

FRAUGHT IMAGINARIES

COLLABORATIVE ART IN PRISON

SHARED DINING, AN INSTALLATION by a group of women at York Correctional Institution in Connecticut, opened to much fanfare in the feminist art wing of the Brooklyn Museum in August 2015. The show, which consisted of ten place settings created by incarcerated women identified collectively as the Women of York, spoke directly to the legacy of feminist art, women's invisibility in recorded history, and the specific lives of the imprisoned artists in the collective. Joseph Lea, York library media specialist at the time, who was instrumental in bringing art and educational programs to the prison over his twenty-two years on staff, writes in the booklet for the exhibition, "*Shared Dining* integrates a largely voiceless population into a public dialogue about women, history, and incarceration. Women of York drew on their experiences and turned commonplace objects into art. By telling stories of women who inspired them, they were empowered to write their own stories, and share them in places where their voices would be heard. In turn, they learned that without sharing stories, we all risk being left out of recorded history."¹ Lea's statement and the exhibition inserted incarcerated and criminalized women into the larger struggle to document and make visible women's histories and women's roles in public and private archives.



Women of York,
Shared Dining, 2015.

The *Shared Dining* installation at the Brooklyn Museum was on display in a room adjacent to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), its minimalism offering a juxtaposition to the ornate plates of Chicago's installation. The materials used by Women of York included items commonly found in prison dining halls: plastic cutlery, paper products, and Styrofoam cups. They also included other items that the women could access through commissary or prison art programs, such as acrylic paint, white tablecloths, and synthetic yarn. The exhibition was the result of a collaboration between the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, York Correctional Institution, Three Guineas Foundation, and photographer Susan Meiselas, who documented the project.

The Sackler Center began the collaboration with a one-day workshop at York on feminist art, featuring Judy Chicago. The project quickly expanded and transformed into a six-month collaboration when the incarcerated participants turned the workshop into a peer-led space that centered around a parallel history of influential women in their own lives. A few of them created place settings to honor

famous people, such as race-car driver Danica Patrick and human rights activist Malala Yousafzai. Some chose mythic and religious icons—Eve and the Virgin Mary. Others, like Lisette Oblitas, focused on influential women in their personal lives.

Oblitas's place setting consists of a large eye peering out from a paper plate. Unflinching, the dark pupil looks up at the viewer. The plate sits at the center of a placemat decorated with painted flowers. A cherub accompanies the name of the honored: "Phyllis Porter." Along the border of the placemat are musical notes. Next to the plate lies a white paper napkin with a single "spork" on it, and at the top right corner of the setting is a Styrofoam cup painted with a gold design.

Oblitas never met Ms. Porter, but the two are forever connected by a fatal car accident that took Porter's life. Oblitas pled guilty in a pre-trial agreement (also discussed in Chapter 4). While imprisoned at York, she made the setting to honor the deceased Porter.² A Peruvian immigrant, Oblitas was working as a nanny in a town north of New York City at the time of the accident. Over the course of her imprisonment, Oblitas exchanged letters with some of Ms. Porter's children; they shared about their mother and offered emotional support. Oblitas used art to honor Porter by incorporating symbols of Porter's life, like her love of music and flowers. The place setting became a sort of meeting space for Oblitas and Porter, across the boundaries of time, of life and death, of freedom and imprisonment. Oblitas reflects, "I wanted to create a beautiful garden for her. For one, I could feel that I was forgiven and that I was loved, and I loved her back. I knew that I was in a prison but I wasn't in a prison. I was in this garden with her. There was no right or wrong; there were [no] newspaper articles pointing a finger. There was no judgment."³ Working on *Shared Dining* was a significant part of coming to terms with her role in Porter's death, personal and collective healing, and her eventual release from prison. Her art honoring Porter was also a way of acknowledging her status as a criminalized and incarcerated person and her relationship with a broader population of imprisoned people.

The organizers of *Shared Dining* incorporated Oblitas's compelling story of redemption and healing through art as a central narrative when publicizing the exhibition. News articles and interviews featured her tale.⁴ The healing role of art during Oblitas's imprisonment reemerged as an important theme in the spring of 2017, almost two years after she was released from prison, when she was faced

with deportation under the Trump Administration's aggressive anti-immigrant policies. Her prior conviction made her among the first group of people targeted once Trump took office. Administrators from York and allies from the Brooklyn Museum, along with her legal team, cited her participation in *Shared Dining* and other rehabilitative programs in her defense, as well as her enrollment as an undergraduate student at Columbia University once released from prison. She won her case and remains in the United States.

Oblitas and other participants in the collaboration, both incarcerated and nonincarcerated, expressed how they were personally transformed by the project and how it opened them up to new possibilities.⁵ *Shared Dining* was also an example of the development of a provisional public that collaborates and forges exchanges between people dispersed across carceral geographies. These points of contact function as sites where divergently situated people—some incarcerated, some working for prisons, some from neighborhoods where incarcerated people are removed, others from areas that feel “safe” by the logic of prison—can encounter, witness, and



Lisette Oblitas, *Phyllis Porter Place Setting*, from the series *Shared Dining*, by Women of York, 2015.

discuss how punitive governance and mass imprisonment have shaped facets of modern life. Such crossings and exchanges can lead to abolitionist imaginaries—the vision and commitment to end punitive captivity and caging, but they can also reinforce the logic of incarceration and the divide between public and prison.

Prison art collaborations allow for new relational practices to form between incarcerated and nonincarcerated groups as they communicate, work together, and envision through, and often against, the punitive regulations of the state. Collaborations between incarcerated people and nonincarcerated artists and organizations serve as a significant means by which prison art circulates among nonincarcerated people, and show how the concept of carceral aesthetics emerges across various states of un / freedom. They also involve negotiations of penal space, matter, and time. In some facilities, the presence of nonincarcerated artists allows for a type of flexible rule-bending whereby incarcerated participants can experiment with a variety of materials, have access to different spaces inside prisons, and spend time doing immersive creative work in community. Moreover, such collaborations often expand artistic, social, and professional networks for incarcerated people that might continue to benefit them once they are released.

One such example of how these programs can forge new publics is the People's Paper Co-op, based in Philadelphia. The program fosters community-based artistic initiatives between currently and formerly incarcerated people, politically engaged artists, and community groups working to reveal some of the long-term effects of incarceration. The *Reentry Bill of Rights* (2017), a collaboration between People's Paper Co-op and twelve hundred formerly incarcerated people who participated in interviews about the challenges of returning from prison, pronounces the collective voice of those criminalized and currently and formerly held in punitive captivity. The bill of rights begins, "We the people . . . the 70 million plus with criminal records. We exist in multitudes. We lead many lives. We are all ages."⁶ The statement's emphasis on the sheer number of people who have been criminalized or imprisoned is an effort to render visible their shadow presence and to destigmatize them. Pulled from various voices, it is not singular but collective in announcing the presence of those currently and formerly held in punitive captivity and demanding an awakening of the nonincarcerated to acknowledge how public life is structured around the regulation, surveillance, and stigmatization of certain people.

But prison arts collaborations can also turn on power dynamics in which the nonincarcerated are deemed as artists while the incarcerated participants are the subject matter or objects of art.⁷ And in so doing, they can rely on and reinforce the ideologies of rehabilitation and punitive correction that are embedded in the origins of the penitentiary and that still continue. In many instances, prison staff choose the participants, and the selection process can reproduce racial and ethnic hierarchies that exist inside carceral facilities. Black people, exponentially over-represented in carceral facilities, are often woefully underrepresented in arts collaborations. Teaching artist Treacy Ziegler, who is white, states, “When you go into prison and you start an art class and it might be 95 percent black in the prison, I got 80 percent white in my class. . . . How can you have a totally black prison here and I only have white guys in my art class? . . . I think it’s extreme racism, but when I ask them [prison staff], they say, ‘Blacks have more tickets [disciplinary infractions], and they don’t get into your class.’”⁸

Prison art collaborations tend to emerge from a model in which outside experts come into prisons temporarily to share knowledge or a skill set. Furthermore, because they need to be approved by prisons in order to take place, many collaborations focus on personal exploration and individualized notions of rehabilitation while avoiding or obfuscating political and systemic critiques of incarceration. The concern here is that art-making becomes a tool of the prison to manage and control populations. Baz Dreisinger, founder of John Jay College’s Prison-to-College Pipeline program, has taught literature and creative writing in many prisons and questions the value of prison arts programs for this reason: “Arts-in-prison programs are potent agents of individual change, yes. But are they also in some ways a distraction from the whole social order itself, from the powerful forces at play in the criminal justice system as a whole?”⁹ While these collaborations create immense possibility for new forms of relationality and a future without human caging, many of them depend on carcerality and its enduring justification of imprisonment.

The dynamics and politics of collaborating across a multitude of differences (e.g., class, race, gender, education, housing, and legal status) are complex and messy in that they forge relations between people held in punitive captivity and people who are able to enter and exit prisons as a privilege of their artistic or professional status. Differently situated participants may have widely varying notions

The Reentry Think Tank, *Reentry Bill of Rights*, Preamble, 2017. Reentry Think Tank Fellows: Hiram Adams, Jym Baker, Faith Bartley, Deanna Bell, Josette Bennett, Russell Craig, Aaron Crump, Alphonso Dashiell, Joshua Glenn, Anthony Hirschbuhl, David Jackson, Anthony Lovett, Sheila Michael, Tarrence Swartz, Colwin Williams, and Romeeka Williams. Poster done in collaboration with Kate DeCiccio. Project codirectors: Courtney Bowles and Mark Strandquist, 2017.

We Be People THE OTHER SIDE OF AMERICA. THE 70 MILLION PLUS WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS. WE EXIST IN MULTITUDES. WE LEAD MANY LIVES. WE ARE ALL AGES.

WE ARE NOT CRIMINALS. WE ARE SURVIVORS. SCHOLARS. ARTISTS. THE LEADERS YOU NEED. YOUR FATHERS. MOTHERS. DAUGHTERS. SONS. FRIENDS AND FAMILY. WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS. WE DESERVE A CHANCE TO PROVE OUR WORTH. WE WORK. VOLUNTEER. MENTOR. AND USE OUR KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, AND SKILLS TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY WHERE AM I? WE SHARED A SMILE ONCE IN A LINE AT THE GROCERY STORE, THE BANK, THE CHURCH PEEK. BUT YOU PUT AN X ON MY FACE. YOU TURNED ME INTO A NUMBER. SEE ME. I WANT A BEAUTIFUL FUTURE. ARE YOU PART OF IT? LET'S TALK CLOSE. IF I WERE YOUR CHILD. WOULD YOU TREAT ME DIFFERENTLY? I AM NOT A SLAVE TO MY PAST. I REFUSE TO BE INTIMIDATED BY YOUR MISPERCEPTIONS. UNDERSTAND THE VALUE I HAVE TO CONTRIBUTE. I WILL NOT SUBJECT MYSELF TO FEAR NOR ANXIETY. BUT WALK BOLDLY. I WILL PROSPER. BELIEVE IN ME AND I WILL BE THE BEST PARENT I NEVER HAD. I WILL MOBILIZE COMMUNITIES. WILL BE A CATALYST FOR CHANGE. WILL MAKE HISTORY. WILL ACHIEVE ALL OF MY GOALS. WILL BE A ROLE MODEL FOR THE YOUTH! WE'VE DONE OUR TIME. LET US BECOME WHO WE WANT TO BE. MY MOM ALWAYS TOLD ME THAT HURT PEOPLE WILL HURT OTHERS. BUT HEALING IS HARDER THAN YOU THINK. SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE I'M READING A STORY THAT ISN'T MINE. I NEED THOSE AROUND ME TO LISTEN. TO LEND AN EAR. TO TRY AND UNDERSTAND THE ROOT CAUSES OF VIOLENCE AND CRIME. TO HELP ME GET SUPPORT AND RESOURCES. TODAY I CAN BE A WOUNDED HEALER. I WANT TO APOLOGIZE. TO LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE I'VE HARMED. TO VOLUNTEER. TO SPEAK OUT. TO TEACH. TO LEARN. AND UNDERSTAND THAT NOT EVERYONE IS READY TO HEAL. WE ARE HURT. WE HAVE HARMED. AND WE HAVE THE POWER TO HELP OTHERS HEAL. BUT IT'S NOT BLACK AND WHITE. SOME OF US CAME HOMELESS. SOME SPENT 7 MONTHS TRYING TO GET AN APPROVED HOME PLAN WHILE WASTING AWAY IN HALFWAY HOUSES. SOME OF US STRUGGLE TO FIND POSITIVE SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS. WHILE OTHERS CAME HOME TO MENTORS, WIVES, HUSBANDS, AND SO MANY OPEN ARMS. BUT EVEN AFTER BEING OUT FOR YEARS. WE STRUGGLE. I STRUGGLE TO KEEP MYSELF ME AND MY AFFORD MORE THAN A ROOM CHILDREN TOGETHER. I STRUGGLE TO OVERQUALIFIED FOR. I STRUGGLE TO FIND A JOB I'M NOT UPON. I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER TO FEEL HUMAN. NOT LOOKED DOWN ENVIRONMENT IF WE WANT THAT WE NEED TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S SO MUCH MORE THAN OUR PAST. THAT CONDEMNATION. THAT WE NEED MORE SUPPORT TO BECOME WHAT WE DREAM OF. THAT WE'VE ALREADY IS WRONG ABOUT US. THAT WE ARE LEARNING TO FORGIVE OURSELVES. AND SO SHOULD YOU.

THAT WE ARE POWERFUL!

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and experiences of mobility, freedom, sensory stimulation, racialized and gendered citizenship, and public life. Poet Liza Jessie Peterson reflects on her time teaching poetry to young detainees at Rikers Island compared to her later, more sustained work of being a full-time high school teacher in the jail: “I bring the magic and the fun. As a teaching artist, I’m in and I’m out, spending no more than an hour and a half, tops, sometimes just forty-five minutes, in each class. My poetry teaching artist swag is tight. I flow like honey and the kids gravitate to me like bees. I rock that shit.”¹⁰ Prison art collaborations are shaped by these disparities (free/unfree, mobile/immobile, captive/roaming) and function in tense relation to the institutional frameworks of prison and its divisions of imprisonment versus public life, bad subject versus good subject, captive versus free person. When these power differences are not carefully considered, and when the collaborative process reinforces inequality, the project itself can contribute to a voyeuristic fascination with prison life and prisoners as aberrant and even non-human, while playing into normative Western aesthetic traditions that link art to freedom, in particular ideas about freedom of expression and association.¹¹

In prisons and jails across the country, nonincarcerated people enter prisons to provide art classes, workshops, and special projects for incarcerated people. This process can take many shapes—for example, a local, state, or federal department of correction contracting with community, art, and rehabilitative organizations as vendors to provide services inside prisons; a nonprofit service or arts organization receiving funds to implement a preconceived program or curriculum inside a carceral institution that is willing to host the project; individual artists, either backed by grant support or who are volunteering or self-funding their work, seeking to collaborate with a prison site or incarcerated artists; incarcerated artists initiating a collaboration with other incarcerated artists or nonincarcerated artists and organizations. This last scenario most often occurs without funding from outside sources due to prohibitions against paying and granting awards to convicted people, prison regulations, and other logistical and legal barriers that make it difficult, if not impossible, for incarcerated people to access resources or competitive funds available to nonincarcerated artists.

Many of these collaborations are run by established organizations, like the William James Association, Rehabilitation through the Arts, Mural Arts Philadelphia, and Artistic Noise. Some are connected to universities, such as University

of Michigan's Prison Creative Arts Project and Auburn University's Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. These forms of art-making, exchange, and collaboration have grown over the past decade, in part due to an increasing public awareness of mass incarceration and support of prison reform, though how organizations and participants envision reform varies widely and ranges across the political spectrum. More grant-funding targeted at prison reform and arts—by organizations like the Art for Justice Fund, Open Philanthropy, Rauschenberg Foundation's "Artist as Activist" program, PEN America's "Writing for Justice" program, the Soze Agency's Right of Return fellowship, to name a few—means more frequent exchanges and higher visibility of prison arts collaborations. The collaborations also reflect a shift in art practices in the early twenty-first century toward a relational aesthetic of socially engaged, multiauthored art projects, part of what art theorist Grant Kester calls "a movement toward participatory, process-based experience."¹²

"Fraught imaginaries" is a concept that I develop to consider the complex dynamics and power structures that shape artistic collaborations between nonincarcerated professional artists, nonprofit arts organizations, and incarcerated artists, students, and participants. It is meant to gesture at the possibilities and challenges of collective dreaming and art-making by people who are differently situated across carceral geographies. The concept borrows from a critical investigation of the imaginary by Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz in which they theorize the imaginary as referring "both to the act of creation and to what has been created."¹³ Foregrounding its plurality and the various ways that thinkers have conceived of the term, they write that imaginaries are "generative processes that bring forth what does not yet have a social correlative, but they also have the power—indeed, it is their function—to fix, delimit, and reproduce collectively organized subjectivity."¹⁴ In the imaginary resides "the appearance of new possibilities of social organization and political action."¹⁵ Fraught imaginaries incorporate the necessary, messy work of creating art, political action, and new sets of relationships between the incarcerated and nonincarcerated, and doing so across forms of penal space, time, and matter.

In part, I write this chapter because of a recurring experience I have had while conducting research for this book. In particular, when studying grant-dependent nonprofit organizations that provide services such as art training and workshops

to incarcerated populations, I have had to navigate the territorialism of workers who staff the programs. This has been especially challenging or fraught when dealing with some white women who staff these organizations and who are concerned that I will be critical of their work and position. As a result, at times I have experienced a resistance among nonprofit administrators to share information with me. I have tried to stay attuned to the vulnerability of nonprofit organizations that are often underfunded and dependent on annual reviews for ongoing support, as well as the fact that many of these collaborations are structured through a racialized and gendered configuration in which the artists and nonprofit workers tend to be overwhelmingly white women and the incarcerated population tends to be mostly black, Latino, and white men. Now, in one sense, this racial and gender divide can be understood as part of the feminization and racializing of the fields of social work, education, and nonprofit organizations and the long history of the systematic and brutal policing and criminalization of nonwhite and poor men. Yet we must attend to how the structures of nonprofit arts and service organizations and carceral institutions work in tandem to define what collaboration means, who is being served, and how art projects can be instrumentalized to reproduce both institutions as sites of containment where social, cultural, and political value are unequally distributed.

While we need forms of public engagement that do not separate incarcerated people from the nonincarcerated, we also need to be careful that prison art collaborations do not rely on a notion of art as intrinsically transformative or on a relationship to prisons that reinforces their power and function to dictate who is captive and who is free. Moreover, we need to interrogate liberal humanist assumptions about what it means to collaborate between “prisoner” and “artist,” when such collaborations obfuscate paid labor (artists and organizations) and unpaid labor (incarcerated people) and promote both idealized and punitive notions about the rehabilitative role of art for the most marginalized and criminalized individuals, leaving carceral systems unchecked.

The Stakes of Collaborating

For nonincarcerated artists and organizations, the investments in prison arts collaborations are multifold, the most significant often being a commitment to

education and cultural access behind bars, as well as securing grants to fund the programs that typically pay for nonincarcerated facilitators, administrators, and a portion of the nonprofit's overhead. For some local nonprofit cultural and arts centers, securing grants to provide services for vulnerable, targeted populations is a primary means to stay afloat, even if those groups are not core audiences or central to the mission of the organizations. For emerging artists, working with incarcerated people can connect to social justice practices, while also being a marker of achievement—seen as cutting-edge and radical, allowing them to enter unknown terrain, and giving them entrée to a group to whom it is difficult to gain access. Overall, these collaborations can be a major stepping-stone toward greater visibility, prestige, and larger grants and awards. They also afford an opportunity to explore what Lea describes as the fascination that the nonincarcerated have about the creative lives of prisoners: “People are so intrigued by incarceration and deprivation of creativity.”¹⁶

For nonprofit organizations, prison art collaborations are financially, administratively, and ideologically folded into the antagonistic relations between the carceral state and its captive subjects. Nonprofit organizations that collaborate with prisons are primarily accountable to prison staff and grant funders and less so to the most vulnerable and those who are the primary subjects of the grant: imprisoned people. While many such programs are touted for giving voice to, offering avenues of expression for, or contributing to the rehabilitation of incarcerated people, nonprofit organizations tend to be the biggest beneficiaries in these collaborations. In this regard their status relies on maintaining healthy, long-term relationships with prisons. Many directors and administrators of prison arts programs spoke candidly and with ethical concern about how the success of their organizations depends on having sizable prison populations; it is largely the prison boom that has driven the growth in arts programming in recent years. Many nonprofit administrators and teaching artists who are employed by them are aware of the fraught status of their associations with prisons and attempt to create programs that will engage and personally empower incarcerated people. But these tenuous arrangements are ultimately governed by prison administrators and staff, who can at any moment cancel a program.

Nonprofit arts organizations are not the only institutions benefiting from the vulnerability of prisoners while attempting to provide services to them. Such is

also the problem with academic studies of incarcerated people and even prison education initiatives offered by universities. Writing about education programs, including one in which he works, scholar Anoop Mirpuri wonders “how neoliberalism’s economic and ideological dependence on policing, prisons, and carceral technologies elicits forms of oppositional scholarship and critical engagement that ratify liberal procedures of valorization and value accumulation at the heart of racial capitalism.”¹⁷ Mirpuri identifies the ideologies and processes of extracting resources, bodies, and ideas from incarcerated people while not disrupting the carceral state as “the correction-extraction complex,” a system that disciplines, holds captive, and extracts labor and resources from targeted populations. He asks, “How might inquiry that explores the discursive and aesthetic practices of prisoners work against the correction-extraction complex that serves as its condition of possibility? How does such inquiry resist performing the legitimation work that the prison requires for its usefulness to racial capitalism?”¹⁸ Mirpuri argues that scholars and educators consider their investment in the category of the prisoner even as they tout a critique of prisons. His interrogation challenges the nonincarcerated to consider the limitation of and comfort in their imaginary landscape that hinges on a system of incarceration as the most foundational institution of managing populations and enforcing laws.

The stakes of such engagement and collaboration are much different for incarcerated people. Is consent to participate in an arts program possible when one party is financially compensated and professionally rewarded while the other is held in punitive captivity? The notion of informed consent is especially challenging when working within or facilitated through one of the most punitive institutions known to modern society—the prison industrial complex. For researchers to work with or study prison populations, they must go through research review boards at their home institutions, and departments of correction require additional levels of scrutiny. Whereas researchers must go through the review protocol, for most partners in prison arts collaborations, proposal review can be quite arbitrary and less regulated, if it happens at all.

As one prison administrator explains, at the facility where he worked, many collaborations with artists occurred through phone calls and email inquiries from artists and nonprofit groups interested in working with incarcerated people. Most of the time, those inquiring had no training working inside prisons or with people

confined and punished by the state. Another prison administrator recalled an incarcerated person stating, “They are using us,” when she pitched the proposal of a collaboration by a group of prominent artists who had already secured funding. The imprisoned man was aware of how the captivity of some served to buttress the careers of others. In most collaborations, incarcerated artists have no access to the terms of the grant, do not know how much money the artist or organization has received, and are not allowed to receive any remuneration for their labor or from the circulation or sale of art resulting from the collaboration. Instead, under a shared logic of the prison and nonprofit industries, both of which rely on state and private funds, the benefits to incarcerated participants (in the language of grant proposals) include the experience of working with a professional artist, and in some arrangements, receiving course credits, certificates, community service, or positive reports that incarcerated people may be able to submit, along with other “good-standing” reports, in a possible parole hearing.

I engage with these concerns not with the intention of exposing or making vulnerable organizations that provide art services to the incarcerated or that benefit from prison collaborations. Rather, I propose that we consider how these collaborations can be reimagined to change the outcomes and goals of participatory art practices from a scenario where some return to cages and others to their private homes. Instead, how can such programs help promote the fullest human capacity of the incarcerated millions? This entails in part a reassessment of what collaboration involves, especially between people who are differently situated in states of un / freedom, captivity, and access to resources and institutions. It starts with an understanding of collaboration that acknowledges the different stakes of its partners and that creates practices that are not just about survival or scarcity, but about the flourishing and freedom of all participants, to paraphrase writer and activist Adrienne Maree Brown.¹⁹

A Brief History of Prison Arts Programs

Since the 1970s, as prison populations have grown, so have collaborations between arts organizations, educators, activists, and prisoners, though there have been periods in this time frame when programs have been cut or underfunded due to

state and federal budget priorities.²⁰ Craft workshops and art activities have existed in some prisons since the advent of the modern penitentiary, but the collaboration among outside artists, nonprofit centers, and art organizations has roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s and connects to social movements and radical art collectives of the era. Two competing, and sometimes precariously overlapping, demands comprise this growth: first, the collective struggles of prisoners' rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s for more access to education, cultural programs, and rehabilitation for incarcerated and detained people, and, second, the administrative needs of the carceral state to manage and occupy the increasing numbers of people in prison.

Historian Lee Bernstein's *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* offers a cultural and political history of the rise of prison arts programming. It provides a rich account of the reciprocal creative and intellectual exchanges that took place among writers, activists, and artists across the carceral archipelago, emphasizing how imprisoned intellectuals and writers impacted the aesthetics and practices of nonincarcerated artists and writers like Faith Ringgold and Larry Neal. Examining a broad range of government-funded and privately funded writing, theater, performance, and visual arts programming that brought the incarcerated and nonincarcerated together in sustained collaboration, Bernstein argues that in the 1970s, prisons were at the center of radical political organizing, arts practices, and theorizing. He writes, "The prison culture of the 1970s demonstrated widespread hopes for collective liberation brought about by a revolutionary movement with incarcerated people among its vanguard. It was not simply that culture could sustain inmates and connect them to one another; during the 1970s cultural expression became the vehicle for incarcerated people to participate in political and social movements seeking to transform and improve society as a whole."²¹

Among the most significant incidents that birthed modern prison arts programs was the Attica Prison uprising of 1971. The "Manifesto of Demands" from the Attica Liberation Front included educational opportunities, vocational training, access to books and media, an end to racial segregation, and an end to incarcerated people being persecuted for their political beliefs, peaceful dissent, or race.²² As Heather Ann Thompson's account of Attica and its aftermath shows, the uprising was a momentous period when incarcerated people organized against the

state's repression and conditions of captivity. But the state's brutal response to the uprising and its legacy are far reaching in how prison administrations have since managed politically conscious and radical prisoners with the expansion of more punitive and austere measures to prevent people from organizing and rebelling, such as isolation units and supermax facilities.²³ Thompson writes that one of the consequences of the uprising was "to fuel an anti-civil rights and anti-rehabilitative ethos in the United States."²⁴ In a few facilities, prison administrations responded to some of the demands of incarcerated protestors by allowing more educational and cultural programs, like the Prison Cultural Exchange Program created by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC).

BECC, like many black artists and activist groups, allied with the Attica prisoners. The group responded immediately to the demands of the incarcerated protestors out of political and cultural solidarity. BECC was a group of black artists based in New York City that had formed in 1969 to protest the racist practices of museums and cultural institutions, specifically the infamous exhibit *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art historian Susan Cahan writes that the BECC's "primary demands were twofold. First, they protested the absence of African Americans in curatorial positions at the Metropolitan Museum, and second, they rejected the idea that an art museum would have an exhibition of African American culture that contained no painting or sculpture."²⁵

Cocreated by artist Benny Andrews (who would later play a central role in the growth of prison arts education programs throughout the 1970s), Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Camille Billops, Norman Lewis, and others, the BECC quickly launched campaigns against other major art establishments, pressuring them to diversify their staff, curatorial vision, and collections. After the Attica uprising—and the state's violent response, in which incarcerated protestors were massacred—BECC connected its direct actions against museums to the need for cultural exchanges with incarcerated people to challenge the conditions of prisons and the cultural and educational deprivation they enforced. A coalition statement from the era reads:

Our present struggle is in response to the Attica massacres. In our efforts to support our brothers and sisters in the prisons of America the Black

Emergency Cultural Coalition has proposed a Prison Cultural Exchange Program which it feels will serve to augment the rehabilitative processes called for in the 28 demands of the Attica prisoners. Our program would allow for the sending of artists into the prisons to teach, lecture, exhibit their works and assist in arranging exhibitions of the works of prisoners in the various communities. . . . We are especially committed to the struggle to uphold the validity of art as an agent for cultural revolution and social change.²⁶

Influenced by the Black Arts Movement, the BECC's mission hinged on a belief in art as a tool of revolution and on an idea of healing that was generated by Attica prisoners in their manifesto, one that refuted the prison's philosophy of rehabilitation: "The program which we are submitted to under the façade of rehabilitation, is relative to the ancient stupidity of pouring water on a drowning man, inasmuch as we are treated for our hostilities by our program administrators with their hostility as medication."²⁷ The BECC followed the lead of Attica protestors, listening to their needs in refuting state-mandated ideas of rehabilitation and also the urgent need for "exchange" with a nonincarcerated public. Lee Bernstein notes that this was a period of political and intellectual exchange between incarcerated and nonincarcerated artists, writers, and activists not bound by the professionalizing of nonprofit administrators and social service facilitators that now dictates many collaborations.²⁸ Thus, a reciprocity of ideas underpinned these interactions without the constraints of grant-funding, deliverables, and payroll that frame accountability in the nonprofit world.

By October 1971, one month after the Attica uprising, several members of BECC began volunteering to teach art and writing in New York jails and prisons.²⁹ They organized exhibits and published *Attica Book*, which featured art by BECC members and a diverse group of other artists who had formed solidarity with the incarcerated activists fighting for their rights. It also included poetry and other writing by incarcerated people who had participated in BECC's initial workshops. One well-known piece that appeared in *Attica Book* is Faith Ringgold's *United States of Attica* (1971–1972), a map of the United States that centers around the Attica massacre and the nation's history of state-sanctioned violence against indigenous and black populations. The map offers a counternarrative of the nation, highlighting practices of dispossession, labor and racial exploitation, slavery, and captivity.

By 1972, BECC had formed into a nonprofit organization and created the Prison Arts Program to support its art workshops and cultural exchanges in jails and prisons. It was supported by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. BECC offered a wide range of workshops on visual arts, literary arts, and theater and performance, initially in facilities in New York, but soon expanding to other states. BECC's archives include several requests from imprisoned people, nonincarcerated artists, and other nonprofits asking the organization to create programs and to model best practices in collaborating with the incarcerated.

By the late 1970s, BECC employed racially diverse artists across many genres who taught in fourteen states, from California to Maine.³⁰ By 1976, BECC was operating art classes at San Quentin.³¹ It also published a newsletter that featured writing and art by participants and instructors, including an essay titled "Art and the Ex-Con," by Rodney G. King, a formerly incarcerated person whom Benny Andrews hired to teach in BECC's program.³² King's writing was included in *Attica Book* while he was incarcerated. He reflects on receiving a copy of the book in prison with a signed letter from Andrews in which Andrews greets him formally. King writes, "'Dear Mr. King' reaffirmed the fact that I was a man with a name and not a body with a number." King comments on the significance of being published among a community of artists: "I immediately responded by giving thanks and informing him that the only time I previously saw my name in print was on a court calendar."³³ Bernstein notes that central to BECC's vision and commitment to prison arts programming were acknowledging and amplifying the skills and creativity of incarcerated artists. He quotes Andrews: "'Along with losing many of their basic rights, it seems that prison artists have also lost their right to be considered artists, regardless of their artistic accomplishment. The public has been reluctant to be open minded in its approach to art created behind prison walls.'"³⁴

Despite receiving national attention and mounting several exhibits, BECC struggled with funding.³⁵ Ten years after its founding as a nonprofit, the organization was severely crippled. Under the Reagan administration, the NEA was no longer able to fund prison arts programs. A letter to Andrews dated 25 March 1982, from A. B. Spellman, director of the NEA's Expansion Arts Program, states, "I am in receipt of your letter of March 11 requesting a reinstatement of the grant for the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC). I am well aware of the good

that the BECC has accomplished in recent years and I regret that the current policies of the Expansion Arts Program mitigate against support of prison arts projects and therefore against awards to BECC.”³⁶ The political shift toward more retributive prisons and the corresponding lack of government funding for education and cultural enrichment programs partly led to the organization’s decline. This shift under the Reagan administration demonstrates how prison arts programming and collaborations are enormously affected by changes in prison policies.

In many prisons during the 1970s, administrators used cultural and educational programs to manage, control, and occupy growing prison populations and to deter activists from staging large-scale protests. In some respects, prison arts and education programming was meant to squelch the revolutionary ideology of the Attica Brothers and even the BECC. As Bernstein notes, “Ironically, this faith in the transformative power of cultural expression also informed many of the reformist justifications for prison programming. Steeped in humanistic rationale rather than revolutionary politics, some prisons provided opportunities for inmates to both learn from and create literature, poetry, and visual art. Historical and political analysis took on a decidedly rehabilitative accent when an associate warden or cultural subcontractor placed it on a budget line.”³⁷ While prisons sought out administrative and programmatic means to deal with increasing numbers of incarcerated people and a rising political consciousness among them, intense debates continued about how to manage incarcerated people, either through programming or through security and custody.

Focusing on theater and writing programs in prison, Bernstein writes that what was at stake was “whether prison theater programs, or arts and education programs more generally, provided avenues for entertainment, liberation, therapy, or vocational training.”³⁸ For prison staff, programming was a way to manage prisoners. For many incarcerated people, art was to serve as a tool for liberation. Art teachers and educators had to walk a tightrope between not appearing as a threat to prison staff and not coming across to incarcerated people as employees or agents of the state. Bernstein writes:

Often working simultaneously within and against the dictates of a repressive structure, they [artists and educators] found ways to shape courses of study and cultural programming that could pass muster with prison

authorities while remaining relevant to the inmates. Thus, if they were forced to describe educational and cultural programs to people who saw them as meaningful only within the rehabilitative function of prisons, they could also judge for themselves if they were relevant to their own interests and needs. Because artists and educators who worked in prisons depended on the cooperation and often the funding of federal and state politicians and professionals, this conflict had a particularly profound impact on their ability to teach in prisons.³⁹

These tensions persist in contemporary prison arts programs. Joseph Lea, the former media specialist at York, comments:

There's always been a tension between programs and custody. We were in programs, education and counseling and twelve-step programs are in programs, and custody is all security. So there's this constant tension between programs and custody. We caused the people to move around a lot, and we caused people to get in groups a lot. That is antithetical to custody, which wants them not moving because it makes for a safer environment and easier control.⁴⁰

Although tensions between programming and security have persisted throughout shifting prison policies, from the 1980s until recently educational and cultural programs in prisons had drastically shrunk as politicians, lawmakers, and prison administrators created more retributive prison environments.⁴¹

Much of the arts programming that exists in prisons today comes from outside initiatives sponsored by universities, arts organizations, foundations, or independent artists. In some states, like California and Ohio, arts councils partner with departments of correction and nonprofit organizations to create programs. While responding to changes in prison policies and funding streams, contemporary prison arts projects and collaborations continue to uphold some of the structures and practices forged by radical activists of an earlier era, even as they remain largely unaware of those histories. Bernstein concludes:

The artists and teachers who continue to go into American prisons are little more than a skeleton crew, applying for grants to provide sorely

needed and much appreciated programming. Without the structures left in place by the 1970s, there would be virtually no aesthetic programming in U.S. prisons. Perhaps the most important paradox is this: the period that saw the solidification of a law-and-order response to criminality also gave rise to an extraordinary range of opportunities for prisoners to access cultural and educational programs.⁴²

Arts in Corrections Approaches

The Prison Arts Project (PAP) of the William James Association (WJA), based in California, highlights some of the complexities of prison arts collaborations that are funded by or interwoven into departments of correction. Collaborations that require funding from departments of correction and whose organizational structure is embedded in the state may have more access to incarcerated participants and to penal spaces and resources when budgets and political attitudes are supportive, but they are vulnerable to changing funding priorities of state budgets. And often, they have to operate under a correction model of working with incarcerated people. These organizational structures also highlight the shift from 1970s radical activism to a late twentieth-century reform model built around nonprofit organizations and the professionalization of activists as social service providers and administrative managers. At the same time, they sustain some of the most consistent skill-based workshops and opportunities for incarcerated artists with little resources otherwise.

PAP was founded in 1978 by Eloise Smith, a former director of the California, Arts Council, and her husband, Page Smith, a historian at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a cofounder of WJA. As one of the most well-established and oldest art programs serving incarcerated populations, it stands as a model for many other organizations in building collaborative relationships with prisons and creating arts programming for incarcerated people.⁴³ As Bernstein notes, the organization was created “to bridge the gap between philosophy and social action.” He also observes that the organization’s founders “framed their goals in narrow terms that would speak directly to the ‘what works?’ concerns of prison administrators and funding agencies.”⁴⁴ WJA came into being during a time when vibrant and often quite radical prison arts programs and exchanges were

taking place across the country. It offered workshops on printmaking, painting, poetry, drama, songwriting, bookbinding, and guitar. Supported by multiple funders, including the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), the California Arts Council, foundations, and private grants, PAP early on developed close relationships with state penal and cultural agencies.

By the mid 1980s, during California's prison boom, PAP ran art programs in every prison in California and became part of CDCR through its new Arts in Corrections division. The division oversaw a large network of collaborative partners in addition to PAP, sponsored fellowships for professional teaching artists, and operated programs in all the state's carceral facilities.⁴⁵ It provided "an artist facilitator who is a state employee within the prison that would help to hold the space and receive the supplies and escort the artists and help them to navigate through the system."⁴⁶ Having a person on staff at prisons helped to ensure that workshops would operate with a regular schedule and a consistent group of students.⁴⁷ It also allowed Arts in Corrections programs to use certain art materials normally prohibited in many prisons because the art facilitator had the power to advocate for the needs of the program. Participants were recruited by word of mouth, flyers, and through the closed-circuit television station that operates in state prisons. Generally, in PAP as in most other prison arts projects, the prison staff have ultimate authority over who can participate. In some facilities, incarcerated people are able to sign up directly. In most prisons in California and across the nation, incarcerated people must not have disciplinary records in order to participate, but rules differ in each institution.

The Arts in Corrections division produced data to demonstrate how it contributed to the goals and mission of CDCR. The programs it offered were so popular that in many facilities there were wait-lists to participate. Even so, Arts in Corrections, and arts programming in general, was drastically reduced during the state budget crisis of 2003. From 2003 to 2014, WJA managed to continue programs in two prisons without any state support. During much of that period, Laurie Brooks, the executive director, maintained the organization by working without pay and relying on about twenty artists to continue the programs, many as volunteers. As part of its advocacy, California Lawyers for the Arts began to work with WJA and the California Arts Council to create art programs in four prisons to develop evidence-based research about the benefits of art-based

programs in prison, led by Larry Brewster of the University of San Francisco. Based on their findings, CDCR provided funds for a two-year pilot program beginning in 2014. As a result of these efforts, Arts in Corrections has resumed multigenre art classes in all thirty-five California state prisons through a contract with the California Arts Council that involves WJA, the Alliance for California Traditional Artists, the Actor's Gang, and other nonprofit arts organizations.⁴⁸ Alma Robinson, executive director of California Lawyers for the Arts and principal advocate, states,

I believe that arts programs in corrections expand justice through the empowerment of each individual who realizes greater self-worth by exploring their unique gifts and talents. Artists work with incarcerated people to find their creative voices that can transcend the self-limiting expectations that they have lived with most of their lives. Artists who dedicate themselves to this work—whether they are inside or outside—are important messengers for justice.⁴⁹

Remaining engaged in Arts in Corrections programs long term allows many incarcerated people to develop advanced artistic skills and craftsmanship, like the formerly incarcerated artist Ronnie Goodman during his time at San Quentin. Jack Bowers, who has taught with WJA for twenty-five years, says that while programs like Arts in Corrections become enfolded in prison systems, they also provide important and sometimes rare opportunities “for prisoners of different social groups to find commonality through shared arts interests.”⁵⁰ The print-making workshop at San Quentin is an example of how art spaces can create community and relations across differences. Incarcerated artists worked with a teaching artist placed by WJA to collaboratively design and carve a linoleum block.

Although being part of the administrative bureaucracy of state prisons allows arts programs to operate with relative stability, maintaining such close ties to the carceral state can impact how workshops operate and how incarcerated people perceive them. Some incarcerated people are unwilling to participate in programs endorsed by the institutions that hold them captive, arguing that they are “methods of ideological control and psychological warfare.”⁵¹ Others strategically participate

in state-sponsored programs to gain access to art supplies that they can use in their solo practices. A currently incarcerated artist whom I will not identify (not based in California) describes his solo art practice as “free” and his work with an arts organization as “slave.” He says, “Even with some of the opportunities and experiences I’ve had with [the organization], it’s still art reduced to decoration via censorship and politics.”

The language of rehabilitation, punishment, and incarceration are significant issues that come up in prison arts projects, especially ones funded through state agencies. They reveal some of the limitations of collaboration in state-sponsored programs and are deeply emblematic of fraught imaginaries.⁵² Engaging in pathologizing discourse about criminality can be one of the demands placed on cultural and arts programs, along with demonstrating measurable outcomes to justify their expense. Some artists and art administrators I interviewed spoke of how they code-switched. That is, they would use the punitive language of the state to talk about incarcerated people when interacting with prison staff, and collaborative and peer-learning terms when talking with incarcerated people. One administrator—a white woman who asked to remain unnamed to protect her organization’s relationship to the prison where they run programs—stated, “I never have much reason to do anything but call [incarcerated participants] by their names. But if there’s a CO [correction officer] talking to me, I may just say ‘offender’ or ‘inmate’ to see if I can get what I need.” She describes how these terms produce cognitive dissonance when used in the context of art-making:

I will use those words we’re not supposed to use . . . mostly for the cognitive dissonance. I want people to have that cognitive dissonance. . . . “Offender” is awful. I never use “offender,” unless I’m talking in their [the prison administrators’] language. “Offender” means you’ve done something wrong and you never stopped from doing wrong. You’re just offensive. It’s awful. Prisons are awful. The whole thing should be dismantled. There’s no question. But in case it doesn’t happen tomorrow, I’m going to go in and do what I can, to be like a termite and do what I can to change it from the inside.

Her critique offers insight into tensions that exist between some of the people who staff nonprofit organizations and their political thoughts about the institu-



A printmaking class at San Quentin State Prison, provided by the William James Association, 2008.

tion of prisons. These tensions also resonate between nonprofit organizations and the freelance artists who are hired to teach in prisons.

The Itinerant Artist and the Politics of Art as Social Justice

Most teaching artists in prisons and other carceral facilities are contingent workers hired as independent contractors without benefits and often with very limited supply and transportation budgets, if any at all. Many were trained in art school and, like others in the arts and culture industries, are struggling to earn income within the current economic system. Some have long-term relationships with the organizations that hire them, but others are brought on for short-term projects that might last for a day, a few weeks, or a few months. This precarious status

has largely to do with limited funding for these types of programs, but nonetheless organizations benefit from large pools of unemployed professional artists and the limited paid gigs available in creative fields.

DonChristian Jones, a self-identified black queer artist in his twenties who grew up in Philadelphia and studied art at Wesleyan University, leads mural art workshops with incarcerated people who are housed in several units on Rikers Island. Jones is among a young generation of artists and activists, largely led by people of color, who connect the rise in the carceral state explicitly to the oppression and vulnerability of LGBTQ people; they are part of a movement that merges radical queer and trans politics with abolitionism with the goal of “building power among people facing multiple systems of oppression in order to imagine a world beyond mass devastation, violence, and inequity that occurs within and between communities.”⁵³ They also engage people most directly affected by mass incarceration from the position of having also been directly impacted, meaning that many young artists of color who attempt to work with incarcerated people have also experienced the effects of imprisonment personally, in their families, and among their communities. Rikers is a particularly challenging and historically charged carceral facility for Jones, who has had relatives, including his father, incarcerated there. Although Jones does not discuss his sexuality with his participants, he does not attempt to hide parts of his identity while working inside prisons. He also participates in mentoring and cultural programs with queer and court-involved young people in community-based settings. Many of them have spent time at Rikers and are aware of the particular vulnerabilities of being identified as gay, queer, or gender-nonconforming in carceral settings.

To develop a mural, Jones begins by using poetry, imagery, and music—often lyrics instead of recorded sound, as most forms of technology are forbidden, even as teaching tools—to guide participants in brainstorming themes of interest based on their collective experiences. He also uses word-mapping from conception to design to fabrication. Next, Jones brings in various images that may represent overlapping topics, moods, and themes that recur among participants. He emphasizes the importance of providing visual material that stretches beyond the familiars of prison life.

Collective brainstorming is a crucial step. It is when the group begins to cohere. During one brainstorming session, the group was transformed and a mural was birthed when a young Haitian immigrant detainee shared that he cried all

the time. Jones describes that particular group as a collective of gang-identified men who were marginalized within the general prison population; they were housed separately because their gang affiliation was a very small faction within Rikers, which led to their being threatened by larger populations of rival gangs. The Haitian participant told the group that his daughter's mother, who was only eighteen, had died and that he had never seen his two-year-old daughter. Jones said that the session transformed into a space where other participants shared about their pain and vulnerability—"that they cry all the time," too. Jones reflects:

I just looked at this moment and I'm in a room full of black and Latino men, and we all had admitted to crying all the time. That was one of the most powerful things that I've ever experienced. I've never been in such a safe space to be so vulnerable, and yet I'm in the confines of a jail. And there's like vaulted desks and handcuffs. Then one of them goes, "Yeah there's like power and strength to be derived from vulnerability." I was like, "Yes. Exactly!" It doesn't mean you're weak to cry. I was like, "Yes! Yes!" And they were like, "Yeah, like Martin Luther King and Tupac. They all would cry." So that is what our word map became.⁵⁴

Out of their sharing, the group developed a mural titled *Staying above the Water* (2017), which incorporates images of grief, sorrow, and resilience that resonated with various participants. It is important to emphasize that the space of collaboration that Jones describes is from the position of the art teacher, who can leave at the end of the session. For all the participants, the kind of sharing that occurred through collaborating is a challenge to penal space and its austerity, and yet the notion of vulnerability—what it means for the teaching artist and the incarcerated students—is rife with complexity. Furthermore, if anyone among the group were to reveal another member's vulnerability, it could put participants at greater risk of being targeted by prison staff or other prisoners. The sharing that emerges in these programs, while crucial to collective art-making, reflects the power inequalities that are embedded in collaborating across prison walls and the lasting implications of this work.

Jones is deeply aware of the ironies of his position as a working artist and contingent laborer contracted by nonprofit organizations that provide services to

vulnerable populations and whose funding sources are government contracts and private philanthropy. Analyzing these fraught dynamics of working with cultural organizations that rely on relationships to the punitive state, he states:

They are dependent on that kind of underserved community. And they also, I find, particularly the larger, more established ones, are run top down by people that are mimicking a corporate structure, that are mimicking a commercial structure. Their budgeting is doing the same. Their funding is doing the same, and these people are not doing any direct work with the populations that they [intend] to serve. So my challenge as a teaching artist, or like doing more direct work, is like finding myself as this liaison between management and the street. . . . So much is lost in translation . . . and it can be racialized too. Like if you have a nonprofit that is run by all white people that is deemed progressive, but you're working with a community of brown folks, there will often be a disconnect in that work. . . .

And then there are issues of artist support or teacher support, like what services are they doing or providing to make sure we're OK in experiencing secondhand trauma. You know because we have to be at tip-top shape, mentally, emotionally, physically, to continue this work. Otherwise we're doing a detriment to the people, and then also sometimes feeling exploitive, like "Oh, you need me to fill this quota," or "You need me to produce this work so you can then take it to a gala or an auction and sell it." You know, the work of a child who already has nothing, who should be receiving this accolade, who should be receiving this money.⁵⁵

Jones speaks of the systemic precarity, violence, and trauma at the core of prisons, where both those held captive and those employed by the system exist in spaces of state-sanctioned brutality, deprivation, suffering, and the arbitrary and forceful power that the carceral state asserts at any given moment. Like many contract workers and volunteers in prisons, Jones on occasion has arrived and been unable to teach because there is no prison staff available or willing to chaperone him to the common area where his classes are held. Even more frequently, he arrives and prepares for the workshop, but participants are not let out of their cells. This work is also a challenge for most artists and service providers because



DonChristian Jones and Rikers mural students, *Staying above the Water*, word map and sketch, 2017.

of Rikers's well-documented violence and massive size. As of 2017, it warehoused about nine thousand people in ten facilities on a four-hundred-acre island.⁵⁶ The vast majority of people held at Rikers are pretrial detainees, meaning they have not been convicted of a crime but are instead suspects, often of misdemeanor charges, who cannot afford bail, or they are there for parole violations.⁵⁷ Rikers has been a topic of public debate recently because of the #CloseRikers and No New Jails NYC campaigns after the suicide of Kalief Browder.

Browder, a black teenager who was taken to Rikers at the age of sixteen under the suspicion of stealing a backpack, was imprisoned there for three years without a trial, let alone conviction. Officers and other detainees routinely assaulted him before all charges were dropped in 2013.⁵⁸ Jones worked with Browder briefly in

a mural workshop at Rikers. To Jones, Browder was similar to many confined at Rikers who are awaiting a trial, a hearing, or simply someone to pay attention to their case. Also like many there, Browder proclaimed his innocence, but what set him apart and what many observers suspect led to the frequent assaults on him were his outspoken insistence that he did not commit the crime for which he was held and his refusal to take a plea deal. When Jones met Browder, it was his first time working as a teaching artist in a carceral facility. Jones recalls that Browder was diligent and serious about working on the mural, but at Rikers, like most jails and prisons, teaching artists and outside contractors and volunteers are prohibited from getting to know participants personally:

You're not supposed to get so close. So he was just another kid on my roster who happened to then take it [the mural] more seriously. And when that happens, those are the kids you get closer to, and we valued him as a painter. . . . He was quiet. He was kind and he was not nearly as rowdy as any of the other guys. Almost everyone in there is gang affiliated, and he didn't seem to be. I don't think he was ever repping any set. And he said several times, "I'm innocent." He ended up being. . . . We arrived one day in our fourth week. We were wrapping up the project and he wasn't there. And we were asking his classmates, "Where's Kalief?" And they said, "Oh, he was thrown in the box."⁵⁹

Investigators and journalists have detailed how other detainees at Rikers would attack Browder with the endorsement of correction officers, who continued to punish him for his claim of innocence. After Browder's suicide, Jones worked with a group of teenage boys of color in Brooklyn to mount a mural honoring Browder, titled *I Just Want to Come Home* (2015), in a public site. As part of the project they organized a series of conversations between people differently situated in relationship to carcerality (such as police and residents of highly profiled neighborhoods).

Treacy Ziegler is a white teaching artist who has worked with incarcerated people in several facilities in various states over the past decade. One of her approaches to navigating the fraught imaginaries and power dynamics between incarcerated and nonincarcerated people is to volunteer her time as unpaid labor, which she recognizes that not everyone can do. After years of working as a social



DonChristian Jones and
Rikers mural students,
Keep Your Head Up, 2017.

worker and exhibiting as a studio artist in Philadelphia, Ziegler began volunteering in carceral facilities when she proposed to a few wardens to mount an exhibit of her art inside a prison. A warden in an Ohio prison accepted her proposal. One of the few black wardens working in Ohio's Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, he was supportive of arts and educational programs. Her exhibition hung in units where incarcerated people were housed, not just the common areas where visitors were allowed. That initial project led to a series of collaborations with prisons in northeast Ohio, and her work has since expanded to other facilities. She often works as an itinerant artist, not connected to any nonprofit arts organization. Sometimes she is paid for her work and sometimes not. Each project is different and contingent.

In addition to teaching inside prisons, Ziegler runs correspondence art classes through *Prisoner Express*, a free newsletter, published by volunteers, that goes out to imprisoned people across the country. *Prisoner Express* provides information about programs and services offered in prisons. It also provides free books, publishes art

and writing by incarcerated people, hosts an annual prison art exhibit, and operates free correspondence courses for incarcerated people. Ziegler serves as the newsletter's unpaid program director for the arts. People who take her correspondence classes are often in solitary confinement. Besides offering lessons and assignments, when possible she sends art supplies to imprisoned students.

Moth and Light (2015) is an example of a collaboration that grew out of Ziegler's multiple engagements with prison art and education. A short animated film based on a story she wrote, it was cocreated with filmmaker Jack Weisman and several artists in solitary confinement, including Jerome Washington, who had enrolled in her correspondence course. *Moth and Light* consists of over six hundred drawings by incarcerated people in response to Ziegler's story describing the experience of an incarcerated man trying to save the life and secure the freedom of a moth that he had found in the Ohio prison where he was housed. The man, one of Ziegler's students, asked her to carry the moth to freedom and release it outside the prison fence.⁶⁰

Ziegler writes regularly about her experiences in prison arts programming and about some of the current trends and debates around working with incarcerated people. She has taken to task the notion of "social practice art" as a mode of engaging and collaborating with incarcerated people, asking, "What structure is there for protecting vulnerable groups from artists who may exploit these groups as a means to artistic success and money; particularly in [light] of the increasing museum exhibitions and grant money for social practice arts?"⁶¹ Ziegler prefers to recognize the teaching of art as distinct from collaborating with incarcerated people on a specific art project that addresses social problems or prisons broadly. She considers the former more "egalitarian" and effective than the latter. While I do not fully endorse her framing of social practice art or the classroom as egalitarian, her emphasis on teaching students to draw from their lives is based in her commitment to refrain from imposing her voice or narrative on incarcerated subjects (also discussed in Chapter 6).

Jones and Ziegler bear witness that not only are fraught imaginaries about disparate imaginary horizons of incarcerated populations and the organizations or programs with which they collaborate, but teaching artists often have fraught relationships with the organizations that contract their labor, the specific prison or jail where they work, the participants who join, and the larger carceral system.

Rethinking Collaboration and Carceral Publics

The collaborative work of Robin Paris and Tom Williams with men on death row at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, in Nashville, attempts to foster a process-driven conversation with some of the most restricted individuals among prison populations. Paris and Williams are college professors who began collaborating with people on death row after being invited by the philosopher Lisa Guenther to lecture in a philosophy course that she taught there. Guenther's research on prisons centers around an ethical question: what does it mean for the nonincarcerated to live in a world where we allow for people to be placed in solitary confinement and to be put to death by the state?⁶² Paris and Williams, inspired by their experience as guest lecturers, began volunteering to teach art history and photography-studies courses that do not use technology (cameras are forbidden). Instead, they work with paper cutouts and photocopies. Paris and Williams also facilitate partnerships between their students at local colleges and their students in prison. One project that received considerable attention and that animates the possibilities and limitations of fraught imaginaries is *Life after Death and Elsewhere* (2015). Williams and Paris invited death-row participants to create memorials of how they wanted to be remembered, as counternarratives to the state's official record of their condemnation to death. Williams explained that most embraced the idea, but two refused to participate and instead did projects that offered a critique of the assignment:

I suggested, "What if we did a memorial show?" A couple of the guys were staunchly opposed, and so we worked out a sort of compromise where some of them would submit works that showed why they refused to design their own memorial, which, I think, added something significant to the show. . . . We were thinking more than the opportunity for the artists,



Jerome Washington, drawings for *Moth and Light*, produced by Treacy Ziegler and Jack Weisman, 2015.

what it might make people feel to live with knowledge of a death sentence, what it means to endure this condition of living death . . . and we were also thinking a little bit about the debates over memorials and monuments. Who gets memorialized, particularly in a place like Tennessee?⁶³

Ron Cauthern's photo-collage *New Monument for Nashville* (2014) takes up this question. In it, Cauthern, a participant in the workshop, has painted a statue of himself in his death row clothing standing in front of the Tennessee State Capitol. As a generative and fraught concept, what it means to memorialize one's life from a person convicted to a death sentence and from a position as university professor is an immeasurable space. And that chasm is the space made visual through this collaboration.

Currently and formerly incarcerated people are creating collaborations that forge new conversations, ways of speaking to these fraught relations. In 2016, The Confined Arts (TCA) program was formed, under the direction of Pastor Isaac Scott, a person who is formerly incarcerated, to create arts programming in and outside of prison and to represent incarcerated artists in the sales and exhibition of their work. The goal of TCA is to enable directly impacted artists to develop professionally and not be exploited by collectors or commercial galleries, as well as to create exhibitions and public programs to change the narrative that is commonly associated with the experiences of incarcerated people. TCA also fosters ongoing public education about equal human rights. In 2016, TCA organized, along with Hunter College East Gallery, *Visions of Confinement: A Lens on Women in the United States Prison System*, an exhibition about women in prison that featured art by incarcerated women and collaborative works. On one of the walls of the gallery was a large collage made of photographs of incarcerated women and their children that spelled out "Prison Is a Feminist Issue." TCA partners with a broader network of reentry services and family support for people who are currently and formerly incarcerated and works closely with Columbia University's Center for Justice, where Scott is employed.

Grafton Reintegration Center (GRC), located in northeast Ohio, is a minimum-security facility that offers extensive vocational, educational, and arts-based programming aimed at incarcerated men who are considered low security risks and are close to becoming eligible for parole. When I visited in fall 2017, the



Ron Cauthern, *New Monument for Nashville*, illustration; Robin Paris, archival pigment print, 2014.

prison had a media arts center, an elaborate screen-printing apprenticeship, and a graphic-design program, all run by Eric Gardenhire, an employee of Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction who oversees recreational and cultural programs at Grafton. He is also a working artist.⁶⁴ Gardenhire believes that engaged programming is important to the operation of prisons, both for the development of incarcerated people and to make the prison staff's work less challenging. He states what many involved in cultural programming in prison believe: that "programming is the biggest management tool." From the perspective of the administration, programming leads to fewer disciplinary infractions, meaning more compliant subjects.⁶⁵ From the perspective of the incarcerated, programming is a way to manage penal time, to create networks and community, and to gain skills.

At Grafton's media arts center, incarcerated people have access to equipment and technology for all aspects of media production. They staff the center as paid employees and work on production teams to develop, produce, and edit content. Their programs are aired on a closed-circuit television station seen in four prisons

across northern Ohio. Occasionally, members of the team have been able to leave the facility to interview and record content outside prison, including an interview with a defense attorney who is an advocate for prisoner reentry services.

The media arts center, graphic design, and screen-printing workshop all operate through peer mentoring. More experienced team members train newer ones. The motto in the facility is “What one person knows, everyone should know.” On the day that I visited the media arts center, the production team asked to interview me after giving me a tour of their facility and discussing their process of working collaboratively. I watched as the team set up a designated green room for the interview, prepared the microphones, and set up the camera. One of the senior team members conducted a thirty-minute on-air interview with me that delved into my research and about cultivating relationships between incarcerated people and a broader public. Much of our conversation centered on how incarcerated people might get nonincarcerated people to see them as other than criminal subjects. A crew member cited Bryan Stevenson’s notion of proximity as one of the strategies needed to end mass incarceration. They were speaking of a type of proximity with the public—including art teachers, volunteers, and other nonprisoners—that is disallowed by prison administration. Artists and teachers are generally not permitted to have contact or to correspond with incarcerated people outside the structure of class.

Prison Renaissance is an online literary and visual arts journal that is managed by currently and formerly incarcerated people at San Quentin State Prison in California. They, too, are inspired by questions about how to create proximity between the incarcerated and nonincarcerated. I learned about Prison Renaissance when Camille Griep, a nonincarcerated ally, forwarded me an email from Emile DeWeaver, one of the journal’s cofounders, who at the time was incarcerated at San Quentin. Besides DeWeaver, Prison Renaissance’s cofounders are Rashaan Thomas and Juan Meza. All three were serving long sentences at San Quentin. They initiated the project, which has proven to be a jumping-off point for other artistic collaborations, out of a commitment to connect to a broader, nonincarcerated public beyond the artists, educators, and volunteers that the prison administrators approved. Prison Renaissance’s mission is “to transform society’s understanding of incarceration via collaboration and exchange between free and incarcerated artists. We hope that the generative work produced by our artists and supporters will change how the public views and empathizes with the nation’s incarcerated population—the largest in the world.”⁶⁶

DeWeaver, who was released from prison in 2018, developed into an accomplished writer while incarcerated. He noted that many editors told him that their experiences with him have changed their perceptions of incarcerated people. He began mulling over how to make visible the injustices of mass incarceration. He states:

I'm very passionate about we, as a country, needing to change what justice looks like, because the criminal legal system has played such a negative, destructive role in my life. I feel like I've lived through it, I know the problems, and I know there are ways to fix them. It doesn't have to be like this. So I'm thinking, how can I bring proximity to the process of social change that we need? How can I become more proximate with a population that likely fears me?⁶⁷

Though San Quentin is known among prisons for offering a range of art and educational programs, like PAP and the Prison University Project, it was important to DeWeaver, Thomas, and Meza that their new initiative be led by incarcerated people and not sponsored by prison administrators. They wanted to resist the carceral rehabilitative ideology and the censoring and administrative approval that are a part of state-endorsed programs. Their website states, "Prison Renaissance is not associated with any Department of Corrections."⁶⁸ From prison, DeWeaver and Thomas worked with Griep to curate and edit an artistic journal and to initiate art collaborations that exceeded the state mandate of correction as captivity and rehabilitation.

DeWeaver and Griep became acquainted when DeWeaver submitted a short story to the *Lascaux Review*, a journal where Griep worked as a senior editor. The story, titled "Superman," was accepted, and the editor in chief asked Griep if she would be comfortable working with someone who was incarcerated. Griep said yes, and that exchange evolved from a "mentorship . . . into a friendship and peer-ship."⁶⁹ Over the years, DeWeaver and Griep have worked on a number of writing ventures together. When the collective at San Quentin formed Prison Renaissance, they asked Griep to work with them. Griep notes, "Emile and I now critique each other's work. I assist him in submissions, editing, Prison Renaissance [administrative] tasks, and some personal affairs management." From inside and outside

prison, Prison Renaissance is committed to serving as a platform for dynamic exchanges and artistic collaborations between the incarcerated and the nonincarcerated.⁷⁰ DeWeaver's artist statement reads, "I woke up one morning in a cell wanting to change my life and the world that had shaped my life. All I had was my art, so I learned to use that."⁷¹

Prison Renaissance has developed initiatives with nonincarcerated partners, including university chapters that work with educators and students to bring writing and art by incarcerated people into classrooms and to enact political change. Members of the Stanford University chapter gathered signatures in support of the Voting Restoration and Democracy Act in 2018. Prison Renaissance, in collaboration with the Stanford chapter, published the zine *Incarceratedly Yours, issue i*, comprising writing and art by four people from San Quentin and four people from Stanford. In one piece, DeWeaver's poetry is interspersed throughout a woodcut by Vince Pane, a PhD student in chemistry and an artist.

Metropolis, an exhibition organized by Prison Renaissance in collaboration with a group of incarcerated and nonincarcerated Bay Area artists in April 2018 (a few months before DeWeaver's release), focused on geographic proximity and social exclusion, two important features of the mission of the collective. The exhibition attempted to complicate the idea of the metropolis and the distance between San Quentin and San Francisco, as well as bring attention to the massive number of people held captive in the nation, and the Bay Area specifically. In the opening conversation, DeWeaver said, "It's very important to understand that we are incarcerating so many people that it can fill a city, and for me that's what *Metropolis* is about. It's . . . a wake-up call that we are incarcerating a metropolis in our country."⁷² The show consisted of visual works, sonic works, and poetry that centered incarcerated voices, "revealing the commonalities between the metropolis inside and the metropolis outside."⁷³

The opening of *Metropolis* featured a conversation between Phil Melendez of Insight Prison Project and DeWeaver and Thomas—Melendez in the gallery space, and DeWeaver's and Thomas's voices projected into the gallery while their bodies were confined at San Quentin. DeWeaver led attendees in a movement-based experiment exploring embodiment, creativity, and collaboration. Weaving together Adrienne Maree Brown's book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* and his own writing, DeWeaver led the attendees in a series of movements



Prison Renaissance,
Metropolis, 2018. Video still.

related to sight. He instructed participants to collaborate by choreographing their gestures. Together, they practiced putting their hands to their eyes, forming circles to intimate binoculars; they covered their eyes to perform blindness or an unwillingness to look. Their gestures synced into a rhythm. Then DeWeaver's voice filled the gallery as Melendez carried a portable speaker around the space, amplifying DeWeaver's voice. Together and with the audience, they enacted a site-specific embodied performance, one that highlighted the differences in their respective locations. DeWeaver said:

I want to do something with you called the murmuration exercise. It's inspired by Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy*. Brown writes about this dream of a social justice movement that's irresistible because of this deep trust that we are capable of moving in, in the same way that birds move, in a murmuration. And she dreams of a movement where we are [so] tuned into each other, that like birds in a flock we can just respond to each other. So tonight what I want to do is practice this dream on a small scale, and I want us to embody this practice of trust and encounter our specific relationships to change. Are you guys down with that? Are you with me in this?⁷⁴

After the audience says yes, DeWeaver begins to read from *Emergent Strategy* as the gallery performers / attendees move in unison:

It is so important that we fight for the future, get into the game, get dirty, get experimental. How do we create and proliferate a compelling vision of economies and ecologies that center humans and the natural world over the accumulation of material?

We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure, because it's all data. But first we imagine.

We are in an imagination battle.

Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable.

DeWeaver continues to read from Brown's book as participants move in sync to his voice:

We have to imagine beyond those fears. We have to ideate—imagine and conceive—together.

We must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as murderers, or Brown people as terrorists and aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators. This is a time-travel exercise for the heart. This is a collaborative ideation—what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?⁷⁵

After the performance, participants continue to practice “collective ideation” by talking among themselves and with DeWeaver on speaker phone about what it would look like to have the movement to end mass incarceration led by those incarcerated.

Prison arts collaborations have the capacity to envision new worlds and systems: ones that do not rely on forced captivity, dehumanization, torture, and subjugation.

Such envisioning requires nonincarcerated artists, administrators, advocates, and educators to resist the carceral logics that maintain prisons and division between captive and free person. How do we collectively imagine and create in ways that do not rely on the violence of caging and carcerality? Baz Dreisinger surmises:

Prison arts programs are certainly well-meaning efforts but they're also crumbs tossed at a system starved for radical overhaul. They're smoke screens, obstructing our view of the big picture, which is that when it comes to justice and safety and humane treatment, prisons simply don't make sense. Big-picture change is not about tinkering with or enhancing what is, but conjuring up bold imaginings of what could be. For all that I love and believe in it, art can be an obstacle to such imaginings because of the very thing it does so well: dazzle us, and then distract us, with beauty.⁷⁶

Instead of distracting from or obfuscating the fundamental wrongness of prisons and caging, can prison arts collaborations build new imaginary horizons by forming relations, ways of looking, and practices of interdependence that challenge the institutional brutality and punitive discourse separating the incarcerated from the nonincarcerated?

There are structural and ideological risks for organizations and artists in banishing the logic on which the carceral state operates, where some are able to enter and exit as teachers and others must return to enclosed boxes as criminalized and punished subjects. Prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, "When the capacities resulting from purposeful action are combined towards ends greater than mission statements or other provisional limits, powerful alignments begin to shake the ground. In other words, *movement* happens."⁷⁷ Can prison arts collaborations go beyond personal growth and individual transformation to foster movement building?