



Commentary

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Against “Improvement,” Toward Relations: Meditations on a Prison Writing Program

Nancy Van Styvendale

I am a tragic, self-educated, poetic street
Survival advocate, who has prevailed
Over the toilsome gutter of addiction
And gang life. A man of many talents
I am still an inmate of oppression
–Cory Cardinal (2012)

We make art under duress.
–Buzz Alexander (2010)

In 2010, the Aboriginal Cultural Coordinator at the Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre (SCC), Diann Block (Métis), put on a writing and visual art contest for the men incarcerated there. Inspired by the men’s existing creative pursuits, Diann devised a forum through which they could share their work with each other, coming together through multiple forms of creative expression despite their institutional segregation. Penal institutions, by their very nature, function to isolate and alienate; they use techniques of expulsion, containment, and surveillance to discipline docile bodies into being (Foucault 1975). In Canada, where they have been described as the “new residential schools” (Macdonald 2016), jails and prisons are an arm of the settler colonial state, engineered to remove Indigenous people from their lands, communities, families, cultures, systems of governance, and legal orders (Chartrand 2019; Monture-Angus 1999; Nichols 2014). Yet creative ruptures in the mechanics of the penal system have always existed, from the nineteenth century ledger drawings of incarcerated Plains warriors to contemporary art, poetry, song, and story. Providing a shared venue for this creativity, Diann hoped, would be one small way to facilitate and nurture connections among the men and with external communities.

The results of the contest were announced on June 21, Indigenous Peoples’ Day, and an in-house publication of the contest entries, entitled *Creative Escape* by one of the contributors, was distributed to all of the writers and artists. Copies were also sent beyond the jail – to public libraries, universities, and community-based organizations – in the hopes of gaining a broader readership. One such reader was Honours English student Dorian Geiger, then an intern at the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network, who one day came across an envelope containing a copy of *Creative Escape*. He cracked it open, poring over pages of poetry, short stories, and visual art on everything from romantic love and family relations to racism, poverty, and gangs. He was drawn in particular to the work of Cory

Cardinal, whose poem “Poetic Poverty” forms one of the epigraphs above. Dorian found Diann’s contact information on the inside of the book’s thin manila cover and reached out: “Would it be possible to meet the author Cory Cardinal?” Diann agreed, and the idea of a one-on-one meeting quickly morphed into a writing workshop that would involve a group of approximately ten writers from the Saskatoon Correctional Centre and ten university students involved in *The Sheaf*, the University of Saskatchewan’s student newspaper.

While we didn’t know it then, this workshop would be the start of Inspired Minds, a creative writing program for and with people incarcerated in several penal institutions across Saskatchewan and Alberta. In the following commentary, I offer my thoughts on the program and its pedagogical and philosophical tenets, contextualizing it in relation to the existing field of arts-based education in prison.¹ Many prison education and arts initiatives articulate their value through the discourse of improvement – in other words, they assume and seek to prove that they contribute to the “improvement” of prisoners, including their self-esteem, behaviour, “pro social” skills, mental health, future job and educational prospects, and, ultimately, their rate of recidivism. My intentionally provocative title – “Against ‘Improvement’” – indicates my interest in problematizing this discourse for the ways in which it locates “need” in the carceral subject, rather than pointing to the inherent violence of the penal industrial complex (PIC)² that produces this need in order to justify the system’s existence. The discursive production of improvement is, I suggest, a continuation of the “civilizing mission” that Indigenous Studies scholar Jennifer Graber (2019) argues has always been behind the settler colonial incarceration of Indigenous people. Bound up with ideologies of reform and rehabilitation, improvement thus disciplines Indigenous subjection to carceral colonialism.

Rather than focusing on the need for improvement of criminalized individuals, Inspired Minds turns to the growth and sustenance of good relations as the essential animating force of our collective work. In this way, we orient ourselves toward local Indigenous knowledge, values, and laws – such as Cree laws of *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship and relationality [Settee 2013]), *wîtaskêwin* (living in peace and harmony [Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000, 32]), and *wîcêhtowin* (helping and supporting relationships [Goulet and Goulet 2014, 98]), all of which underscore the centrality of good relations to living well. Counter to the logics of removal, containment, deprivation, and punishment on which the PIC depends, we attempt to cultivate and enact a relational ethics of care as a means of harm reduction within this

1 I emphasize that these are *my* thoughts, not those of everyone involved in Inspired Minds. We are a collective of incarcerated and non-incarcerated participants, coordinators, university students, volunteers, and allied university units, non-profit organizations, and individual correctional staff. We all come with our own particular orientations to the penal system, although we are united in a commitment to supporting good relations both inside and across the boundaries of penal institutions.

2 The term “penal industrial complex” (or, more commonly, “prison industrial complex”) refers to a constellation of intersecting systems, including policing, the courts, prisons, child welfare, and education, that work together to protect settler colonial interests and control, contain, and extract labour from criminalized people, particularly BIPOC, LGBTQIA2S+, disabled, migrant, and poor communities.

desperate and most un-relational of colonial spaces, the prison. I begin with our “origin story” in the poetry of Cory Cardinal and the community-building of Diann Block because I want to highlight, from the start, how Inspired Minds is rooted in the creative, “self-educated” (Cardinal 2012) wisdom of people who are incarcerated and the community relations that this wisdom inspires.

As a white settler scholar of Indigenous literatures and community-engaged learning, working in the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan in 2010, I was privileged to be invited to participate in the initial writing workshop. We met in the jail’s chapel, the only room available and big enough to accommodate us all.³ Our collective anticipation was palpable as the men entered the room, and I distinctly remember the first writing exercise we were given: Using all of your senses, describe in as much detail as possible the table at which you are sitting. A deceptively simple exercise, but one that solicited some rich descriptive writing, opening the door to a discussion of writing as an act of careful attention. Indeed, a table in jail is a storied entity, holding etchings of presence, love, rage, boredom, and resistance. It is a testament to the lives contained, constrained, and constituted by the institution; an insistence: “I was here.” As Alice Te Punga Somerville (2016) observes of the poem “Education Week” by Māori poet Evelyn Patuawa-Nathan, prison graffiti is an archive that contains ancestral presence, “a space of unexpected reconnection” with the “names / of cousins / and brothers / and fathers” inscribed there (123). In her autobiography *Stolen Life* (1999), Cree author and former prisoner Yvonne Johnson echoes this insight, searching for solace via the names of loved ones carved on the walls of a prairie jail cell. “Making art under [the] duress” of prison, as Buzz Alexander (2010) notes in the epigraph above, thus has a relational, connective potential – it can create and sustain relations that defy carceral separations.

Following the opening writing prompt, we paired ourselves off (one incarcerated, one not) and worked on individual pieces that the men had brought for our comment and editing. I was paired with A., a serious-looking Métis man who, surprisingly (at least to me), was interested in workshopping a fairytale about a princess, which he wanted to send to his wife on the outside. I don’t remember what I expected would happen my first time in jail, but it wasn’t that. That was my first lesson inside: Don’t make assumptions about the participants – who they are, what they’re interested in, what they want to write about, whom they want to write to. In retrospect, that lesson went pretty deep, and has continued to inform the way I approach my work facilitating creative writing workshops and training others to do the same. Listen carefully, interrogate your assumptions, and follow the lead of participants. The popular refrain “Nothing About Us Without Us,” first coined in the 1980s by disability rights advocates to stress the importance of centring disabled people in

3 This is a telling detail, revealing how Christian influence shapes many of the programs, opportunities for interaction with volunteers, and physical spaces available to prisoners. In the nine years I’ve spent facilitating creative writing classes inside penal institutions, I’ve witnessed the closing of unit classrooms due to overcrowding, as well as the repurposing of a gymnasium to warehousing prisoners temporarily (Inspired Minds 2016), while the chapel remains open for religious programming. I have also witnessed the routine devaluing of Indigenous cultural spaces and programs within the institution.

disability program and policy development (Charlton 2000), is thus a core principle around which we organize our work.

After that initial workshop, designed as a one-off, I was “hooked,” as Diann likes to say. I approached her to ask whether she would be interested in working together to develop a creative writing program. After talking with the men and assessing their interest, Diann responded with an enthusiastic yes. In the summer of 2011, we reached out to Allison Piché, then a Masters student in the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and together we designed and implemented the first two classes of the Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing program, named by the inaugural cohort of men. While most of the participants in Inspired Minds are Indigenous, the program is open to people of “all nations,” both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as its name indicates. It is also open to people with any level of literacy or official educational attainment. We recognize that multiple literacies exist, not only alphabetic and numerical, but also oral and cultural, and that many participants have the latter in spades. We also value many forms of storytelling and creative expression, including oral/aural and visual. Since those two initial classes, we have offered over 40 classes to approximately 225 people at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre. In 2016, in partnership with the Elizabeth Fry Society (Saskatchewan), we expanded the program to Pine Grove Correctional Centre, a women’s jail in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. More recently, in 2018, following my move to the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, we began Inspired Minds classes at the Edmonton Institution, a maximum security prison for men. For participants who attend at least six out of eight classes, we provide a university certificate of completion.

While the logistics of the program shift in response to specific institutional conditions, Inspired Minds generally offers eight-week-long classes to small groups of five to ten participants for 90 minutes per week. We take an explicitly participant-centred approach to program development and implementation, which means that we place the perspectives, knowledge, and interests of incarcerated participants at the centre of all aspects of class design and delivery. At the beginning of each IM class, participants brainstorm together the genres of writing in which they are interested (e.g., poetry, life writing, fiction, graphic stories, songs, meditations, comedy, etc.) and the subject matter they want to read and write about. In classes to date, popular topics have been Indigenous rights and social movements, identity, culture, spirituality, historical events and figures, survival skills, racism, addiction, parenthood, and incarceration. Following this initial brainstorm, participants vote on the genres and topics they would most like to learn about, and, based on the results, the facilitator constructs a flexible syllabus, with readings and creative writing exercises, that is open to change as the course unfolds and new interests arise. Volunteer or student facilitators also bring their own strengths and interests to the classroom, which leads to a necessarily diverse assortment of teaching and learning materials on which future facilitators can draw.⁴

⁴ Since 2011, we have curated an extensive shared bank of literary and visual materials and writing exercises, upon which facilitators can draw in constructing their lesson plans. Facilitators are also responsible for uploading any new materials that they use.

Facilitators are just that – facilitators, not “teachers.” Pragmatically, this is because many of our facilitators are themselves students (specifically, graduate students or upper-level undergraduate students in Indigenous Studies or English). Philosophically, we are informed by the work of Inside-Out and Walls 2 Bridges (W2B), two prison exchange programs in the United States and Canada, respectively, in which incarcerated and non-incarcerated students take university classes together. In W2B classes, as Shoshana Pollack (2020) explains, the facilitator “does not lecture but through a variety of teaching techniques holds the space in which students can explore complex and challenging ideas from a variety of perspectives, lived experiences, and contexts” (350). Similarly, Inspired Minds facilitators hold space in which they and other participants come together in what we call a “common learning project.”⁵ The idea here is to disrupt conventional pedagogical hierarchies in which instructors are thought to possess superior knowledge (Buhler, Settee, and Van Styvendale 2014), and to recognize instead that we are all “both teachers and learners who have intellectual, experiential, and emotional knowledge” (Pollack 2020, 349; see also Alexander 2010; Davis and Michaels 2015; Pollack and Eldridge 2015; and Pollack 2016). Certainly we all come with different types of knowledge, but we all have something substantive to contribute.

Each week, we discuss an assigned reading that engages with one of the preselected topics and genres of interest. We then work on an exercise, often in small groups, that allows us to apply some of the ideas about form and content discussed in relation to the reading. Finally, we have an opportunity to share our work and provide feedback. Facilitators write and share alongside other participants. Visiting and laughter are threaded throughout the class: we invite informal conversations, digressions, joking, and stories that might not seem directly relevant to the topic at hand but that are deeply relevant to building community in the classroom, the core of our work. In one recent class, we read Métis author Gregory Scofield’s “Heart Food” (1999), a beautiful lyric poem that uses rich sensory descriptions to invoke the speaker’s childhood memories of home. We discussed our responses to the poem, focusing on lines or images that stood out as particularly striking and/or resonant with the men’s own experiences (The smell of Pine-Sol at kôhkom’s! The taste of Red Rose tea!). My co-facilitator and I then drew attention to Scofield’s use of simile as a literary device to recreate a sense of home, where “baking bread, loaves fat and soft / as pillows, / hung under [his] nose, woke / [his] tastebuds” (1999, 11). This led into an exercise in which we worked in pairs on a simile worksheet and then shared our similes (some playful and silly, others quite serious) with the larger group. Homework for the week was to write a poem about our own “heart food” – What is it that sustains your heart? – using as many similes as possible.

At the heart of this work are not the “skills” we might hone or the specific topics we might discuss, although these are certainly important. Rather, our “heart food” is in the relationships we form around the circle. For men in particular, as participants have told

5 In Inspired Minds, facilitators are not necessarily faculty members (as they are in W2B). Facilitators are volunteers, senior students, university staff, and faculty members. New facilitators are trained and mentored by senior facilitators (such as myself), who guide them through their first I.M. class.

us, Inspired Minds can create a “safe enough space” (Piché 2015, 56–57) in which to share experiences and vulnerabilities not otherwise permissible in the hetero- and cis-normative, hypermasculine environment of men’s institutions (88–91).⁶ Many of the final class projects that participants have spearheaded – for example, a release guide for incarcerated people and a manifesto on the right to education in jail – highlight the relational responsibilities and ethics of care that I.M. participants feel toward each other and toward the larger incarcerated community. Contrary to the popular stereotype of criminalized people as selfish and uncaring, these projects speak volumes about the caretaking work that prisoners undertake, despite institutional barriers of censorship, surveillance, and resource scarcity.

It would be naïve and even dangerous, however, to romanticize what creative writing or education more broadly can do in prison (McKegney and Martin 2011). Not only are we constrained in our efforts by the material and ideological conditions of the prison, but, as Kate Drabinski and Gillian Harkins (2013) suggest, “working *inside* carceral institutions can too easily become working *within* carceral institutions” (5) – that is, reproducing carceral logics and practices, rooted in settler colonialism. Certainly, prison education programs have a long colonial history. For Indigenous peoples in North America, education in prison is as old as prison itself, and the colonial motivation for this education persists over time, grounded in discourses of civilization and savagery, which fuel the criminalization of Indigenous people (Ross 1998). In the late nineteenth century, for example, following the so-called Indian wars, a number of Plains Indigenous warriors were removed from their territories and shipped to Fort Marion, a prison in Florida, where they were subjected to the assimilationist regime of army captain Richard Henry Pratt. Armed with his grotesque motto “Kill the Indian, save the man,” Pratt implemented a regimented program of Christian, academic, and arts education, taught primarily by white women from charity societies who embraced the saviour mentality that continues to shape much volunteerism in prisons.⁷ Pratt later founded Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the first federally funded residential school in the United States, which he tellingly modelled after Fort Marion (Graber 2019). Today, the carceral continuum of incarceration and education continues, reiterating the colonial impulse to “civilize” the “savage” – now to rehabilitate, reform, or “improve” the “criminal” – which functions to remove Indigenous peoples from their lands, communities, families, cultures, governance systems, and legal orders.

6 As Piché (2015) observes, the notion of a “safe enough space” acknowledges the dangers and harms that continue to exist for incarcerated people, while suggesting that the relationships we build in the class can create a sort of safety. As a site of various intersecting power relations and dynamics, however, the classroom does not exist outside of existing harms and, in some cases, may be a site of further harm (56–57).

7 As a white woman, I am particularly attuned to this legacy and to the ways in which it informs my presence in the institution. Not surprisingly, many of the potential volunteers who apply to Inspired Minds are also white women. As a program coordinator, I am responsible for assessing volunteer motivations and ensuring that volunteers/students have experience with/in Indigenous communities or Indigenous Studies, as well as the skills necessary to reflect critically on their own positionality, privilege, and motivations for doing this work. The continued recruitment of Indigenous volunteers is a central priority.

During my time as a coordinator and facilitator with Inspired Minds, I have come to understand how the program is constituted both by and against the discourse of “improvement” that undergirds many prison education and arts programs. Numerous studies assess the positive impacts of prison arts programs on the “life effectiveness attitudes” of prisoners (Brewster 2014, 1), including “time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control, active initiative, and self-confidence” (Brewster 2014, 13; see also Brown 2008; Cheliotis and Jordanoska 2016; Cross 2018; Feuerverger and Mullen 1998; Green 2010; Gussak and Ploumis-Devick 2004; and Helfgott et al. 2020). Other studies point to the therapeutic function of the arts, and in relation to Indigenous prisoners specifically, their potential for healing and decolonization (Bamarki 2016; Marchetti 2018). Still others illuminate how arts programs can assist in the “smooth functioning of the institution” – that is, in the management and control of prisoner behaviour (Bervig Valentine 2006, 313; see also Ezell and Levy 2003; Johnson 2008). In her study of Inspired Minds, Allison Piché (2015) similarly found that participation in the program, according to staff, led to prisoners being on their “best behaviour” (45).

On the face of it, improvement is a good thing – who would argue with the benefits of healthy self-esteem, better emotional regulation, increased educational and job prospects, reduced recidivism, and successful reintegration? Importantly, as Erica Meiners and Roberto Sanabria (2004) observe of the related discourse of “redemption,” which prisoners learn to rehearse and inhabit to strategic ends, “improvement” can secure social capital and mobility within and beyond the penal system (i.e., lower security classifications, shorter sentences, access to resources, relative freedom, etc.). The trouble, however, lies with the ways in which “improvement” locates dysfunction and need in carceral subjects, thus perpetuating a “damage-centred” (Tuck 2009) and deficit-oriented framework for prison education and arts. In relation to Indigenous prisoners in particular, as I suggest above, improvement is informed by the “civilizing mission” of settler colonialism – or, in other words, the production of “need” in Indigenous peoples, which functions to legitimize the ongoing interventions of state institutions in Indigenous lives. From this vantage point, prison education is part of the disciplining of carceral subjects and the production of settler colonial notions of “good citizenship.”

Inspired Minds certainly exists *inside* these carceral conditions, and as such, participates *within* them, as Drabinski and Harkins (2013) caution above. Within this space, however, we shift the emphasis from individual improvement to the cultivation of good relations. In so doing, we reaffirm the importance of Indigenous knowledge and laws pertaining to living well, including *wâhkôhtowin* (the interconnectedness of all beings), *wîtaskêwin* (living in peace and harmony), and *wîcêhtowin* (helping and supporting relationships). We move away from a damage-centred approach that locates the need for reform in prisoners and obfuscates the harms of incarceration itself, and turn instead to an ethics of care grounded in Indigenous principles. In this way, we begin to undo the colonial production of Indigenous criminality, highlighting instead the creative wisdom of those who enact Indigenous laws of relationality within the very system designed to supplant them. We centre the knowledge

of prisoners who continue to “survive,” “advocate,” and “prevail,” despite being “inmates of oppression,” as Inspired Minds progenitor Cory Cardinal reminds us. And in moving against improvement and toward relations, we enact collective care.

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