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The Broom Closet: Pedagogy in and of the Prison

Tanya Erzen

Every week, at the largest women's prison in Washington State, I sit in a cramped room lined with donated books with a group of women who are taking two to three courses each semester toward their associate degrees in Arts and Sciences. We call ourselves (three professors and ten to twelve students) a critical inquiry group, and our aim is to discuss the ideas that animate higher education in the prison: critical pedagogy, authority in the classroom, and how gender and race underpin educational justice and community. We read articles on race, power, gender, and class in the classroom; neoliberalism; education policy; and more recently, the idea of utopia (our readings include *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, by Ursula K. Le Guin; *Economies of Abandonment*, by Elizabeth Povinelli; *The Promise of Happiness*, by Sara Ahmed; and *Gender Abolition and Ecotone War*, by Julianna Spahr and Joshua Clover).

In the Le Guin short story, the utopian happiness and well-being of the inhabitants of a city called Omelas depend on a child being constrained in a tiny, putrid broom closet, a fact that all of Omelas knows and accepts. The citizens of Omelas offer differing rationales for the child's suffering: the child is too degraded to be rehabilitated into normal society or to ever know joy. Others accept the horror as "the terrible justice of reality." Some leave Omelas forever: "The place they go is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness."

The parallels of prison to the broom closet are obvious and even overdetermined to the women in critical inquiry. Empathy and responsibility, whether it was right for the people of Omelas to walk away or to stay once they know about the child, instead intrigue the group. One student refers to Judith Butler's book *Precarious Life*, which argues that recognition of mutual vulnerability engenders empathy. Another cites Herbert Marcuse and argues that citizens of Omelas are searching for "a freedom no longer based on and limited by scarcity and the necessity of alienated labor," so they were right to walk away.

Rather than a broom closet, a space of enclosure, containment, and confinement, the students find Spahr and Clover's concept of the ecotone, a transition

zone of differing ecologies, more of an apt way to think through Le Guin's story. An ecotone is a contact zone, a space of flows and dependencies, much like a coral reef, a wetlands, a university, and a prison. It is those dependencies, of the happiness of Omelas on a degraded child and the instability that this relationship produces, that interest all of us. Analysis and debate ensue for two hours until the correctional officer's voice buzzes through the prison PA system, signifying "movement time." There are only a few minutes to eat lunch and scatter to their units or risk an officer writing an infraction, meaning they can't participate next time.

Rather than invoke this anecdote to convince readers of the remarkable vibrancy of intellectual engagement in prison, I want to think about critical inquiry as a key space of collaborative pedagogy, and how knowledge production in the collective pedagogy of college in prison is both particular to the prison and also resonant with classrooms outside the prison. Pedagogy in prison is both a broom closet, sealed off from educational practices in many ways, and an ecotone, mutually dependent and inextricably linked to the outside college classroom. The pedagogy inspired by American studies enables students to see this paradox. It also produces a sense of precarity and instability for students and professors that is politically generative. The political stakes of intellectual work in a prison might be more starkly apparent, but they are equally present in the prison and the university. Pedagogy in both spaces can produce what Spahr and Clover call "a politics adequate to the present and an idea of where to intervene."

When we started a college program at the prison, it was because women from inside the prison invited professors to come in 2011. They were part of an organization called the Village, formed by women inside to address mental health, violence, addiction, and education issues for female prisoners. The women's prison was more violent than any other prison in the state, including men's facilities. Women serving ten, fifteen, and thirty years, whose home was the prison, for better or worse, were aware of the withdrawal of state funds for college (Washington eliminated public funding for higher education in prisons in 1995 following the federal withdrawal of Pell grants to prisoners) and any commitment to long-termers. Women inside began to ask how to create contingent spaces of self-determination or sovereignty within the prison. The Village has grown from five members in 2009 to over three hundred members. They tutor other women to obtain their GED, act as peer-advocates for women undergoing personal trauma and grief, reintegrate those who have been sent to solitary, convene a yearly antiviolence conference and classes, workshops, and groups on family, reentry, violence, and education.

Members of the Village education committee informed us on our first visit that they had applied for and received AmeriCorps VISTA funds for college, but there were no classes for them to take. From that meeting and subsequent collaborations, negotiations, and setbacks, we collectively envisioned and created a college program. The Village education group is now an inside advisory council, and released women are on the board of our organization. All of us participate in critical inquiry together. One hundred and fifty women are actively enrolled in college, and we hold three semesters and over thirty college and college preparatory courses a year. The only impediment toward growth is finding physical space for classes. Students apply and after a writing and math assessment are placed into courses as a cohort. By the time some of them begin their first college-level class, English Composition, they've often been together for two or three semesters.

If the prison and the critical inquiry group are ecotones, spaces of tensions, one of the most pressing we grapple with is the particularity of our student's experiences, and a resistance to viewing pedagogy in the prison as exceptional. Balancing the exceptionalism of college in a space of repression with the desire to offer and teach courses of the same integrity and rigor as we do on our campuses is an underlying and irresolvable tension. I am wary of professors who praise their prison students as the smartest they have yet encountered in their careers, extolling their work ethic, insights, and willingness to learn (a phenomenon that Gillian Harkins and Erica Meiners also discuss in this forum). While true of some students, the romanticization of prison college students flattens out the particularities of pedagogy inside. Sometimes students are bored, rude, distracted, or take too long during the breaks. Some refuse to peer-edit their papers because of long-standing personal grudges. After all, students have lived with each other for long periods, sharing the most intimate parts of their lives, like sleeping arrangements and public toilets. Some are exceptional students, but because of their scholarship, not because they happen to be in prison.

Beyond hours of studying, writing, quadratic equations, and political theory, a central struggle for most of the women in college is with the idea of being and embracing the identity of college students. The women's sense of inadequacy and insecurity is not unique to prison, but perhaps only more apparent than at an outside campus. Almost 90 percent of our students report histories of physical or sexual violence, and grapple daily with mental health issues and low self-esteem. The number of women in prison is increasing at almost double the rate of male imprisonment. Some of them have never used a cell phone or eaten in a restaurant; some are grandmothers, and others have

a college degree. A student who receives a paper covered with critical feedback may decide she's failed irrevocably and refuse to return to the classroom. The informal pedagogy among students as older cohorts mentor new ones in the cells, dayrooms, and workplaces of the prison alleviates new students' fears and sense of alienation.

We daily confront the underlying premise of "corrections education" that there should be special classes for people in prison distinct from what is taught at outside campuses. This assumption manifests in the community college programs that receive millions of dollars a year from the Department of Corrections to teach Adult Basic Education, GED, and vocational training. Our students receive credit toward a degree through an agreement we have with the local community college that cannot offer college courses because of state law. As part of this uneasy relationship, we recruit and train professors from the University of Washington, University of Puget Sound, Evergreen State College, Pacific Lutheran University, and elsewhere, and our courses must adhere to the general objectives and learning outcomes of the community college. Our syllabi have to be approved by faculty at the community college, with whom we often share the same concerns about academic rigor and intellectual engagement. However, one professor, reading an international relations syllabus, echoed the correctional education assumptions, lecturing me and my colleague that "our captive audience" would find this course too difficult. He suggested that we substitute newspaper articles for his political theory texts. These suppositions about the intellectual capacities of students in prison are as damaging and flattening as those that consider them geniuses by virtue of the fact that they can speak from the experience of incarceration. However, aside from those tensions, our professors have freedom to design and teach their syllabi as they like.

The ecotone speaks to the contingency that underlies the college classroom inside and outside: exploitative labor practices, the dismantling of departments and programs, the corporatization of administration, and the acute conditions of hierarchy, lack of power, and daily forms of oppression. In prison, precarity is the only given. A program may be eliminated or lend itself to carceral governance as the prison administration boasts about having a college program when it is fiscally or politically opportune. A student's room is randomly searched and overturned with all her possessions confiscated, including books and papers. A woman is absent from class because she has been placed in solitary confinement for kissing her roommate, and we deliver their assignments and books to them in segregation. Some have been in prison since they were fourteen years old. When norovirus swept through the prison a few months ago, the

administration placed all women in quarantine. Clad in face masks, professors entered the living units to sit with women in the dayrooms while they took their final exams. In the prison space of hierarchy and “corrections,” where people are dehumanized to the extent that they are never called by their first names, are referred to as offenders, and are punished for questioning rules, a professor’s emphasis on critical analysis is an alternative to the prison pedagogy of arbitrary and relentless punishment. When a known member of a white supremacist organization and an African American student together examine the work of the artist Kara Walker, something is destabilized and new forms of knowledge are generated.

The practice of collaborative pedagogy enabled students to appropriate the concept of the ecotone and the broom closet for making sense of their position as women college students in a prison. These concepts push against the prison’s relentless focus on the individual “offender.” A woman’s story is honed in years of prison-mandated anger management, violence reduction, and Bible study classes where a woman is rewarded as “rehabilitated” for her ability to narrate her life in a testimonial narrative of responsibility for her crime, repentance, and self-engineered transformation. Instead, the students declared themselves an “invasive species” like carp or blackberry bushes. They adapt and thrive in a fraught terrain of critical and tactical struggle. The classroom is a space where one woman argued that they “come into being” because they have the intellectual tools to see how the prison is inherently unstable. It came into being, and it can be dismantled. They argued that envisioning the prison as an ecotone expands the space of what is possible for them and for a politics beyond the broom closet. They embraced the unstable, liminal, and always shifting concept of the ecotone to critique the suffering that undergirds the broom closet of Omelas. The only consensus at the end of the discussion of Le Guin’s fable was that perhaps Omelas needs to be destroyed and reconfigured in a way that doesn’t require a child in a broom closet at all.

Note

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