men in the art studio are not performing "toxic masculinity." They see beyond conventional constructions of masculinity. They are just doing what feels comfortable, where they can "carve their space" and be authentically themselves. They choose to be a part of the art room community. Their identity determines the choice, and the choice shapes their identity. It is "co-constitutive."

The artmaking process transformed the artist and the art materials—the prison clothing, the catheter, the glue. The medical devices became something else, something sci-fi, outside of reality. The artist could share his vulnerability with the community in the art studio. The artist confronted his reality, sharing his world through his art. The community in the art studio was likely transformed as well.

Art can help us become "aware of the tragic deficiency in the fabric of life" (Greene, 1995, p. 379). Too often, we are willfully ignorant of the wrongs in the world—whether incarceration or inadequate medical care or some other injustice—and we accept without question the way the world is. We become complacent. Art can re-sensitize us, help us become

conscious of injustice, and convince us to rebel against it. Seeing images of *what is* can inspire us to "summon images of *what ought to be*" (Greene, 1995, p. 379, emphasis added). The art that the students made may have re-sensitized Mary and the students themselves. Maybe it led them to question how the world is and imagine what it ought to be.

Post-Reflexion

Mary's approach to teaching creates opportunities for students to be vulnerable. They are being open and honest about their disabilities. The students seemed to feel safe in the classroom. bell hooks might call this a "homeplace." I am cautious about creating vulnerabilities when I teach in jail. I am concerned about students exposing their emotions and then having to stay in their housing units where they may have no safe place to go while they have raw feelings. Sometimes they will tell me about the crime they are accused of and the trauma surrounding it. I listen with empathy and then try to redirect the conversation gently to the activity at hand.

Human and Non-human Elements. Mary's description of the artwork of the two students emphasized the materials. Both made works that referenced their physical disabilities. A microphone built from paper might have represented the fragility of the voice, but it also represented a reclaiming of the voice. A sculpture built using catheters was representative of the student's physical struggles, and the catheters were also material evidence of his physical struggles. The catheters were a unique example of the fusing of human and non-human to co-produce the teaching experience.

This Is Not a Metaphor

I participated in a poetry workshop on metaphors at the jail that was facilitated by a volunteer. It was Friday afternoon, and we sat around two steel tables, with four steel stools at each table, bolted to the floor. Shanika was a vibrant and charismatic woman and a leader in the

housing unit. She called others to come join us. The fluorescent lights hummed and flickered. Keys rattled on the correction officer's belt, cell doors slammed, a horror movie played on the television, and women hollered at each other. Four volunteers from the university and four incarcerated women in beige sweatsuits sat surrounded by chaos. We read and discussed two poems with metaphors.

What I Didn't Know Before

By Ada Limón

was how horses simply give birth to other
horses. Not a baby by any means, not
a creature of liminal spaces, but already
a four-legged beast hellbent on walking,
scrambling after the mother. A horse gives way
to another horse and then suddenly there are
two horses, just like that. That's how I loved you.
You, off the long train from Red Bank carrying
a coffee as big as your arm, a bag with two
computers swinging in it unwieldily at your
side. I remember we broke into laughter
when we saw each other. What was between
us wasn't a fragile thing to be coddled, cooed
over. It came out fully formed, ready to run.

This Is Just To Say

By William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

On the cold steel stools, we imagined two horses galloping and two lovers embracing. We imagined a sweet juicy plum and a selfish and spicey boyfriend. We laughed and joked about the "delicious plums" and the "hellbent beast." Then we immersed ourselves in our own metaphors, becoming ready to run so sweet and so cold. For 15 minutes, we scribbled with four-inch golf pencils on lined loose-leaf paper. Then, I looked up and saw that everyone was waiting for me to finish. We read our poems aloud. We had written metaphors about shady cars, split-open watermelons, and bawdy bananas.

Shanika read her poem about being a fish in a bowl.

She had no one to turn to. In darkness, hunger, and silence, she sunk down down down.

Her poem silenced the group. She was strong, but her poem revealed a deep sadness that she kept hidden. I felt an ache. The poem held a "resting space" (Vinz, 2024, p. 57) where we were immersed in her words. The only response to her poem was *to be.* To feel the in-between-ness of the words, to hear what was not said. We collected the poems the women wrote that day and made a zine out of them. We distributed the zines the next week, printed in color with photo illustrations. The women loved them.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. As we sat down to begin the poetry workshop, we were surrounded by noise and activity, with the sound amplified by the concrete walls and steel furniture. Slowly, as we read the poems, the noise receded in our consciousness, and we focused on the poems and each other's reactions to the words. We read the poems out loud twice, so that we could savor the sound. It was as if a bubble settled over the small group of workshop participants—the volunteers and incarcerated women. We were alone with each other.

Horses and sweet plums were not recent experiences for these women. The sensual pleasure that images in the poems conjured were memories for the incarcerated women—not something that was accessible in jail. By spending time discussing the poems, we had the opportunity to stoke memories of beauty, delight, and contentment. By lingering in our thoughts and writing our own poems, we took the chance to dwell in the comfort and peace of our imaginations.

I am not a therapist, and the prison classroom is not a safe space. But poetry and art can be healing. Through the arts, people can access and express repressed feelings, providing a release. The need for art as a therapeutic expression and the need to keep emotions protected and safe is a contradiction. In prison, this opposition is an unresolvable contradiction. But the need to make art sometimes outweighs the need for safety.

Jack: Everyday Joy

The prison where Jack teaches art has a strong art program that predates his involvement. During COVID, the prison was on lockdown, with no visitors coming in or out. The men in the prison organized themselves, asked for and received permission from the warden, and began painting a mural. The mural filled a long hallway, covering both sides of the walls. Jack said it was " exciting…it's a really weird piece. The content is all over the place." Jack told me, "And it just grew until more than half of the facility is muralled and painted all over. It's exciting to watch how their chops have progressed…. They're doing these Thomas Kincaid-style paintings all over the walls with highly considered rendering. And I don't know, it's a really weird, interesting art piece that is huge."

It was in this context that Jack and his colleagues began offering facilitator training for incarcerated people to lead art workshops. At the end of the training, the men earned a certificate and credits towards an early release.

Ramen Noodles and Community

The facilitator trainings were designed to provide incarcerated people with the skills to lead art workshops. The trainings were offered in two 1-week intensive units, with a few weeks of break between Week 1 and 2. The break gave the trainees time to develop the curriculum. Jack explained:

> So, one week, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., five days a week. Then you wait a couple of weeks, and then you come back and do another week. And then the hope is that you have a number of classes ready to run at the end of that second intensive week. I try to encourage having partners or small groups lead the instruction just because I know there's a lot of complexity putting the curriculum together in two to three weeks. But also, I think having that support structure is helpful for them. With that said, a bunch of dudes have insisted on going their own way. And that's led to some interesting stuff, too.

After they completed the training, the men taught the curricula they had developed to other incarcerated men over a 15-week session. Jack and his colleagues supplied the needed art materials for the workshops and provided on-site support.

Jack told me the trainings were incredible experiences. They were teaching in a "level-four facility," meaning a high-security level. Jack thought the difference between the levels was overhyped. He explained:

> Level four—you can sense the change in security precautions. We had to lock up all the materials and so forth and so on. Within that space this summer, it just got so familial. I'm tripping over words. But we created a context over this summer where every day just seemed like such a joy to them and to us, where we were coming in and getting excited about moving paint around on canvases and making a mess.

> Did you ever see where they take a garbage bag and fill it with all their Ramen noodles? They were doing that every day, and they made sandwiches out of the ramen noodles that they all mixed together.
>
> It just got to a point where this group was working excitedly to create a curriculum for this whole space. Artmaking projects for this whole space. And painting…we had this big canvas we were painting on because we were, at that point, just starting the idea of thinking about the mural on A yard. And the energy level seemed like it was going up, instead of down, which I sometimes find on campus…when you get to a certain point in the undergrad classes, it's like, halfway through, folks are a little tired, you know. The men just had a very visceral and exciting energy this summer. My co-worker was going to get married at the end of the summer, and we were also just talking about his impending wedding a lot and there was just this energy of excitement growing each week. Unfortunately, right after that, A yard was moved because of the reorder organization. So, we got through the facilitation training, and they got the certificate they get through our process. But then, we were dispersed. So, it was sort of sad for me at the end because I don't get to see those dudes anymore. But it was a really energetic and exciting shared moment.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. When Jack talked about the facilitator training, he described the camaraderie and joy that the participants felt. They made a communal meal, they worked on art projects together, and they talked about personal things. Sharing a meal in the community with the incarcerated men was an unexpected and joyful experience for Jack. At the end of the training, the prison reorganized housing for the men, and they were dispersed and would not see each other again. Jack was sad about the loss of their friendship.

Incarcerated people are often moved unexpectedly by the prison administration for arbitrary reasons. The communities and relationships that are disrupted and the programming that people no longer have access to are not considerations for the prison administration. The constant awareness that people who one looks forward to seeing may one day suddenly be gone, with no notice or reason, creates an emotional hyper-vigilance for the loss of relationships. Perhaps prison administrations perceive strong community bonds as a threat to their control. In any case, it is difficult for educators to maintain friendships with incarcerated people.

Human and Non-human Elements. I wondered what happens when the men start painting "moving paint around on canvases and making a mess" as they planned a mural. What do prisons do to men? How does the paint affect the prison and the people within it? How do each of these things/bodies—people, paint, prison—intra-act? Jack described an earlier mural the men had made. It filled a hallway with a vast landscape. I picture that mural as an immersive art experience. A relatively new form of entertainment, an immersive art experience envelops the viewer in an environment, blurring the lines between reality and the artwork, transcending traditional art viewing by placing the viewer within the artwork. Corporate entertainment companies have created immersive experiences of paintings by Van Gogh or Monet, for example. The men in the prison might enter an immersive art experience of their own creation to travel virtually to another place or time and escape reality.

Post-Reflexion

Jack inspired me to share a story of my own. I told him:

> I have a vivid memory of a time we were doing an art workshop in the jail, and we had been allowed to bring in music. We were playing Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*. These were young women, 18–21 years old, so this was 'old people's music' to them. We had markers and paper and collage materials. And it was so blissful in the room. The music was playing, and the prompt was to make something abstract. The music is kind of abstract; it doesn't have words, so how do you express the rhythm, tone, and different instruments? What emotions does the music inspire, and how do you communicate those emotions visually? And we were sitting in this room, all of us making art together with the music playing. Nobody was talking. And it was just blissful. And I thought, 'This is so weird. It's wonderful, but I'm in jail. Experiencing bliss.'

Jack responded:

> Yeah, I think that's a really good articulation. I mean, there are so many sad aspects of the time spent there. There are definitely things I see there that I'm like, oh, no, no, that's not what I want. But I think the highs are just as impactful sometimes. I also think it's exciting to have a space where you're sharing real emotion in a real way with people. I think there's a heightened intensity around the complexity of the space.

Jack felt that emotions are more readily shared in the workshops than in his outside, on-campus classes. This may be surprising—one might expect that incarcerated people would be more guarded about their emotions than people on the outside. However, perhaps because of the camaraderie, trust, and respect that Jack and his colleagues fostered with the incarcerated participants, people felt comfortable and safe and were willing to share their emotions. It is possible that the contrast between the normal prison environment and the environment of the workshop contributed to making the emotions more intense.

Hip Hop, Origami, Crochet

I asked Jack to describe some of the artwork that the men had made. He told me:

> Through the curriculum that they designed, we looked at a number of different media. We had a guy who developed a class on writing poetry and hip-hop songs. There weren't a lot of folks that enrolled in it, but they generated a lot of really cool stuff. And when we did that show where they zoomed in, he read one of the pieces they generated. It was super impactful. There's a guy who teaches a screenwriting course. He's a complex and interesting instructor. But I've never gotten to see any of the work that has come out of that course. I don't know why that is, so I can't speak too much about it. But I have seen him teach, and he's a compelling pedagogue.
>
> There's a lot of painting. And I think that some of the dudes who are engaged with the mural process are showing what they know how to do to folks, but also potentially helping to train more folks to help with that giant project they've kind of taken on and are excited about.
>
> And another one—I hate to call it cute, but it's the first word that comes to my mind when I think about it. These two dudes got really obsessed with origami. One of the books that we had in the materials we brought in initially for the class was an origami instructional manual. And neither of them had ever experienced origami in any way prior to that, but they just got super psyched about it. And they developed a whole curriculum out of this book. And they just started making such cool stuff and generating a lot of origami. And then they'd start doing small paper crafts. This guy started making these tiny baseball caps of paper. We put a bunch of them in the show that we had, but they were tiny little bit baseball caps with nice little details and like, I don't know, it was again, my brain keeps on screaming cute at me, but it was just very endearing.

Jack's descriptions of the paper sculptures contributed to a counter-narrative of incarcerated men. The paper sculptures were "cute" and "endearing." Small paper sculptures require careful meticulous handcrafting. I imagine a group of men sitting around a table, bent low over their hands, quietly slowly folding and tearing tiny pieces of paper. Slowly a pile of miniature baseball caps grows between them. This does not correspond with the dominant narrative about prison in a Netflix series, for example.

> What else has been made? Oh, I forgot—crochet got huge. So, there is this one guy who had already known how to do crochet. He got really excited about teaching folks to crochet. He got so deep that he was crocheting stuffed animals, and he was donating stuffed animals that he made to a local animal shelter to sell to raise money for their shelter. It's a funny thing. He's an ornery dude. He has sort of a gruff personality. But then he's turning out all these little stuffed dogs, and very carefully teaching everybody else how to make the little stuffed dog. So that's a funny space.

62½ Years to Life

Jack's story about the crochet artist resonated differently for me after I read a story written by Lamarr Knox. Knox, incarcerated in New York State with a sentence of 62½ years to life, published an essay in *The Marshall Project* in 2022 about his evolution from a gang member to a crochet artist during his time in prison. He had been in the Crips gang when he was a young man and was incarcerated at the age of 20 with a sentence of 62 years to life. He was sent to a prison where most gang members were from an opposing gang, and he feared for his safety. At first, he tried to establish a reputation as a tough man and ended up serving time in solitary confinement after getting in fights. Knox (2022) wrote:

> After about seven years, I did find a cathartic hobby: I started crocheting. I learned how from a pot-bellied, bald, old man named Joe who was on my tier. (If you ever read this, Joe, my bad.) I'd see him crocheting all the time and selling his finished work, and I asked him to teach me. After he said yes, I ordered about $60 worth of yarn and crochet hooks from a catalog. I was slightly embarrassed when that first order came. Crips don't crochet; old women in rocking chairs do. When people saw me carrying my yarn from the package room to my cell block, they asked what the crochet man was making for me.

> I didn't confirm or deny why I had the materials. Picture a 240-pound, 6-foot, 27-year-old, Black Crip crocheting in his cell. That was me. I would cover the front bars of the cell with a dark sheet to prevent other prisoners from seeing me. This worked for a while, until one of my friends knocked my curtain down. He probably thought I was smoking weed without him; I was known for doing that. When he saw me crocheting, he burst into laughter, shaking his head. He wasn't the only friend who teased me; peer pressure exists behind these walls, too. But I laughed along with my friends and kept on crocheting. Soon, I realized that if my work was good enough, I could sell items for a profit. (n.p.)

As he became more skilled, he made items on commission, like toys, monogrammed pillows, hats, and scarves that other people would order as gifts for their loved ones. According to Knox:

> Crocheting was the first step to changing my life. I left the gang, which meant severing ties with comrades and giving up a position I thought I would have for life. It was very emotional for me because I felt like I was abandoning my family. One night, I broke down and cried. I didn't know where the emotion came from, but I woke up wanting to be a better man and live a simpler life. (n.p.)

Art programs are not always art therapy, but they are often therapeutic. Art educators are not therapists, and the spaces where they teach are not therapeutic spaces. The spaces are not safe for sharing vulnerability. However, artists can practice self-care and self-healing through practicing their art.

Human and Non-human Elements. In his description of crochet, Knox focused on the physical experience of crocheting. Crochet is an entanglement between the human and non-human. The yarn takes action on the human. Crocheting was a kind of meditation for Knox (2022):

> When I crochet, I get into the rhythm of it and get into a zone. I maintain the tension of the yarn as it slides through my fingers evenly…. Crocheting teaches me patience, control, humility, and compassion, and it allows me to meditate on my life. When I finish a project that a fellow prisoner will give to a loved one, it feels like an accomplishment. I like knowing that whatever I make in this uncomfortable place will bring comfort to someone in society. I also take pride in creating gifts that my children will become attached to because they came from their imprisoned father. (n.p.)

The tension of the yarn and the rhythm of the movement were physical ways of knowing. Knox's fingers "knew" how to create the right amount of tension with the yarn.

The crocheted objects intra-acted among Knox, the prison culture, and people outside and inside the prison. Carrying the first bag of yarn from the commissary to his cell was a frightening experience. He did not want anyone to know that he was going to learn how to crochet, like a grandma in a rocking chair. Crochet became part of quitting the Crips. Being a member of the gang was an important part of his identity, and it was painful to leave his "family." He connected learning to crochet to leading a simpler and better life.

While he lost some friends by quitting the Crips, crocheting also helped him build new connections with people. He developed a friendship with Joe, who taught him to crochet. He nurtured his relationship with his children by making them crocheted gifts. Often people who are incarcerated for long periods of time are gradually alienated from their community on the outside. Visits and phone calls become less frequent as the years go by. The crochet toys that he sent his children reminded them that he cared about them. He established a reputation with other incarcerated men as someone from whom to buy gifts for their loved ones. Did he become a "crochet man" like old Joe? The objects that he crocheted formed bridges to the outside world, as part of him left the prison and joined a family with each gift. His artworks left the prison and brought comfort to people on the outside. His art was his way of making a contribution to society.

Affect and Percept

I asked Jack what he thought the value of art was for incarcerated people. He said:

> A driving concern is how can we make sure that folks have at least the opportunity to engage with the material and conceptual means of thinking about who they are and defining how they see the world and communicating how they want the world to be. That's how I define what I want for folks—is for everybody to have that opportunity and that access.

When I prompted him further, he continued:

> There's this Deleuze and Guattari book, *What Is Philosophy?* where they talk about the difference between different disciplines and what the concepts they engage with are. It's helpful for me because I don't think I ever really thought about it the way they talked about it before. But it talks about *affects and percepts.* So, things that are felt or things that change how we feel about the world and things that we perceive in the world.

For Jack, affect and percept are modes of living that center on emotions and personal experiences of the sensory world. It represents his own way of engaging the world.

> I think in terms of thinking about modalities, those are the modalities that have been comfortable to me. I don't know if that's just personal self-definition, physiological tendency, whatever. But, thinking about how things make people feel, and how we experience the sensory world are the ways that I have been most excited or engaged in day-to-day living.

Deleuze and Guattari (1994) defined art as "a bloc of sensation, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects" (p. 164, as quoted in Smith et al., 2023). Jack said this mode of thinking through and expressing emotions and personal experiences was essential to him, but he felt that it was a mode that was undervalued, maybe even discouraged in contemporary life, while scientific ways of thinking were privileged by neoliberal society.

For Deleuze and Guattari, philosophy is the study of affects—the things that a thing is capable of transforming into, of its "becomings" (Smith et al., 2023). They proposed that the senses are the origin of knowledge. The arts are "a third mode of creative thought." Art's role is to create "signs" that break habits of perception and develop new ways of thinking.

New Materialism extends Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy and defines affect as the process of "taking something on, of changing in relation to an experience" (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, pp. 8–9). Affect "expresses the embodied experience of learning, the places in which we learn and the histories and desires we bring to learning…[it is] the lived reality" (pp. 8–9) of a situation. It is learning that happens in formal settings like schools and informal settings like prisons. The experiences that constitute affect "intra-act" and create reality.

All of these sensory "actions" on the part of the prison and the art materials contribute to the aesthetic experience. Art is not made by humans alone, but by humans and things together.

Why does this matter in this story? Attending to "affect" and "intra-action," Jack expanded the value of the students' experiences learning about art. Before the men began to paint murals, their part in the intra-action could be defined as "prisoners." They were captives in the prison. The environment defined their actions in the prison. But when they became artists, they changed their relation to the prison. They created a fantasy world on the walls. They transported themselves to a new place through a kind of speculative fiction.

The intra-action of the men and their environment transformed them and their environment. They were becoming something new—artists. *How can art—both making art and experiencing art—create something new?* is an abolitionist question. There is more at stake than just beautiful paintings on the walls. When Jack sought permission and support for the men to create new murals, he opened a chance for the men to become something new and to create a new world.

Human and Non-human Elements. Barrett and Bolt (2013) proposed that relations between human and non-human bodies "enable art to come into being" (p. 7). Human and non-human actors co-create each other's reality in a continuous state of becoming (Barad, 2007). For example, the prison, the paint, the brushes, and the men all contributed to the creation of a mural. Through "intra-action" the human and non-human—bodies and things—encountered each other and "became different" (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, p. 4).

Jack was strategizing to get permission for the men to create more murals. The men would have more opportunities to engage with their environment, to be proactive, and to engage in a new intra-action with the prison. They, the prison, and the painting materials are changing

and becoming something new when they paint the walls. The prison walls become art materials. The men become artists. The murals become a place to be lost in a different world. As Barrett and Bolt (2013) noted, the quality of art materials is an essential aspect of creative practice. "The visual arts engage all manner of material processes in making and assembling art. The material facts of artistic practice appear so self-evident and integral to our understanding of art that it may seem unremarkable to frame them in terms of the material turn" (p. 5). The prison walls are included among the art materials that constitute the murals. Painting on these walls differs from painting on any other walls or paper or canvas.

Murals are a common feature in prisons. The murals transform the environment from grey concrete blocks to colorful landscapes. The paintings became an imaginary escape for the men. The artists changed the prison, and the prison co-produced the transformation of men into artists.

Post-Reflexion

I have not seen these specific walls, but I have seen other prison walls. They are usually concrete blocks with years of thick layers of dirty peeling paint covering them. I imagine there is very little natural light. The hallway is dim with fluorescent lighting, and probably some bulbs are broken. The walls are high, and the hallways are narrow, limiting the angle of view for observing a large mural. I also imagine echoes of sound—men laughing, shouting, metal doors banging in this space with terrible acoustics. I probably smell bad cafeteria food, or sweaty men, painting in a poorly ventilated, hot space.

I also imagine the men's excitement when they open the cans of paint and see the brilliant colors, in the space where everything is gray and drab. When they dip the paintbrush into the can and swirl it around, maybe the paint is creamy and luscious. I imagine that they mix some colors,

maybe pouring red and blue into a container and stirring until it turns purple, adding more blue or red to change the hue. In my imagination, the hallway lights up. The putrid smells are overcome by the smell of fresh paint. The men apply the paint to the wall, and I wonder at how those colors change the space.

Marvin: Everywhere We Fit in

Marvin described the "classroom" where he taught art in the prison:

> So, first, I'll start with the spaces, right. The prison that we teach in is a super-maximum security prison. And it was designed to keep people in isolation for decades, right? These prisons should have never been built. But that's a whole other story. The way it's built is so ergonomically incorrect, right? And then you come into this space, and it really wasn't built for programming. It wasn't built for teaching art. It was built to keep people in solitary confinement. So, there are two general formats to the prison, half of it was designed for solitary confinement, and the other half of it was designed to be level four, which is the highest security level in the State, with the exception of the segregated housing unit, which is the other half of the prison. So, it's challenging finding space to teach. I've taught in what they call a classroom. That means in the end of a hallway, where we could section off the hallway, and put up a couple of writing boards to kind of separate the class from the people who are walking in the hall to the chow hall where people go to eat. There's no one in there eating while we're in there, but we're teaching in this space. Wherever we can fit in, that's where we're doing this work. Because there are no other options, right? So, wherever we fit in.

When Marvin said, "Wherever we fit in," it sounded to me like he meant, "We will push our way in wherever we can." He was teaching art in a hallway. An art classroom in a traditional school might have a sink, storage areas for materials, drying racks, worktables, and windows. This "classroom" had none of that. I imagined (hoped?) they were allowed to use folding tables with benches or plastic chairs. They probably had to bring all their teaching materials into and out of the prison in clear plastic tote bags. Marvin was determined and would not be discouraged from bringing art into the prisons. Marvin continued: "I am the facilitator. I'll go table to table. Check out what's being done. And seeing if there's any support I can offer, making sure the inventory is correct at the end, making sure it's right at the beginning. I'm kind of bouncing around the

room." Some of the incarcerated men were teaching the others how to make art. Marvin's job was to support them and, at the end of the workshops, collect the materials and make sure nothing was missing.

"Wherever we fit it" meant that *where there's a will, there's a way*. After all, Marvin believes that art is a human right. Marvin will offer art *everywhere* they fit in.

Marvin told me that prisons are designed to separate and discipline, and his response was to empower and see the value in the students. He knew incarcerated artists who had no formal training but who created masterpieces. Regardless of whether they had formal training or education, they were "totally capable" of creating and teaching art. Marvin felt a call to honor those capabilities and to create space for them to make art.

A Ride Home

The prison where Marvin has been offering art programs is on the northernmost border of a large state. As Marvin explained to me, sometimes when a person is released from prison, they do not have anyone to pick them up. They do not have a way to get home. The state provides people with a small amount of money when they are released—Marvin called it "gate money." If a person needs transportation, the state will arrange for a shuttle to the bus station, but the cost of the shuttle and a bus ticket are taken out of the gate money. If Marvin learns that one of the students needs a ride home, he coordinates with other service-providing organizations to find transportation. He told me about one time when a student needed a ride. Marvin said:

> So, I drove up a couple of hours to go get him, picked him up, made sure he had his plane ticket, backpack, essential cell phone, and all those things. And one of the first stops he wanted was to come to the campus because the art programs in prison were a collaboration with the college, right? So, he wanted to come see the campus that was on his certificate when he graduated. So, we brought him to the campus. The professor was down here and gave him a tour of the art department and gave him a tour of the campus.

> And from there we went to meet someone who was a DJ on the radio back in the day and now works on campus. Took him there to meet her. He felt like she was a celebrity.
>
> For me, the best part is always seeing someone step out of prison. That's right, I want to see you come home. And I want to see you stay home. And I want to see you live a beautiful life. Right? So, seeing that person actually walk out of prison is like, wow, and this person who did 18 years in prison, and I was privileged to see him actually step off the bus, walk out and I provided that transportation. That was an amazing experience. So, it's those types of things. It's always why I do the work. There's intersectionality. Everything is linked up to the work because I want to see people come out. Whether it's supporting the educational program, supporting the art program, or supporting the rehabilitative program. It is all for that student on the other end.

Post-Reflexion

As Marvin told me this story, I imagined the man's joy and excitement at experiencing that first taste of freedom. I vicariously felt Marvin's pride and honor in sharing that moment with him. Maybe Marvin re-experienced his own first day of freedom. I have never picked anyone up from prison, but I have been one of many who have welcomed them on their first visit to campus. In my office, I work with several people who have served time in prison. I appreciate their wisdom, grace, and grit, and I cannot imagine what they had to endure when they were incarcerated. I cannot imagine how happy they must have been to be finally free.

Marvin's story also reminds me of the inverse. I have been to the sentencing of a few students with whom I work. It was devastating. A young woman admitted that she did wrong, but the circumstances were so shocking and she was so young that I cannot blame her. Yet the viciousness and revenge directed at her by the prosecutor and the judge were without mercy. Sometimes people do terrible things, but they are not terrible people. They are people who were in a bad situation and made a tragic choice. What should the consequence be? I believe that incarceration creates more harm rather than resolving past harm or preventing future harm. This is the base of my abolitionism.

Marvin's story about picking someone up from prison held a kind of wonder for me. It was "a characteristic of wonder that its effects, and affects, may issue unexpectedly, if we are lucky" (MacLure, 2013, p. 231). I imagined the man's pride in visiting the university campus where his professors teach. The power of Marvin's story resided not only in his telling but also in my hearing it and through my connections with other people who are or have been incarcerated. The wonder came from it being *beyond* my ability to imagine. It was something beyond what I can know. The story belonged to the man who was released from prison, but it also belonged to Marvin, who picked him up, and it connected with my colleagues through me. It ricocheted off the stories of the people I know who have been sentenced to prison. The story experimented with "order and disorder, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are formed, but are always subject to metamorphosis, as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects, and ideas" (MacLure, 2013, p. 229). It was a story of transition from the reality of prison to the hope of freedom.

The Prison System, with All Its Complexity. When Marvin told the story about picking up someone who was being released from prison, he explained what "gate money" is. The prison's stinginess struck me. When they release someone from prison, even though they are located in a remote corner of the state, the prison does not offer a ride to a town where the newly released person can catch a bus. They charge the person for a shuttle. In response to this miserliness, Marvin and his colleagues pool together to provide transportation and necessities. They see the cruelty and step in to prevent people from being released into an unnecessarily desperate position. The carceral system seems designed to make people fail.

The Mural

Marvin told me a story about a mural in the prison. Incarcerated men had asked the prison administration for permission to create a mural:

> They got some supplies donated, paint brushes and stuff. You would walk in the hallway, and you would see seven painters on different portions of the hallway, creating, still in a prison. But they were able to create amazing artwork out of just a little bit of permission and a little bit of supplies. But that's over 100 yards long on two walls, not just one wall. So you could multiply that times two, which would make it 200 yards. That whole hallway has become one big, long mural. And a lot of the artists who created this work are sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. They will spend the rest of their lives in prison, unless the governor commutes their sins. And they create these incredible art pieces. It is incredible.

In his story about the mural, Marvin's excitement and awe were infectious. He focused on the contrast between the mural and the site. The mural was an astounding expression of creativity and imagination. The site was a place where "where individuals were held in solitary confinement for decades, never touching another human being" for long years, a place of deprivation and isolation. Marvin said a group of "artists"—not men, not prisoners—reached out to the captain to ask if they could create a mural. Taking the initiative, they "got some supplies donated" and worked as a collaborative to create the mural. "Out of just a little bit of permission and a little bit of supplies," they transformed the prison hallway into another world of freedom.

Post-Reflexion

A mural can create a heterotopia within the prison. Michel Foucault developed a theory of heterotopias in an essay called "Of Other Spaces" (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). Heterotopias are an interesting way to think about prisons and art classrooms within prisons. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds. They are set apart from the everyday world as a way of managing variations in society. Examples of heterotopias are libraries where books are stored and categorized, museums where artifacts are displayed and stored, gardens where plants and

flowers are tended, and playgrounds where children are entertained. They can also be places where deviant behavior can be acted out or managed. A heterotopia creates a new place within an existing space (Wood, n.d.). A prison is a kind of heterotopia because it is a confined world within greater society, where people are isolated and invisible to the general public.

Prison visiting rooms are heterotopias within the prison. Visiting rooms often include murals of painted landscapes that serve as backdrops for family pictures. These landscapes are metaphorical Gardens of Eden. "Created specifically for escape and self-representation, the idealized paintings of tropical beaches, fantastical waterfalls, mountain vistas, and cityscapes invite sitters to perform fantasies of freedom" (Emdur, n.d.). (Alyse Emdur's (2012) book *Prison Landscapes* documented these paintings.) It is an imaginary place where incarcerated people and their families can share a "free" world. Or, according to Nicole Fleetwood (Kushner & Fleetwood, 2020), the landscape serves as "a rupture in time for incarcerated people and those who are waiting for them to be free" (n.p.).

Another kind of heterotopia within a prison is the art classroom. It is a space that determines a great deal of the teachers' experiences. An art space within a prison does not dismantle the prison, but it creates a break within the prison's total control. Art feeds the imagination for invoking a new way of being and of organizing society. This heterotopia can be a portal to another place.

Human and Non-human Elements. Listening to Marvin's story through a New Materialist lens, I understand that the men were becoming artists through an entanglement with the site and the art materials. The men and the materials (the prison, the paint and the brushes) created the art. "Not only are we always with/in bodies, but we are always with matter. So, not only do we make matter and meaning, but it also makes us; we are entangled, co-implicated in

the generation and formation of knowing and being" (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, p. 4). Marvin was excited to see the mural in that space and made by those people. He was excited to see the people and the space transforming.

The prison walls held an ominous power. The hallway used to be part of the secure housing unit, a place of torture where men suffered and endured in isolation. In prison, people are impeded in their actions, isolated from/in their communities, and restricted in their access to materials. Their existence is regulated and circumscribed in every way, so much that their opportunities for affect—for "becoming"—are denied. Their bodies are confined, and so are their minds. But they are resourceful, and they find ways to resist confinement.

The paints were tools the men interacted with to transform this site. As anyone who has painted can admit, paint sometimes seems to have a life force. It can be unruly, disobedient, and out of control. The men worked *with* paint to create a scene that was fantastic, fantasy, and fanciful. The men and the materials, the humans and non-humans, created a different world. The power of the site was transformed from a dungeon to Eden.

Space for Creation

Marvin told me about an artwork made by an incarcerated person that had a powerful effect on him:

> I've met some of the most ingenious, smartest people, beautiful people in prison, right? Who are just being held back because of all the barriers that exist. If I can remove some of those barriers, and say, 'Hey, here's this amazing artist who wants to teach.' If I can help create that… how blessed am I just to be able to create and witness that person creating. That's a beautiful thing, and it amplifies their voices. Art is a way to express yourself in a positive manner. And that alone is therapeutic.
>
> When I first got out, I went to an art exhibit of work by incarcerated people. And I remember just looking at this one piece of art that showed a person who was incarcerated. It showed the fence, the razor wire, the watchtower in the back. And then it had a little girl on the other side of the fence, dressed in a prison uniform. That clearly illustrates to

> me intergenerational trauma. It is more likely that she's going to end up in prison because her father is in prison. And this system is designed this way.
>
> That piece was more powerful than anything I could say or write. And that can really change people's perspective about what it means to incarcerate one person, because you incarcerate that family, too. Seeing powerful pieces like that totally moves me. I'm like, *Wow, how blessed am I just to bear witness to this?* And I think it's also important to know that I am privileged. Even though I experienced oppression as a Black man in the United States with a criminal record. For sure. There are 40,000 collateral consequences. Caste systems and all this stuff. But I also have privilege, right? I have the privilege of being able to walk in and out of prison. Before I didn't have that privilege, and right now all my students don't have that privilege. So how do I exercise my privilege to empower that person who has less power than me? Arts in Prisons or any art program for that matter? If it's being run right, you create that space for creation, and that's a beautiful thing.

Marvin felt blessed to bear witness to the genius and beauty of incarcerated people. For him, teaching in prison was an opportunity to share his privilege and to empower incarcerated people. Looked at through a social justice lens, "teaching and learning in these settings can be viewed as activist work, focusing on that which is culturally and socially relevant" (Hochtritt et al., 2018, p. 288).

I was struck by Marvin's optimism and generosity. Almost as an aside, he admitted that he had experienced racial oppression and collateral consequences. He did not dwell on this, though. He turned his focus towards helping others who had not been as fortunate as he was. During his 20 years in prison, he must have had times when he experienced despair, yet he did not become cynical or bitter. Somehow, he seemed to endure without losing his spirit.

Maybe Marvin was performing optimism and hope. I was a relative stranger, so why should I expect that he would share his vulnerabilities with me? Why did he agree to speak with me at all? I think I know the answer to that question. Marvin is focused on getting people out of prison. He believes that art is one way to do that. He may believe that the research I am doing

can encourage more people to do this work, either teaching in prisons or other kinds of activist work.

It is essential that I amplify this story because in it, Marvin explained how the social constructs and collateral consequences that lead to recidivism and the intergenerational trauma reinscribe mass incarceration. He also offered a counter-narrative of the goodness and potential of people who are incarcerated. He labeled them as "genius," "smart," "beautiful," "talented," and "amazing." He affirmed that art has a great power to communicate and inspire people to care about mass incarceration.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the educators' stories about their experiences teaching art in prison. They told stories about difficult conversations about art and race; stories about working collaboratively to create art; stories about individuals making extraordinary artworks out of basic materials; and a story about witnessing the joy of a man just released from incarceration and experiencing freedom for the first time in years. I thought with theory to make connections among the stories, the teachers, the students, the prison, the social construct, and myself. In post-reflexion, I thought through theories of new materialism, critical pedagogy, and abolition.

Abolition is an important lens through which to begin to imagine a different and better world. Bettina Love (2019) wrote that through art, we can imagine "a world free of injustice, a world that doesn't exist yet…" (p. 100). When people "on the margins" and in prisons create art, they refuse to be invisible. Music, poetry, singing, dancing, theater, and visual art inspire people to persist in the fight for freedom. These educators found ways to shape and be shaped by the fluid and changing art classroom in the process of "becoming" free.

Thinking through critical pedagogy, I pondered liberatory pedagogy and deconstructed power dynamics. Several of the educators shared stories that reflected a liberatory pedagogy. Diane engaged her students in dialogue and problem posing, asking them to work in groups to discuss Kara Walker's *Sugar Baby* and Titus Kaphar's *Jerome Project* and debate their meaning. Mary placed a high value on community. She created with her students the time and space for them to hold an impromptu talent show. She recognized that her student who made a sculpture with his catheters was "a huge release" and a "moment of shared vulnerability." Jack was excited to share the community experience while creating curricula with his students. They enjoyed shared meals improvised from ramen noodles and filled the space with artmaking. The growing sense of community energized the group. Marvin worked with a community of service providers to welcome a man home from prison. He provided material needs like a ride, a cell phone, and a plane ticket, and he provided emotional support by bringing him to the college campus where he was celebrated and embraced.

The teachers and students undermined the power dynamics of the prison. The teachers refused the hierarchical structure of traditional classrooms. Diane encouraged debates and discussions. Jack and Marvin created opportunities for students to facilitate art workshops, where students took leadership roles. In these art classrooms and studios, the idea of abolition can take root through imagination and creativity.

The interconnection between human and non-human elements was present in all the stories. The social apparatus of the prison is a significant force shaping the experience of the art educators. The educators may have experienced tension or anxiety in the classroom because of the racial disparities in mass incarceration in the United States. The ethics of punishment and surveillance are characteristics of the prison that limit the potential of students and teachers.

However, the teachers and students reshaped the prison apparatus by creating graduate-level art studios, creating murals on the prison walls, holding talent shows, and using their imaginations to envision a different reality.

Thinking with theory helped me to listen to the stories from different perspectives and to access multiple meanings. I heard the educators talk about the ways the prison system resisted education and how the educators confronted or went around those barriers. The educators spoke of unexpected moments when they could suddenly hear and know something familiar as if for the first time. Assumptions and biases revealed themselves and melted away. The stories showed how the educators experienced teaching in prison, and how their experiences shaped and were shaped by the context and students.

In Chapter 3 of this manuscript, I noted the importance of art teachers engaging in honest, vulnerable conversations about race in order to open the path from being an ally to being a co-conspirator. Honest discussions about race are central to critical pedagogy and engaged learning (hooks, 2014), and for white teachers to move beyond allyship to fighting for racial justice alongside students and colleagues of color (Love, 2019). As Sue (2016) wrote in *Race Talk*, encountering "diverse racial points of view, being able to engage in racial conversations, and successfully acknowledging and integrating differing perspectives lead to an expansion of critical consciousness" (p. 17).

Diane and I spoke extensively about race. She was clearly wrestling with the difficulties of having positive interracial conversations. She told me, "as a white woman," she needed to find a way to talk about art by Black artists using all the "right words, all the right language. And, you know, that's certainly a challenge." She was uncomfortable and felt ill-prepared. She also felt the unease among the white students in her class. "I think this is where a lot of people—especially

white people—are so uncomfortable. Saying, *this is a white artist or a Brown artist or Black artist*, and it's like genders in the pronouns. Why do we have to do this? I think we do have to do it until it's kind of settled in."

Diane regretted that the college where she taught did not provide training for faculty to talk about race, especially because the faculty were "predominantly white." Sue's research would support Diane's desire for professional support. According to Sue (2016):

> Poorly handled, race talk can result in increased antagonism among students, misunderstandings, and blockages in learning. Skillfully handled, however, race talk can improve communication and learning, enhance racial harmony, increase racial literacy, and expand critical consciousness of one's racial/cultural identity. (p. 21)

Unfortunately, I did not engage in equally open and honest conversations about race with Mary, Jack, and Marvin. There are many possible explanations for this.

I asked Mary about the demographics of her students. She said that her students were of diverse ages and races. She told me she had several students who had mental health challenges. Mary also told me that she had concerns that, as a white woman, she was making art about incarceration. She wondered if it was appropriate for her to do so. In the end, she decided that she should use her talents as an artist to raise awareness about incarceration. I did not bring the conversation back to her students and ask more pointed questions about race, nor did I probe further after she spoke about her concerns about being a white woman making art about incarceration. I did not want to contaminate the findings by asking leading questions, nor did I want to cause her to doubt herself and her commitment to making art about incarceration. In addition, maybe I felt self-conscious about being persistent in asking about race. Sue (2016) wrote that white people may feel insecure talking about race because they fear being

"misunderstood and deemed racist" (p. 31). Though Sue was specifically talking about cross-racial conversations, white Americans may also avoid talking about race amongst themselves.

I, too, am uncomfortable talking about race. Like Diane, I feel ill-prepared. Maybe I shied away from conversations about race with each participant because I feared offending them. Sue (2016) suggested that white Americans are nervous to talk about race because they fear that they will say something that sounds biased and racist, and therefore avoid talking about race (pp. 13–4).

I did not have the opportunity with Jack and Marvin to develop the trust and confidence for an open, honest discussion about race. I only spoke with Jack once because he became unexpectedly busy advising students who were involved in protests on the campus of his university. I talked to Marvin twice, but the second time he was recovering from COVID and was not very talkative. But maybe these are excuses I made for myself because I was afraid to talk about race.

Marvin mentioned race once:

> I experienced oppression as a Black man in the United States with a criminal record for sure. There are 40,000 collateral consequences. Like caste systems and all this stuff. But I also have privilege, right? I have the privilege of being able to walk in and out of prison. When before I didn't have that privilege, and when right now all my students don't have that privilege. So how do I exercise my privilege to empower that person who has less power than me?

Marvin said that he had experienced oppression as a Black man, but then he quickly redirected the conversation to the collateral consequences of incarceration, and his relative privilege after being released. Marvin is a person of color, and I am white, and it is possible that he was skeptical about my sensitivity to race. It may be that had I been a person of color, he would have gone into more detail about how racism contributed to his incarceration and perhaps magnified

the collateral effects. Researchers have found that people of color avoid talking about race with white people because they find white people's denial about racism painful. As Sue (2016) wrote, "In some respects, people of color are very aware how most White Americans are likely to react to racial topics, so they may also minimize differences in order to assure acceptance from fellow White Americans. They must walk a tight rope between being true to oneself and at the same time not risk offending others" (p. 14).

Another way to interpret my interaction with Marvin—allowing his mention of race to slip by unremarked—is through the lens of "thin description." Savannah Shange (2019) wrote about "ethical refusal," or the denial on the part of Black folks to allow access to "interiority" (p. 15). Shange reframed John Jackson's (2013) concept of the "thin description" (p. 158) in ethnography. A researcher practices "thin description" when they respect a participant's conscious refusal of transparency. As a researcher, Shange (2019) chose to respect the lines that people draw, letting them be absent from the research (p. 16). Marvin mentioned race, then immediately redirected the conversation to the collateral consequences of incarceration, and I followed his lead. I did not insist on pursuing the collateral consequences of race instead.

I do not claim that I made a conscious decision that resulted in a thin description of racialized experiences. It was probably a combination of lack of participant availability, general social anxiety on my part, and anxiety about and avoidance of talking about race specifically. Like Diane, I feel like I could benefit from training on how to hold conversations about race that are respectful, sensitive, and constructive. Understanding racial dynamics and advocating for racial equity is an essential aspect of abolitionist education that is lacking in this research. The topic is too important to discuss superficially.

In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this research. What experiences of teaching art in prison have these conversations brought to the surface? What might be some paths for future research?

Chapter 6: THE ART THAT SUSTAINS (IMPLICATIONS)

Introduction

This study found that educators' experiences of teaching art in prisons are impacted by their students, the prison setting, and mass incarceration in general. Studying this phenomenon from a post-intentional phenomenological (PIP) perspective made clear how the ecosystem of teachers, students, physical setting, cultural context, and the researcher is entangled in creating the phenomenon of teaching art in prison. These parts are in motion, fluid. Teaching in a prison is not a stable, predictable endeavor. Prison rules change arbitrarily. Students are transferred to other prisons and leave class suddenly. Classes are interrupted, delayed, and cancelled with little or no notice. Students react in unexpected ways to the materials. Teachers have to be flexible and adapt to the conditions of the day. While I learned a great deal about the phenomenon of art educators who teach in prison, new questions and areas for further study arose during my conversations with the educators and throughout the post-reflexions. In this chapter, I expand on several promising areas for future research.

A Community of Educators

Educators may find it helpful and sustaining to talk with each other about their experiences. This study found that art educators worked collaboratively with their students to work through and around the barriers and complexities of the prison system to create rich educational experiences. Surfacing their experiences may help educators who teach in prisons find solace and strength in the community.

Educators who teach art in prison may benefit from opportunities to network with others working in similar settings. Educators may feel isolated in their efforts to overcome the barriers of teaching in prison. They are outsiders among the prison staff and officers. The other teaching

staff in the prison are usually few in number. Colleagues who do not have experience teaching in prison do not understand the challenges they face. Incarcerated students may face numerous challenges, including weak academic preparation, poor physical and mental health, and ongoing trauma. The educators may not have a community of people with similar experiences with whom they can commiserate. They may find that discussing their experiences with others who have had similar experiences is helpful. How might they share their challenges and successes to learn from similarly situated colleagues?

Diane provided an example of how difficult it can be to share her work with someone who was new to the environment:

> I had a guest last week and when you have a guest it just reminds you of how weird it is. The guest said to me, 'Well, I just thought I'd use my iPhone and make recordings and take photographs'. And I told her there are no iPhones. 'Oh, okay. Then I'll just bring in my camera.' I'm like, 'What part of this do you not understand?' Yeah, she was just like an insane guest to have. Crazy.

The guest was accustomed to having her phone and other digital devices available at all times and could not imagine being without them. The most basic rules were a challenge for her to remember.

Diane noticed the difference between someone who works with incarcerated people and someone who does not. People who do not teach in prisons "want to see the cell and want to know what they're in for. They get there and they ask questions." She told another story about a guest in her class:

> She had looked up every person in the class and she said, 'They told me we wouldn't be working with murderers and pedophiles and rapists.' I was so upset to know that there were pedophiles and rapists in my class. She said, 'Robert's a rapist.' I just adored him, I just flat out adored this guy, and he's so smart. And then to attach that just messed it up. And the pedophile. I knew exactly who that was, even if I didn't want to know. Right. So, the same thing happens at the prison where I work now. There are some famous inmates, but I don't want to know because it just colors my thinking.

People who do not work with incarcerated people often think it is exciting or exotic work. They want to visit the prison so that they can tell stories at parties. Experienced, committed teachers want to know their students as learners, not "inmates" and "criminals."

Sharing experiences among educators may provide the opportunity for educators to reflect on their teaching and identify ways they can support their incarcerated students. Diane told me a story about a collaborative project she worked on with her students. Because of the restrictions on materials, she prepared a canvas for the project in her home studio. She glued the first layer of collage materials onto the canvas, so that the women could add their individual images and choices in class. She told the students she felt bad about all the ways they were unable to participate fully in the project. She wanted them to feel ownership and receive credit for the project.

> I said to them, 'I'm the person coming in, who's your teacher, and my name is attached to this because you're my class.' I put their names on the piece, of course. But it still comes under the heading of my class. I said, 'I wish you could participate more, I wish you could have made this piece of canvas. That I could have brought the canvas in, and you would glue down the pages. But they won't let me bring gel medium and we don't have enough class time, and we don't have a studio.' And a couple of students said, 'No, you empower us. That's your job here. To help us be able to do things.' They argued that bringing in books and the canvas already prepared for them to work on was an empowering relationship. Not a bad thing. They were very clear about that. I thought that was very cognizant and aware.

Diane wanted the students to be able to be equal collaborators in the art. However, her students were well aware of the rules that restrict their ability to have agency. They appreciated what she did, and rather than seeing it as an example of the way they were restricted, they saw her preparation of the canvas as empowering, enabling them to do more. The ways that an educator can empower their students are different in a prison than on a college campus. Sharing

experiences like this and reflecting on them with colleagues can help educators develop new insights and strategies and become better teachers.

Educators can become accustomed to the prison environment when they do it for months and years. It is essential, though, for art educators to maintain a sense of indignation at the circumstances. It is not healthy to begin to feel like the prison is "normal." The incarcerated people and the prison staff who are in the prison every day accept these circumstances as normal or inevitable. I believe the experience of being in jail or prison should remain shocking. I do not want to become inured to it. It is crucial to fight against the gaslighting. Talking with colleagues can help educators to see their surroundings with fresh eyes. They can remind each other to be outraged. Both Mary and Diane remarked that talking to me, as a person with similar experiences, was, as Mary described it, "incredibly helpful, actually." Diane told me, "You're like my therapist now. I don't have one, so good. This is good. I need one." They both felt that talking about the work with someone who understood it from personal experience felt like a relief.

Future research might intervene to create a network of art educators who teach in prisons. What types of meetings—in-person, Zoom, social, professional development, among others—are practical, sustainable, and beneficial? What kinds of stories do the educators share with each other? What can they learn from each other?

Vicarious Trauma

Teachers may experience vicarious trauma. They may have students who are struggling academically and emotionally. The educators described teaching in prison as emotionally draining and rewarding work. The stories captured the difficulties of navigating the prison system and the bonds that develop between the teachers and the students. Jack remarked:

> I mean, there are so many sad aspects of the time spent there. There are definitely things I see here that I'm like, oh, no, no, that's not what I want. But I think the highs are just as impactful sometimes. I also think it's exciting to have a space where you're sharing real emotion in a real way with people. I think there's a heightened intensity around the complexity of the space.

In a class of 12 students, Mary said:

> One of them is schizophrenic, for sure. I don't know what's brought on by being in prison, or what was there before? But yeah, one of the guys is definitely traumatized from solitary. For sure. One of them does have family traumas from a disability. Actually, there are two students with traumas linked to disability.

Coping with their trauma was magnified because she cared about them:

> With the guys there's reciprocity. And that feels sustainable. There's a reciprocity of care. They see that I care. And then they respond, 'No, we care about you.' They wrote me a letter thanking me for coming in, which was an acknowledgment of the fight. I realize showing up is the most significant act. That's really all it takes. It's community. And sometimes you actually don't get that in a lot of other spaces. I definitely don't get that at the college with my colleagues. There's not that same kind of care. It's more about competition than it is about cultivating care.

Future research should study the potential for vicarious trauma among art educators who teach in prisons. What kinds of trauma do they observe among their students? How does that trauma impact the educators? What kinds of effective support are available for educators who experience vicarious trauma? What are the informal and formal sources of care? How might the support be supplemented?

Race Talk

Race is an ever-present subtext in American culture, but especially in prisons. Because of the racial disparities between the incarcerated and the general populations, and the more general ways that people of color experience daily discrimination, the relations between white and non-white incarcerated people, staff, and officers have an implicit power hierarchy. I have not adequately addressed this issue in this dissertation. It is a complicated problem and deserves an

inquiry that focuses on it alone. However, some of the stories that the educators told brought the issue to the surface.

Diane was conscious that, as a white woman, she had to use the right language to talk about the work of Black artists like Kara Walker and Titus Kaphar. She said, "That's certainly a challenge. I also have to find a way to get the white students to talk about Black art." She noted that for hundreds of years, white culture has been treated as the standard, and Black people were expected to learn about and conform to it. Now she said that was no longer true. She and the white students needed to become informed about Black culture and find respectful ways of talking about it.

Mary had reservations about her role as a white woman making art about prison abolition. "For a long time," she said, "I had to sit with it because I thought, 'I'm a non-incarcerated white girl from Southern California. What business do I have making artwork about prisons?' But I think it ended up that working with incarcerated populations just became an alignment with everything that mattered to me." How do white art educators experience being white in a majority person-of-color setting? How does their race shape their experience in prison?

In future conversations, I would pursue this topic further with art educators who teach in prison. What are their experiences of discussions about race in the prison classroom? How does talking about art that explicitly addresses race create shifts in the classroom? Given that it seems that the majority of educators in prisons are white, such a study might focus on white educators using a critical whiteness studies approach and critical race theory (CRT). "Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is a growing field of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege" (Applebaum, 2016, n.p.). CWS

asserts that "white people should learn to acknowledge, rather than deny, how whites are complicit in racism, and…develop an awareness that critically questions the frames of truth and conceptions of the 'good' through which they understand their social world" (n.p.). Along with CRT, this would be an important area to further explore.

Prison Rules

There is an inherent tension between a teacher and the prison administration. Prisons are designed to punish, not to rehabilitate. The priority for the prison administration is security, not education. In addition, the rules can seem arbitrary, changing according to the whim of the individual officer on duty. Mary told me, "It feels like every facility has a new rule every five seconds, so you never know what you're doing wrong or right anymore." Jack said that the rules often feel arbitrary and nonsensical. Each of the teachers I spoke with confronted the contradiction between wanting to be a good teacher in a punitive and arbitrary environment.

Mary offered a surprising observation. She said, "I guess now I'm system-impacted because of how much I'm working in it now. Trying to navigate through the landmines. It feels like the closer you get to this system, the more potential for you to do something wrong, that could land you in the same situation." Of course, as a young, white woman, Mary is at low risk for incarceration, so why would she feel that she might "do something wrong" that would land her in the same situation? It seems unlikely. However, her comment resonated with me.

As I thought more about why it resonated, I realized that every time I get a phone call from the jail where I offer programs, I feel dread. I experience an emotional "flinch." I expect that I will be blamed for something going wrong or yelled at. It does not actually happen that often, but it happens in small and large ways. Going through the metal detector, an officer may suspect I have some kind of contraband, which turns out to be harmless. Once a marker was

missing at the end of the program, and the officer told us volunteers that we could not leave the jail until the marker was found. Once a staff member yelled at me for showing up to provide programs when they were not expecting me, even though it was the regular day and time for my program. In every interaction I have with jail staff and officers, I am obsequious and contrite, as if I am apologizing in advance for a mistake that I have not yet made. I remembered this feeling when I heard Diane's story about being yelled at by the officer, and she bit her tongue. It is not easy to do. I suspect that the prison atmosphere of blame, discipline, and punishment has seeped into my subconscious.

Future research could ask art educators who teach in prison about their experiences with the prison administration. What kinds of stories can they tell about working with corrections officers and prison non-uniformed staff? What have they observed about the interactions among students, officers, and prison staff? How do their interactions with officers and staff co-create their teaching experiences? How do they resolve the tension between teaching and complying with the prison rules? These are questions that warrant further study.

Building Liberatory Art Curricula for Prisons

The educators told stories about their teaching that reflected critical pedagogical strategies such as engaged pedagogy, the importance of building community, welcoming emotions in the classroom, and acknowledging race. What kinds of curricula work well in a prison setting and why?

Mary had also taught young women at a juvenile facility. They had computer access, and Mary taught them to use Photo Booth. The young women wanted to take selfies, so Mary taught them to transfer the selfies into Photoshop. Mary said, "We did this image trace-over using the pen tool. And they were all just locked in and immersed." The young women had various levels

of attention span, but this project, using a familiar activity, was engaging for all of them. Using Photoshop, the young women traced their faces. They engaged in identity self-reflection. As a follow-up assignment, Mary asked them to build an avatar. Mary said, "I wanted them to invent their Goddess avatar. I centered it around the moon, pretending we're all on the moon together. And you have to invent an avatar—what would that look like? What would she be? And they love that." Mary took a familiar art experience—the selfie—and asked the young women to think about it, and themselves, in a new way. They synthesized a self-portrait and a self-identity, and they engaged in personal meaning-making and personal identity-making (McDougall et al., 2011). She wanted them to imagine an alternative reality, to freedom-dream a better future.

How might Mary expand the liberatory potential of this exercise? How might educators more consciously develop and implement teaching strategies that are abolitionist? A participatory action research project might work with educators to analyze their existing teaching strategies and curricula and then refine them to support students' freedom. Such a project could create a handbook for an abolitionist practice for teaching of art in carceral spaces.

Conclusion

Educators who bring art into prisons not only enrich the lives of their students but also may find the work meaningful and personally satisfying. Through art, educators and students can share visions of a better world and imagine alternative futures. The world does not have to be the way it is. We created it. We can create a different world. Art can be a practice of joy where joy would seem to be impossible. Art is a way of "making sense of this unjust world and a way to sustain who [we] are, as [we] recall and (re)member in the midst of chaos what it means to thrive" (Love, 2019, p. 100). In the trauma of prison, art is a mental escape, a moment of beauty and pleasure, and a way of reaffirming and valuing an artist's whole self.

Chapter 7: FREEDOM DREAMING (CONCLUSION)

My initial interest in this research project began with my own experiences teaching art in jail. I often wondered if the art programs I taught were of any real value to the incarcerated people, or if I was becoming a tool of the carceral system, an excuse or a camouflage, making it appear as if the system were less cruel than it actually is.

I learned from speaking to the participants in this study and thinking about their stories through theory that the art programs are more valuable than I had realized. Art can function as a sensitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social change (Davis, 236). Art can be a "homeplace" (Love, 2019, p. 99; see also hooks, 1990) where people feel safe and supported as they survive the trauma of incarceration. Teaching art in prisons is valuable for incarcerated people, for teachers, and for the wider community.

Art is vital for abolitionist movements. Art can change people's perspective. The popular media portrays criminalized people in handcuffs and behind bars as dangerous threats to the general public (Brown, 2023). Art allows incarcerated people to create a counter-narrative of their lives as artists, friends, siblings, daughters and sons, mothers and fathers. They assert their humanity and individuality. A self-portrait can assert an artist's personhood and continuing existence, despite the efforts of the criminal legal system to "disappear" them. A crocheted animal can remind a child that her father in prison loves her. Incarcerated people have the right to be seen and the right to see.

Art as a Way of Knowing

To many people, art is considered a "luxury," not a necessity. Elliot Eisner (1985) pointed to a long tradition of devaluing arts in Western culture. Plato said, "True and certain

knowledge" (Eisner, 1985, p.30) could not be acquired through the senses alone. Plato reasoned that sensory information depends on materials, and materials decay. Therefore, the knowledge we gain from materials is conditional and transient. Also, the senses can be misleading. Plato thought that abstraction and rational logic were better sources of knowledge. "Dependable knowledge [according to Plato] is more likely as we move from the concrete to the abstract. The more we advance toward the abstract, the more we achieve episteme" (Eisner, 1985, p, 30).

During the Enlightenment, "Man" was understood as a being who thinks (Arnheim, 1980). The mind's intuition (sensory, emotional, creative, and imaginative) and abstract thinking (rational, scientific, and intellectual) were separated, and sensory experiences were considered a lower function. Imagination was not essential for civilized human beings.

Rudolph Arnheim (1980) identified two modes of cognition—the intuitive mode and the intellectual mode—and that an "intimate interaction between intuitive and intellectual functioning accounts for the best results in both fields" (p. 497). The intuition takes in visual information, and the intellect engages the imagination to identify patterns and analyze the visual information. Arnheim wrote that "the imagination of the average person demands our respect" (p. 490). It is an interdependence of the intuition and the intellect through which "perception transcends constantly and routinely the mere mechanical recording of sensory raw material" (p. 490). It turns out, then, that art is not a "luxury" or "misleading," but the place where intuition and intellect come together.

The Exploratorium, a museum in San Francisco established to engage the public with science, hosted a conference in 2011 titled *Art as a Way of Knowing*. The conference brought together over 120 artists, scientists, and educators to explore the history, practice, and value of

the arts as a means of inquiring into the natural world. One of the main themes explored in the conference was "art as a form of inquiry." The presenters described and demonstrated that art:

- is effective at engaging and distilling complex and dynamic problems.
- challenges habits and certitude; frames familiar problems in new ways.
- enchants and invites participation.
- engages all of the senses and sense-making capacities of the learner,
- provides opportunities for synthesis and personal meaning-making. (McDougall et al., 2011, p. 7)

Because it is traditionally undervalued in Western culture, art is not emphasized enough in schools. People's sensitivity to the aesthetic is underdeveloped. Artistic intuition and intellect are underdeveloped because of the absence of attention to the arts in the school curricula. For too many people, artistic skills and thinking wither from negligence (Eisner, 1985, p. 35).

According to Augusto Boal (Jackson & Boal, 2006), the "Aesthetic Process" (making art) is a chance to learn and to produce knowledge.

> Its importance and its value reside in its stimulation and development of perceptive and creative capacities which may be atrophied in the subject – in developing the capacity, however small it may be, that every subject has for metaphorizing reality. We are all artists, but few exercise our aesthetic capacities. (p. 18)

The arts are a way of exploring the physical world (for example, the materials we use to make art); the social world (which can be the subject of art, or when art is an instrument for communicating with the world); and our interior world (when we make art that expresses our emotions, fears, and imaginations). When people make art, they exercise latent abilities that are too often repressed. "Art is a special form of knowledge—subjective, sensory, not scientific. It is not better than other forms of knowledge, but it is unique" (Jackson & Boal, 2006, p. 20). Art satisfies "our need to lead a stimulating life" (Eisner, 1985, p. 30).

Through art, people who are directly impacted by the carceral system may express how it harms them and their families (Brown, 2023, p. 173). A painting of a child in a prison uniform

visiting their parents communicated to Marvin the intergenerational trauma of incarceration with an emotional power that he had not experienced through written or spoken language.

Embodied Knowing

Art is "supraverbal"—a nonverbal form of meaning-making and communication involving symbolic expression of thinking, understanding, and communicating rather than words (Wright, 2015, p. 8). The arts engage the body. For example, a musician uses delicate or strong, fast or hesitant motions to create sounds on an instrument; a painter uses a hand motion to create a unique effect with a brush; a crochet artist's sense of touch is activated through the variety of textures of fibers in a weaving; the sound of a human voice singing can have a physical impact on the bodily sensations of the listener. These ways of knowing outside of language are essential to all learners, not just artists. It is a powerful, underutilized, and underappreciated set of tools for thinking, theorizing, and acting.

Whether for the artist or the viewer, embodied experiences "aid in the construction of knowledge; they also help make this knowledge meaningful" (Hubard, 2007, p. 51). When Lamarr Knox creates crocheted animals for people on the outside, his muscle memory directs his hands to create the right amount of tension. After years of practice, his body knows how to create the three-dimensional sculpture from strings of yarn. When a child receives the animal, they "know" what to do with it. Maybe they tuck it under their arm, or sniff its paw, or stroke its mane. A child may have a physical relationship with a plush toy that is almost instinctual. The body and the emotions are conduits for knowing and appreciating art (Hubard, 2007, p. 51).

"Embodied knowing" is discovery through materials and senses (Bolt, 2013). For Mary's student who built the microphone, engaging with physical materials was part of the creative process of building the sculpture. The student was inspired by his physical disability and had a

vague idea about a prosthetic device. He modified his concept and design as he experimented with materials, engaging all of his senses and sense-making capacities (McDougall et al., 2011). He developed abstract ideas through visual and tactile sensory information. He translated formless ideas into a physical object, and, in the process, he accessed and expressed new thoughts and feelings about his experience of his disability and the world (Wright, 2015, p. 2). Through the design process, he learned about the possibilities of the materials at hand and came to understand and accept in a nonverbal way something personal about his disability.

Mary and the other students helped him learn about the physical limits and possibilities of the materials. Through building the sculpture, he learned about the physics of tape and paper—their strength, fragility, and flexibility. He learned how to create enough rigidity through layering and folding so that the stand would hold the weight of the microphone, how to balance the weight of the microphone and the weight of the base so that the microphone would not fall over, and how to build a device on the stand to hold the microphone. Learning and thinking through art is a nonverbal form of meaning-making and communication. It is somatic: It connects the mind and the body (Wright, 2015, p. 6). He learned to balance the weight of the materials. He applied the tape using his hands. He got a "feel" for using the tape to build a strong object. Through working with materials, he could distill complex and dynamic problems (McDougall et al., 2011). Tactile and visual stimulation of memory and imagination triggers feelings in the body. The physical experience makes the imagination livelier and more authentic.

The properties of materials are central to artmaking (Bolt, 2013, p. 5). The paper and tape influenced the student's thinking about his artwork, beginning with how he chose to express the concept he began with—his disability. The place where he made the art—the art studio in the prison—and the community in the art studio also had an impact on what and how he made his

sculpture. Artmaking is a relationship "between" human and nonhuman, social and physical (Bolt, 2013, p. 6).

Art can reveal knowledge that is situated in society. The student's artmaking strengthened his community. The other students and Mary provided technical support for the project. The sculpture became a way to address his disability publicly, without having to address it directly. The microphone symbolized his disability. Artmaking often involves thinking in symbols (Dewey, 1934). People may find it challenging to put their feelings into words, and art can help "bridge the gap of words" (Wright, 2015, p. 10).

Later, the students had a spontaneous talent show and used the microphone as a central prop in their theatrical presentation. The talent show helped shape the meaning of the microphone. The symbolism of the microphone expanded and was a catalyst for their creativity. The microphone enchanted and invited their participation (McDougall et al., 2011). The students performed songs and read poetry. People who are incarcerated are silenced, ignored, and forgotten. They are isolated from their families and loved ones. The environment in the prison is often unsafe for vulnerability and expression. In the talent show, however, they were literally giving voice to their art. They performed music and poetry. They used their imaginations to go beyond their experience of reality and escape the prison, to live for a moment in an imaginative universe. They were free to express emotions and to be imaginative. The talent show was an act of social imagination. The men invented "visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society" (Greene, 1995, p. 5).

It was a space for joy and freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2022, pp. 48–49). Freedom dreaming is Black joy that nourishes the need for pleasure and beauty and provides joy in places without (Kelley, 2022). Black joy counters the aesthetic starvation and despair that prisons

impose. The arts provide cultural nourishment through visual art, music, and crafts. The aesthetic and political are found in spirituals, blues, and progressive rap music (Davis & Self, 2021, p. 8). The pleasure of the arts is not just an escape from prison; it also builds community, establishes friendships, is a form of play, and "plants seeds for a different way of living" (Kelley, 2022, p. 57).

Freedom dreaming imagines a better world, believes that change is possible, and knows this better place can be found. This dream of a better world can mobilize political engagement (Kelley, 2022, p. 48). "Freedom dreaming is imagining worlds that are just, representing people's full humanity, centering people left on the edges, thriving in solidarity with folx from different identities who have struggled together for justice, and knowing that dreams are just around the corner with the might of people power" (Love, 2019, p. 103).

Imagination and freedom dreaming provide "a road map to justice" that is focused on healing, love, Black joy, and ending racial injustice. "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge" (Davis & Self, 2021, p. 7). "Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society" (Kelley, 2022, p. 54). Art stimulates the imagination and opens our minds to new possibilities. It "challenges habits and certitude" (McDougall et al., 2011, p.7).

Among all of our ways of knowing, imagination is the one that allows us to conceptualize and believe in alternative realities. "It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (Greene, 1995, p. 3).

Jack defined affects and precepts as "things that are felt or things that change how we feel about the world and things that we perceive in the world." He said that he wanted to make sure that "those modalities that I know have been so important to me for understanding the world, are also honored and made available for others." For Jack, art was a way of experiencing the sensory world. Sensory art experiences can change how people feel. He knew that the arts and sensory experiences are not "the most honored" in our schools and other institutions. But this way or modality of experiencing the world, through sensations, was important for him to understand the world. He wanted to make sensory knowledge through art available to the students he worked with in the prison. To Jack, the arts provided opportunities for "synthesis and personal meaning-making" (McDougall et al., 2011) and for understanding the world.

Abolition

Abolition is freedom dreaming for the flourishing of all people. The goal is to create thriving communities with healthy food, plentiful housing, attentive healthcare, and meaningful and well-compensated work. Abolitionists work together to develop new social relations and new values that support the health and well-being of everyone. Abolition is a process and a "becoming." In abolition practices, we are dismantling dominating systems and creating a new world. It is a world we have not yet invented and one we need to invent together, in community.

Mary led her students in an exercise of freedom dreaming. They imagined the prison where they were 300 years ago, and then 300 years into the future. She hoped they would be inspired to think about new worlds and new ways of being.

An abolitionist teaching paradigm focuses on working together, collaboration, discussion, and healthy disagreement. Abolitionist teaching wants to build schools and classrooms that care for and support all children, with new ways to show people they are loved, and "new ways to

establish an educational system that works for everyone" (Love, 2019, pp. 88–89). Abolitionist teaching supports freedom dreaming, with the uplifting of humanity "at the center of all decisions…equal rights, liberties, and citizenship for dark children, their families, and their communities" (Love, 2019, p. 89).

Diane did not express an interest in abolition, but she was conscientious about being a good teacher. She gave her students a rich learning experience and assignments that required them to be critical thinkers. She respected her students and held high standards for them. She developed lesson plans that were specific for each class and that worked for everyone. Her teaching absorbed critical pedagogy practices, and those practices can advance abolition.

Prison abolition requires a paradigm change from an individualistic punishment paradigm to a communal healing paradigm that calls for a more holistic approach, identifying the structural systems that led to an individual's choices. Marvin may not identify as an abolitionist, but he recognized the humanity of his students when he went beyond teaching art to help them get documentation for their parole files. He wanted to see them free and successful. Marvin was practical, though. He saw dismantling mass incarceration as happening one person at a time through education. When released, people stay out of prison if they have an education because they have a better chance of finding work that pays a living wage.

Abolition means not just the closing of prisons but, as Mariame Kaba said, "the presence, instead, of vital systems of support that many communities lack" (Kushner, 2019, n.p.). Abolition is not about destroying, but about rebuilding. It calls for investments in jobs, education, housing, and healthcare. It calls for preventing violence rather than punishing violence.

Some people think that abolition is a process and will happen over time. We are all trapped in the cultural paradigm of individualism and punishment—educators, students, and artists. The system seems omnipotent—it is everywhere and accepted by everyone as a given. Why do we have prisons? Why do we call the police? Why do we want people to be sent to prison when they commit a crime? Why do we want to hurt someone when they hurt us? Why are anger and revenge our response to being hurt? How can we reduce the amount of interpersonal harm that is done? How can we address harm without prisons? How can we share resources so that everyone is safe and can flourish? We are all immersed in a punishment paradigm, and it is difficult to liberate our minds.

Abolition is a process and a "becoming." In abolition practices, we dismantle dominating systems and replace them. It is a world we have not yet invented. We will need to invent it together. We will make mistakes as we try things out. As Mariame Kaba said:

> And how much hubris must we have to think that us individual persons are going to have all the answers for generations worth of harm built by multi-millions of people? It's like, I'm on a 500-year clock right now. I'm right here knowing that we've got a hell of a long time before we're going to see the end. Right now, all we're doing is building the conditions that will allow the thing to happen. (Ewing & Kaba, 2019, n.p.)

Art and Abolition

Abolition is about making things as much as dismantling, according to Mariame Kaba. By making art, incarcerated people can create contribute to abolitionist futures. For Kaba, (paraphrasing artist Elizabeth Catlett), "art is only important to the extent that it aids in the liberation of our people…. Art makes us think and feel differently [and] helps disrupt patterns and old ways of thinking" (Madden et al., 2020, n.p.). Art nurtures the soul. Abolitionist teaching is "dependent on art for resistance, (re)membering, joy, love, healing, and humanity" (Love, 2019, p. 99).

Abolitionist art education supports people who are incarcerated by affirming their humanity and providing tools to sustain themselves. It uses culturally sustaining pedagogy, reminding people of their rich cultural heritage, instilling pride and self-worth (Davis & Self, 2021, p. 7). Abolitionist art educators appreciate and respect their students. An abolitionist art educator helps their students discover their genius and express their brilliance and supports their students in advocating for themselves.

Art is joyful. People who are incarcerated are starved for beauty and pleasure. Prisons are aesthetic wastelands. They are drab, harsh, and ugly. Individualism is discouraged. Art materials are often categorized as "contraband," with illicit art materials and forbidden images of freedom. People can experience a physical sense of peace and calm when making art, when concentrating on color and light.

Art fuels resistance because it can influence feelings and open minds. "Art is a form of social consciousness" that can "awaken an urge in those affected by it to creatively transform their oppressive environments. Art can provide a rallying cry and disrupt patterns and old ways of thinking" (Madden et al., 2020, n.p.). For Mary, abolitionist thinking starts with the ideology behind what we design. She asked her students to redesign their environment with natural forms, to connect to nature, beauty, and health.

Educators who advocate for abolition need to be mindful that they and their students are under surveillance and that they and their students are not free. Marvin told of the educator whose permission to teach in prison was revoked because she spoke about abolition at a conference. Still, one can advocate as long as one is discrete. The first step to changing society is changing oneself. "…[T]he most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another

place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling" (Kelley, 2022, p. 56).

Conclusion

Teaching in a prison, the abolitionist educator faces many obstacles. Working "in the system" means following the rules of an institution that is designed to crush people, not uplift them. It is a careful balancing act to be supportive and nurturing while avoiding the censorship and domination of the prison. Educators must be careful not to be co-opted by the carceral logic and become complicit. In a prison setting, an art educator can be an abolitionist by following strategies suggested by Bettina Love. An educator can create a "homeplace" for students where the importance of community, affirmation, and safety for learning are paramount (Love, 2019, p. 99; also see hooks, 1994). An abolitionist classroom creates justice in classrooms where everyone is valued and respected and where everyone's culture is welcome.

Making art with young women in a jail, listening to Miles Davis, drawing with markers, and collaging with colored paper and pictures from magazines, were blissful. This music was abstract, and we were trying to express the rhythm, tone, and the timbre of different instruments with color and shapes. It was a different way of knowing, a different way of expressing our emotions, and a pathway to peace, calm, and joy. It was an abolitionist moment.

EPILOGUE: A PERSONAL POST-REFLEXION

Interviewing the art educators was affirming for me. I enjoyed talking with the educators and hearing about their experiences. I felt I was part of a community of people who were committed to this work. Working in a carceral setting can be isolating. Most people cannot understand what or why I teach in jail. They cannot imagine what it is like.

In hearing the stories of the educators, I was reminded of why teaching in carceral settings is essential. In the 10 years since I began teaching art to incarcerated people, I have sometimes wondered if what I do makes any difference. It is easy to become discouraged working in the carceral system. Things do not get better. Yet, by talking to the other educators and engaging in post-reflexion, I was encouraged and reminded of why art is essential. Art is a source of joy, an intellectual activity, and an act of liberation.

By way of an epilogue to this study, I would like to share one last story about an experience teaching art in a jail.

Art Is a Weapon

Once, I was at the jail with volunteers offering an art workshop. We had brought acrylic paints and canvases, and the participants were very enthusiastic. About 18 women participated. I was glad there were five of us because just handing out materials and making sure everyone had things were very chaotic. We used a lot of paint. The women were all really into painting, and they were also doing a little tie-dying. The officer in the unit did not object, but I imagined tie-dying the prison uniforms and bed sheets was not "approved" by the prison leadership.

Joy

It was sometimes like that in a housing unit. The women became frantic when they saw the art materials. They wanted them so much. In one particular unit, the women had a pattern of

keeping a couple of markers. We were not allowed to leave any materials behind. Whatever we brought in, we had to bring out. The jail administration said that pens and paintbrushes could be made into weapons. So, we had to count how many we brought and count again before we left. If anything was missing, we had to tell all the incarcerated women that they had to help us find the missing materials. Sometimes it worked, but sometimes it did not. Then, we had to report it to the correction officer. Then, maybe the next week we could not do an art program in that house, as punishment. So, one person stealing a marker might prevent a whole housing unit from having art programming.

But did they want the marker to make a weapon? Would they turn it into the handle for a sharp blade? Or would they make a drawing? A card for their child? Spend some time coloring? I have seen the collections of markers and pencils that some of them have. One student showed me her drawings—they were fantastic cartoon heroes in vibrant colors. A second student showed me the cards she made to thank all the social workers and service providers who helped her. She drew beautiful, delicate, colorful flowers and animals for each card. Were these weapons too?

An Intellectual Endeavor

Making art is an intellectual activity. It is a kind of study, as Moten and Harvey (2004) used the term, in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Moten and Harvey rejected the institutionalization of education and embraced learning as something "you do with other people" (p. 110), including working, dancing, suffering, playing in a band, sitting on a porch, or working together in a factory. It is an informal kind of learning in communal spaces where people share their wisdom, listening to and debating one another. In the *Undercommons*, study is integral to existence. It is not something that happens (necessarily) in a classroom or library. It is a way of being.

In the artist's studio or in the jail dayroom, we are engaging in study. Study is not the domain of an institution but the practice of people. It is not organized and orderly; it is unruly and disruptive. When the women in the jail appropriate materials, joyfully and enthusiastically re-purpose paints in order to tie-dye bed sheets, pillowcases, and jail-issued shirts, they are undermining the rules that are designed to correct them, limit them, try to re-shape them into obedient, compliant prisoners.

Writing and rewriting are tools for thinking, pondering, and analyzing; then writing instruments—pencils, pens, and paper—are necessary tools for study. In the jail, paper and golf pencils are allowed. Full-length pencils and pens are considered contraband because they can be used as weapons. For those who are visual thinkers, markers, colored pencils, and paints are tools for study. When the women keep markers so they can color and draw on their own, they are claiming the right to study and to create. When the jail administration labels art materials as contraband, it is attempting to shackle the mind.

Liberating Knowledge

Marking Time is a multi-platform project that grew from a decade of research by Dr. Nicole R. Fleetwood, author, curator, and professor at New York University. *Marking Time* "includes an award-winning book, a traveling exhibition, and ongoing public programs and collaborations highlighting artists working to end mass incarceration and issues impacting imprisoned people, their loved ones, and communities" (Marking Time, 2015).

According to Fleetwood (2020), artists labeled as "criminal," "felons," and the like use their creativity, collaboration, imaginary worlds, experimentation, and relational practices to reclaim their identities. "Through portraiture, they develop counter-images to the mug shots and prison ID photos that define them as prisoners. Self-portraits are not just images of themselves,

but they are acts of self-making" (UCSD Visual Arts, 2021). When women make cards and drawings for family members, making art is healing, not in the traditional art therapy way of trying to change the individual, but healing nonetheless because it resists the labels assigned to them. They are not "inmates," they are mothers and daughters. They resist the isolation that is imposed on them. They are developing and sustaining strong social bonds with people beyond the jail walls.

In the book *Marking Time*, Fleetwood (2020) proposed a theory of "carceral aesthetics," which she defined as the practice of art under the conditions of "unfreedom." She identified the "penal space" as the built environment of the prison. That space determines what and how artists create while incarcerated. "Penal matter" is the practice of improvisation and foraging that artists do to compensate for the restrictions that incarceration places on the materials available to them. Artists who make connections between contemporary mass incarceration and the history of slavery, anti-blackness, and other forms of oppression are exploring what Fleetwood called "penal time" (UCSD Visual Arts, 2021, n.p.).

When women take pens and do not give them back, they are foraging for materials. The penal space is a place of scarcity, and they are collecting what they need. The art they make is a way of piercing the walls of that space, of reaching beyond the walls to communicate with people on the outside, to build and maintain relationships. Or when they make cartoons of superheroes, they are reaching outside of penal time, imagining an alternative reality.

The participants experience pleasure and joy in creativity, which is an act of resistance to incarceration. Incarceration prioritizes discipline and punishment. Joy is antithetical to imprisonment. Incarcerated artists can build community and learn in a "third space"—outside of traditional learning environments. In art workshops, participants can create an alternate identity

to that of "inmate" and "prisoner." Incarceration tries to homogenize all people detained, replacing their individual identities with "booking case numbers," supplanting their personal characteristics with the crimes they are accused of. They resist the arbitrary rules of the correctional institution that define pens as illicit contraband.

Learning happens when so-called educators and students recognize that everyone has wisdom to share. It is the democratization of education that is liberatory (Freire, 2020). The learners are not dependent on teachers to tell them what to think. They are not passive receptors, but they create knowledge through conversations and actions. Learning empowers them to take action.

Conclusion

It sounds wrong when I say that teaching art in jail is one of the best parts of my week, but it is true. It is a strange phenomenon. When teaching art in a carceral setting, educators can witness the creativity of their students. We have the privilege of learning from our incarcerated students how art can be a source of healing and a practice for discovering knowledge. We can participate in learning through intra-action among the art materials, the setting, and the community. We can experience the creation of freedom through making art.

As I read and reread and write and rewrite these stories, more memories and connections surface. This process will never be finished. I will distribute my dissertation and have a defense, but I will continue to write and recall and rewrite and remember more and differently.

The experience of teaching art in prison cannot be wrapped up, resolved, and packaged neatly. It is a messy, complicated experience, and it can never be fully understood. It can be excavated infinitely from the experiences of the teachers, their students, the creativity they engage in with paint, paper, crochet hooks and yarn, the prison system, my experiences, the

officers and staff, the criminal legal system, the ignorance of the general public, the punitive society we live in, and on and on. All of these are the layers that operate in a cycling process of hiding and revealing this phenomenon.

Like Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*, then, I interrupt this dissertation here, as a work that cannot be finished, but that must serve instead as ongoing material as I continue my work of art education in prison and excavate layers upon layers of experiences and meanings.[1]

[1] Michel Foucault interrupted his book on the prisons in the middle of a discussion about social conflict and resistance to the prison, about "the distant roar of battle," with a pregnant footnote. Alan Sheridan's English translation of *Discipline and Punish* included the footnoted passage in the main body of the text, as the last paragraph of the book, and translated the passage as follows: "At this point I end a book that must serve as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization and formation of knowledge in society" (Foucault, 1977, p. 308). A more accurate translation of the French would be "I *interrupt* here this book…" It was, after all, an interruption, not an end, as I too can only interrupt and not end this research. The footnote, in its entirety, reads in French: "*J'interromps ici ce livre qui doit servir d'arrière-plan historique à diverses études sur le pouvoir de normalisation et la formation du savoir dans la société moderne*" (Foucault, 1975, p. 314).

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APPENDIX A

Letter of Informed Consent

TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
525 West 120th St. New York, NY 10027
212-678-3000 | www.tc.columbia.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title:

Consent

Principal Researcher: Mia Ruyter, Teachers College

312-404-5060; mr3460@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION You are invited to participate in this research study called "ART AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM: EXPERIENCES OF ART EDUCATORS WHO TEACH IN PRISONS." You qualify to participate in this research study because you have taught art in prison for at least three years and because you have stated an interest in creating equitable and just classrooms. A total of six people including you will participate in this study.

You will be asked to:

- participate in one or more interviews over Zoom. The day and time of the interview will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. These interviews will last approximately one hour. The conversations will be recorded and transcribed, and then the recordings will be destroyed.
- **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?** This study is being done to learn about the experiences of art educators teaching in prisons and their pedagogical practices.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to discuss your experience as an art educator who teaches incarcerated students**. I will not be asking you to share specific information about the students you work with, or the institution where you teach.** This interview will be audio-recorded. ***I will notify you when the audio-recorder is started and stopped.*** After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) I will share the transcription with you so that you can be sure it is accurate. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life when discussing your work with a colleague. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced while teaching. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. You might feel concerned that things you say might get back to your teaching site. Your information will be kept confidential.

- **Where and how is the research data stored? What is the researcher's data security plan?**
- **What provisions are in place for monitoring the data collected (and storage) to ensure the safety of subjects?**

I am taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using pseudonyms instead of your name and your

institution's name and keeping all private information on a password-protected external drive and locked in a file drawer. The original recordings will be destroyed after being transcribed.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY? You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS? The study is over when you have completed the second interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if the study is not finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY I am the primary researcher, and I will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down and the audio recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor (grant agency), and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED? This study is being conducted as part of my dissertation. The results of this study may be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your identity and the identity of the institution where you teach will be removed

from any data you provide before publication or use for educational purposes. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING **A**udio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don't wish to be recorded, **you will not be able to participate** in this research study.

_____I give my consent to be recorded

_____

Signature

_____I **do not** consent to be recorded

_____

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

___I consent to allow written materials such as transcripts and lesson plans to be viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Signature:

_____

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

I may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

The researcher may contact me in the future for other research opportunities:

Yes _____ No_____

Initial Initial

The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes _____ No_____

Initial Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Mia Ruyter at 312-404-5060 or at mr3460@tc.columbia.edu

(The Participant's Rights section is *not a separate document* from the informed consent form. It is all one document.)

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Identifiers may be removed from the data. Your data will not be used in further research studies.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: _____ **Date**: _____

Signature: _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Research Questions: How might teaching art take shape for educators in the prison system, with all its complexity? How do unexpected moments – the surprises that happen while teaching – help co-produce experiences that create shifts in the prison classroom? How do non-human elements – for example, specific art materials or the prison environment – co-produce the teaching experience?	
Duration of interview: 1-hour **The interview will take place over Zoom at the date and time that is convenient for the participant.**	
Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. Before we begin, I want to remind you of the purpose of this research, and your rights as a participant. For this study, I will talk with four art educators who teach in prisons about their teaching experiences. This interview will be recorded. I will share the transcription with you so that you can be sure it is accurate. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential. Do you have any questions for me? I will begin recording now.	
questions	**prompt**
Tell me about how you became an artist. Tell me how you began working in art education.	☐ Silent Probe ☐ Echo Probe ☐ Uh-huh Probe ☐ Tell Me More
Tell me about the prison where you teach/have taught art. Where do you teach? How often? What do you teach? Tell me about the space where you teach in prison. Begin with your commute to the prison, entering your classroom, and preparing the room for a lesson. What facilities are available? Tables, desks, chairs, water, sinks, etc.?	☐ Silent Probe ☐ Echo Probe ☐ Uh-huh Probe ☐ Tell Me More

Who are your students? What were the ages? Security status? What are the demographics? (Age, race, mental health, income as far as you know.)	☐ Silent Probe ☐ Echo Probe ☐ Uh-huh Probe ☐ Tell Me More
Please tell a story about a lesson that happened in the last year and that stands out in your memory. The lesson could stand out for any reason. For example, a lesson that: students responded positively or negatively; there were unexpected events that changed your plans; you had feedback from people outside of the classroom, such as corrections staff or teaching colleagues, that surprised you; something unrelated to the lesson happened that evoked strong emotions in you or your students. (Allow time for the participant to think) Now, I'll ask that you tell me the story of that lesson in as much detail as possible, including information about the environment, the content of the lesson, the people involved, what made the lesson memorable to you, what happened, how you felt about it, and the intended and actual results of the lesson. You indicated in our initial conversation that you have an interest in creating equitable and just classrooms. Could you describe how this is reflected in your teaching? How do you think of yourself as an educator who has an interest in justice and equity?	☐ Silent Probe ☐ Echo Probe ☐ Uh-huh Probe ☐ Tell Me More
I don't have any more questions for you today. Is there anything you would like to tell me about that I haven't asked about? Do you have any comments or concerns that you want to share with me? I will send you a copy of the transcript in the next few days. I invite you to read through the transcript and check for errors. Can we make an appointment now for another conversation, in 2 weeks? Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with me.	