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Article

# Out of Time: Accomplices in Post-Carceral World-Building

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**Abstract:** An article in which a faculty member, a university staff member and former student, and a currently incarcerated student and teaching assistant collaboratively examine their experiences as co-teachers and co-learners in a humanities-based prison classroom, and as co-authors of the article itself. Fostered by the faculty member's pedagogical approach and design of the course, the authors pose that critical practices of writing and learning are dynamic sites of imagination and collaboration, and in turn, avenues by which informed and intentional futures can be enacted. Locating their practice and experience of partnership within a prison, the authors enter their co-created and individual narratives into a discussion of the liberatory potentiality of written and collaborative "world-building" to identify, resist, and replace mechanisms of harm and oppression, effectively bringing a post-carceral world into being.

**Keywords:** education; collaboration; community; humanities; imagination; incarceration; pedagogy; prison; writing; world-building

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*The storytelling self is a social self, who declares and shapes important relationships through the mediating power of words. Thus, in sharing stories, we have the potential for forging new relationships, including local, classroom 'cultures' in which individuals are interconnected and new 'we's' are formed. In the end we might say that it is not literacy per se, but the substance of the narratives that arise from it (sometimes beyond the page), that has the potential to help individuals reimagine themselves and their place in the world around them.—Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi (Dyson and Celia 1994) in Doing Time Writing Lives, ed. Patrick Berry*

## 1. Mapping the Territory

In the musical motion picture *The Greatest Showman*, the song "Rewrite the Stars" references an interracial couple that longs to be together amidst the cultural and societal bigotry of the times. The song's refrain includes the line, "No one can say what we get to be" (Efron 2017). Pondering the idea of world-building toward a landscape absent of prisons can seem as impossible as rewriting the cosmos. But unlike the stars in the sky, prison is a human construct; there is an ideology and method behind its apparent inevitability. Our experiences, explored by each of us collectively and in turn in this article, helped us to know, in a felt and embodied way, that this inevitability is false—because we constructed something different, we made a space both within and beyond the place in which we were located, within and since the writing class we shared as both incarcerated and not-incarcerated members of a prison-based learning community. We operated in time beyond time in making a world that was no less real for being transitory.

In this essay, we intend to map the territory we claimed in our work together and to argue that our humanities-based learning and teaching environment (and, further, the space we built as we three

authors collectively developed this piece) became a site for our individual and collective practices in post-carceral world-building—that is, an intentional reshaping of our understanding of ourselves and each other as full agents, accomplices even, in making a world where prisons as they currently exist have ceased to be. In approaching this project, we looked to literature characterized by critical, activist-oriented conceptions of hope, narrative, and world-building as guiding threads to weave an understanding of how time spent writing in community within prison is time spent envisioning and enacting a future and post-carceral world. As we have come to recognize the act of coming together to write and our writing itself as a dual practice of world-building, literature that defies and complicates a currently-carceral world both informs and exemplifies our practice and collaboration.

At its center, hope is “the belief, simply, that different futures are possible” (Giroux 2004, p. 63). Hope functions as a “collaborative and imaginative process” that invites and empowers us to “collectively reimagine the future and its possibilities” (Jacobs 2005, p. 800). As a reimagining of the kind of world we would like to exist, hope requires conscious reflection, as we examine ourselves and our surroundings to “assess what is missing” and identify what it is that we “long for,” what it is that outlines and guides our dreaming and action toward “a not-yet reality, a future anticipated” (Mathieu 2005, p. 19).

In that “not-yet” half-light of anticipation, hope is a “subversive force” propelling “performative practice” by establishing new ideological and imaginative space for “dissent, contingency, indeterminacy,” possible through experimental and reflective responses to the conditions that demand engaged conceptualizations of hope in the first place (Giroux 2004, p. 63). Assuming an attitude of this sort of generative, critically conscious hope positions each of us to embody the “protagonic role” in these devised worlds as we bring them into being, using that imaginative and collaborative space to change, try, discuss, fail, critique, and practice what it might mean to exist in these futures. In its conscious intentionality, this kind of ideological and social resisting, rewriting, and rehearsing—what we pen as the “activist imagination”—is just that: “rehearsal for the revolution” (Boal 1985, p. 122).

Informed by a critical consciousness of hope, the activist imagination can be leveraged to transcend “the category of possibility to reality,” of thought into action, when it is recognized not as any momentary or “idealized blueprint but as a continually open vision,” a flexible, intentional “gesture that seeks to move out of abstractions about a better world toward actions devised to change the current world” (Mathieu 2005, pp. 18–19). At the heart of change making, hope is boldly enacted and “grounded in imaginative acts and projects,” avenues of creativity functioning as “vehicles for invoking a better future” (Mathieu 2005, p. 19). “Reading and writing,” in particular, “construct a contextual now that we all can inhabit,” a dimension within and beyond the present for our visions of the future to flourish (Berry 2018, p. 14).

Scholars and activists, incarcerated and not, dedicated to creating and studying humanities in prisons identify written, reflective, and collaborative practices as imperative examples of self-hood and “world-making” that engage “reinterpretations of past histories and hopes for the future” in their processes (Berry 2018, p. 44). Within the physical and ideological space of prison, the activist imagination can function as a kind of cathartic and “cognitive liberation,” enacted, for example, through “narratives in which the prison is reimagined as another space [...] a ‘third space’” (Berry 2018, p. 30; Smith 2017, p. 97). The prison classroom is, therefore, exceptional as “a place where social and intellectual community might be restored in a way that reestablishes the agency the institution inherently strips away,” inviting and equipping a group of individuals seeking liberation to participate in a critically hopeful and shared community practice of world-building. The conditions of a presently carceral world paradoxically underscore the radical potential of creative and collaborative learning to resist and replace elements of its constraints, reinforcing the inherently “emancipatory endeavor” that is humanities-based practice within prison. This practice creates a collective map leading to the construction of a third space that is beyond “inside” and “outside” and offers the tools with which to construct it (Smith 2017, p. 97). That hopeful, imaginative space materializes as a “newly opened space of resistant reconstruction,” as it forms itself from the work of individuals concerted to give “concrete

shape and content to a vision of freedom” (Larson 2017, p. 35). Existing notions of incarceration, justice, and what it means to be human and to act humanly are interrogated, revised, and reenacted through and by a circle of narrators and witnesses. In this exercise of thought and the practice of writing, we create and we witness ourselves creating “the bases for a postcarceral world” (Larson 2017, p. 111).

## 2. “What We Get to Be”

Our collaborative world-building was centered in the course Writing as Activism. Originally designed by co-author Vicki Reitenauer as a campus-based course<sup>1</sup>, Writing as Activism was first offered as an Inside-Out course<sup>2</sup> within a minimum-security correctional facility in 2016, and has been offered in that same facility once a year since then. In both the campus- and prison-based versions of the course, its very structure challenges traditional forms of education. This practice- and process-oriented course invites everyone in the circle into a relationship as co-learners and co-teachers, and understands each person to be a writer, an author, and the authority on their own work. The instructor writes beside us, across from us, and in the same circle of/as us; the instructor, in other words, *is* us.

For 10 weeks, we will interact with each other in a predictable pattern: at our first class meeting of the week, we will discuss course content that we have collectively developed through suggesting articles and poems, essays and interviews, for the reading packets the instructor prepares for the group. (Because the buying of published texts is disproportionately expensive for many incarcerated students, the instructor makes and distributes these packets to all students weekly based on recommendations from the group.) We will also engage in writing feedback groups during these first class sessions of the week, bringing drafts of our individual writing projects to share with our colleagues for author-centered feedback. Starting at the midpoint of the term, we will also brainstorm and then work on one or more collectively-designed projects: perhaps, like most years, this will include the production of a class-wide publication of original writing and art and a reading held inside the prison for staff and guests.

Our second class meeting each week will follow its own pattern: week after week, we will co-facilitate workshops with and for each other, spaces in which we are all invited to experiment, to practice, and to generate fresh possibilities in our work. One week we might craft children’s books around social justice themes; in another we might experiment with erasure poetry, making new texts out of old and oppressive ones. The instructor and teaching assistants will co-facilitate the first of these workshops to show how it might be done; after that, small teams of facilitators will design and then run their own workshops, all for the good of the group.

Before any of that can happen, though, we must bring our individual selves into that classroom, not quite sure what we will encounter there. We begin, humanly: with handshakes, with introductions, with the sharing and remembering of chosen names. And then we continue onto the page, responding to writing prompts that ask us to investigate what brings us to this writing course and what describes each of us as a writer and an activist. We start writing from what we know in order to discover what we but sense. Our intention is to create community in a space where it seems an anomaly, where the space requires, at least in part, the absence of community. Here, among us in our space-within-space, our time-beyond-time, there are no required speeches or scripts, but rather an invitation to share vulnerability on the page, a call that someone always answers.

We trust in this authentic writing process to weave the universal and organic threads that will form our community in this space. Through this practice, our connection becomes more and more fully relational. Through this practice, we make visible to ourselves the web that delivered us into this room, the previously invisible strands that have always connected us, and that will continue to

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<sup>1</sup> To receive the syllabus or other materials from this course, contact Vicki L. Reitenauer.

<sup>2</sup> Temple University’s Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program supports faculty members to offer courses inside correctional facilities in which half of the students are incarcerated at the facility and half of the students enter the facility from the sponsoring college/university for integrated class sessions. For more information, see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>.

connect us after we leave this room, over and over again. We share our stories as an essential practice in constructing a community that is carried across the physical space that separates us when we part.

Though we are collaborating across a divided landscape for only 10 weeks, our objective is to critically understand our internal and external prisons in ways that allow our efforts to build the world we would like to see even if (and when) we do not see one another again. During these 10 weeks, we exercise a relational power that activates each of us in different ways to create the world as it could be, through writing about our longings and our fears, and our human capacities to love, to hope, to care, to understand, to empathize—even and especially when these capacities sit side by side with our lived experiences of violence, trauma, harm, despair, guilt. Our class is like water, fluid and finding its way through the cracks in the systems we have built to protect ourselves from each other. Our practice builds a newer world, laying invisible bricks into a bridge that leads to a place absent of prisons as we know them today.

Many of us will never see one another again. Perhaps we will forget each other's names. But there is something more real than names going on here: There is the embodied participation in a context in which we actively confront this unnatural structure that we are working, within and beyond our individual selves, to replace.

The fact that some of us can write this article together speaks to the effectiveness of our practice. This piece was born in the possibilities that have emerged through relationship-building across institutional lines—that is, between the faculty member and the university she represents and the staff at the correctional facility responsible for educational and other programming for those incarcerated within it<sup>3</sup>—and the organic development of shared interests to tell our individual and collective stories. Soon after the conclusion of the course that we shared in 2018, we started discussing this potential collaboration (in the less-than-immediate ways that attend communication into and out of a prison). With the help of the correctional rehabilitation manager and other staff at the correctional facility, who scheduled time and space for our shared work, we met together four times to discuss the approach and focus for this article and to assign ourselves writing tasks. As a prisoner, Benjamin (Ben) has limited access to technologies with which to conduct research and had to rely on Rhiannon and Vicki to print, copy, and bring resources to use in the building of this piece. (That said, Ben enjoys more privilege than most, through his job as a clerk and the strength of the relationships he has built within the prison over the two years he has been at this particular facility.)

As we ended our last class session, we did an exercise that involved each student anonymously writing a letter to a classmate, an activity intended to allow us to reflect on our time and writing practice together. In many ways, these letters were formal goodbyes; yet contained within them were expressions of profound gratitude and promises to continue our kind, compassionate, incisive, necessary world-building. The letter Ben received, contained within a Portland State University envelope, had on its face erasure poetry covering certain letters of the institution's name and an inked-on configuration of stars. The letter, which Ben has practically memorized, is evidence of our intentional practice toward building a post-carceral world, our seeing and knowing each other across the structures that divide and keep us from each other and from the individual and collective healing we so dearly need. Here we are, rewriting the stars with a practice that aims to dismantle a system and replace it with what Dr. Martin Luther King powerfully called "beloved community."<sup>4</sup>

We decided to build this article, as we built our shared learning space through our course, out of both our individual stories and our collective one. What you have been reading so far represents our

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<sup>3</sup> The authors are deeply grateful to all those who made this article possible, including our fellow students and the facility staff, past and present, without whose shared insights and active support this essay could not have been written.

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the concept and practice of "beloved community," Rhiannon M. Cates and Vicki L. Reitenauer recommend the work of their late colleague Roslyn Farrington: Roslyn Farrington, "Creating Beloved Community," *Creating Connection and Community*, Multnomah County Library, podcast audio, 27 January, 2010, [http://multcolib.libsyn.com/creating\\_beloved\\_community](http://multcolib.libsyn.com/creating_beloved_community).

fully collaborative writing, with each of us drafting a number of these sentences, some of us revising them, and all of us guiding that process through both our time together and our time apart. What you will read next are our distinct voices in our individually authored pieces, minimally edited by each other. What we leave you with is how we are each practicing, in language on the page, “what we get to be:” writers at work, attempting to say something real and true about our collaborating out of time and across space, accomplices in a post-carceral world-building deeply desired by each of us and all of us, together.

### 3. Here We Are: Rhiannon

Sometimes I have dreams about the ritual of it all. Parking lot small-talk as an American flag whips against itself, until the buzzer invites us inside. One gate—notice the pristine landscaping. Another gate—divvying up badges as the poem outlining risk and liability is quietly recited, as required. One more gate—a metal detector to sniff out any forgetfulness. We pencil in our purpose, decidedly “education,” a dozen times down the visitors log before shuffling across a noticeably well-waxed lobby. One more door—polite chit-chat and the screeching symphony of classroom furniture rearranged. A bag of name tags clattering out onto one of a newly formed circle-square of plastic tables. Finally, we are together. Finally, we are alone. We almost always start right on time. Exhale. Who has a check-in question?

There are unbreakable rules that inform each step of these rituals. Some are more depressing than others. The consequences of these unbreakable rules are very different for half of us. You will not forget that. Here we are.

In this unholy church of rules, we are a congregation brought together by some sense of faith, or perhaps more accurately, a lack thereof. In this church of unbreakable rules, we get to work writing our own. Right away, silently, out loud, and on paper, we make promises to ourselves and each other about how we will be during this time, in this circle, with each other. How we will not be. How we will approach our practice of writing together and apart, in and out of prison over these ten weeks we have been given. We promise to try. Twice a week times ten we will draw and erase, redraw and erase, our circle. Coming and going from our own little world that is both inside and outside and neither and nowhere. We are setting the stage. We’ve got less than 48 hours on it.

Slowly and suddenly, our circle becomes its own ritual of remembering and reimagining this world we have conjured, this world we are writing. Each evening we are workshopping the script, performing our play about a world in which prison is not like it is now. It is not quite clear, but we are pretty sure that in our play there is no prison at all.

We leave as much as we can, as much as we would like, behind. In the car, in the dorms, at the door. Each of us is responsible for writing our own role for this play we are working on. We will stay in character the whole time, thespians on one big blind date. The thrill of this lasts until an officer politely forces intermission, blurts out a character someone did not bring to class, a first name, a last name, sometimes both. Never mine. We will not forget it but we will never mention it. We keep writing. It’s okay. It’s not—none of this is, but the show must go on. There are no dress rehearsals.

There are secrets we keep out of the script, things easier left unsaid, though done. I write carefully around these parts of myself, in the end leaving a perfect outline in ink on paper, chalk on asphalt. It’s okay. It’s not—none of this is, but here we are. We keep writing. Confession, commiseration, absolution, repeat. Trigger warnings generously given in a room none of us can excuse ourselves from. Later we cannot stop laughing. This is where the faith comes in. Who wants to share?

We are out of time for tonight.

In this place, this prison, time is a weapon, brandished to wound, warn, and kill. Somehow, through it and despite it and around it, our world wields time against itself, the poison its own antidote, for a moment. Twice at once, in our very writing of the world and in our performance as a group of writers writing that world, we are prescribing new purpose to time. Through possibility and the

practice of it, we dare to reject the things about prison-life-death we cannot change by daring to change some of them right now, for now. Together untangling a quiet wisdom to know which ones. Serenity, for a moment. Our congregation is a small shrine to a world we are deciding to write towards, to love towards, and to believe into being.

By any definition of prison, this little future-world should not exist, but here we are. Ten weeks of lucid dreaming. A dream we know we will be left to try to remember together, alone. To recreate together, alone. You knew it was coming. That was the deal.

Ten weeks and we are just getting started.

We are out of time for tonight.

We are out of time.

On the last night, the rituals are the same. Have a good summer. Have a good life. Keep writing. All we can do is thank each other over and over again. Because we cannot say I love you. Headaches from not crying. Half of us, luck's draft, pack our things. Shuffle quietly back across that gleaming lobby, notebooks under our arms as we nod polite farewells to officers beneath barbed arbors. Back to the parking lot—a sunset of a sky scabbed pink with new spring. By this time of night, the flag has been taken down, tucked away tightly someplace. When I hit the freeway on the last night, I start to scream. Springsteen on the radio. Helplessness. *You can't start a fire*. Serenity. *Little world falling apart*. Here we are.

Later, when the screaming stops, I will try to talk about it and stumble. The word “magic” is all that will form in my mouth. Then the inevitable disappointment of trying to describe a dream to someone. Inherently impossible and perhaps only interesting to you. People would rather hear about nightmares.

Months later, when three of us come back together to write about this, the magic play, the dream world, they have decided that we shall be allowed to meet in the prison chapel. It is perfect. It is not lost on me. We begin again, this writing of worlds, a play within a play. Faith of future. Practice of possibility. *Even if we're just dancing in the dark*.<sup>5</sup> Here we are.

#### 4. Subversive Hope: Ben

In 2008, I took my first Inside-Out college class through Oregon State University. There was a knot in my stomach as I climbed the 66 steps that led to the education floor of the Oregon State Penitentiary, donning my light blue dress shirt stamped in bright orange stencil with the words “Inmate.” Entering the room, I found the chairs set up in a wagon wheel circle, and I sat down across from a young student who introduced herself as Rory. For 11 years, I had not talked to anyone from the community other than my family and prison guards, and I was nervous. Prison conditions you to feel inferior, where even a conversation with an outside community member or the simple touch of a handshake feels like a breach of boundaries. With each three-minute conversation around the circle, my anxiety decreased, and during those two hours, removed from my cell, I nearly forgot that I was in prison, serving a 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year sentence. The idea that we can create a transitory space that removes one from prison is one I would hear regularly as I went on to take over 14 Inside-Out courses. But is that space really ephemeral?

If only microcosmically, I learned I can resist the dehumanizing machine of prison by creating spaces with others where a shared context of transformative learning and building of genuine community takes place. Indeed, something magical happens when students come into a prison and learn side by side with prisoners. We are (all) truly removed from prison in that space. It is

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<sup>5</sup> Lyrics by Bruce Springsteen. 1984. “Dancing in the Dark.”

incredibly humanizing. I remember leaving so many of those classes feeling as if I had eaten a meal that kept me full for days, lying awake, unable to sleep, contemplating new perspectives of possibility previously obscured. While something organic is transpiring, connecting common threads of humanity, our practice together grows into something far more intentional.

I did not consider myself an activist when I came to Inside-Out. But with each course and each human interaction, coupled with the state of the world, something in me activated. It began internally, with understanding that I had been dehumanized for years and realizing that I could have met any one of these students on a campus and they would never have known I had been in prison. This new understanding erased my previous belief that, upon release, passersby would somehow know I had been incarcerated, that I was different or somehow broken beyond repair.

Just as prison walls are intended to keep us in, more so are they intended to keep the public out. Prisons and their inner operations are hidden for a reason. It benefits the system for the public not to see or understand the most important aspects of what—and who—are behind these walls: human beings who have a contextual narrative that when shared and woven together allows us to transcend the transitory and mobilize to action. Teaching the humanities in this space is more than an experience; it is a tactical defiance of a dehumanizing system we are forced to confront and work to replace. This action does not come without some compromise, without choosing your battles.

My first Inside-Out class took place during an election season with a mandatory-minimum ballot measure in play. During the course of the class, I learned that nearly none of the outside students knew what Measure 11 was: a mandatory minimum sentencing law (which I was sentenced under, and which also sentences adolescents as young as 14 to prison as adults). After spending weeks building community, learning together, and sharing our stories, many students were asking the same question: What can I do? Some had never voted on ballot measures at all, or even took the time to read one, but they mobilized and went out and voted. These intentional humanizing interactions also mobilize us inside.

When someone is dehumanized, it is often easy to turn inward, to “other” those around us as we fall prey to that age-old tactic, divide and conquer. I interacted with fellow prisoners in these classes that I otherwise would not have, going on to develop meaningful relationships outside of class. The beginning of organizing is building relational power, and this transpires in relational meetings, discovering that the things that unite us are so much stronger than those that divide us. In addition to making these connections, I experienced and witnessed a personal awakening that all parts of me have value—and I strive to never cheat myself of learning the context of those around me. Inside-Out lit a fire in me that has become a creative practice in life. I have taken so much from the many courses I have been privileged to be part of as I have built a lasting community that continues even if I never see some of my classmates again.

However, perhaps more than any criminology or literature course, enhancing my writing as creative practice through the shared context of Inside-Out has had an even greater impact on me. In “Writing as Activism,” which I took as a student and have subsequently engaged with as a teaching assistant, we collaborate as we build community in a sacred space located inside a prison. Sharing our writing is perhaps one of the most vulnerable and intimate things we can do together. I experience a creative empowerment in writing for me, but also a creative power that goes out into the world when we do it together from inside a prison.

While my writing may not possess physical or political power in the moment, there are many examples of individual writing which led to and were part of social movements and even removed people from prison. I think of Nelson Mandela (whose writing and letters were smuggled out to the world); Malcolm X; Angela Davis; and Rubin Carter (who wrote his book in prison). Our writing practice together passes through the apathetic walls of the prison, breaking the institution’s oppressive power in a way that is creative and lasting.

Author and activist Walidah Imarisha once said to me, “All social justice is science fiction.”<sup>6</sup> It sounded strange to me at first until I contemplated it and then read her introduction to Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, an anthology of radical speculative fiction Imarisha co-edited with adrienne maree brown. Here, they repeat this revelation: “Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds,” inviting “movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories” (Imarisha et al. 2015, p. 3).

We write together, learning together in ways that persist in building the world as it could be one human being at a time. The outside students leave this space transformed; they will never be the same in how they vote or interact with the world after we have shared together (in) this context. Many never consider the lived reality of prison, and those who leave it after 10 weeks go on to share a different perspective with those in their world. And I come away from those shared spaces challenged to see the humanity in my fellow prisoners and my captors alike.

Trevor Noah notes that “apartheid’s walls cracked and crumbled over many years,” that the system dismantled one piece at a time (Noah 2016, p. 69). While taking down a dehumanizing system all at once might be ideal, it is simply not possible. Since my first Inside-Out class I have seen outside students become activated and engaged, with some even changing their career paths. One young man who wanted to be a district attorney shifted direction after his course, and I have seen prisoner after prisoner transformed by the experience and going on to practice that transformation with fellow prisoners. The power lies not in the Inside-Out course or curriculum itself, but in the human beings who dare to learn side by side and then go on and on, building our world in an intentional way.

### 5. Words Build the World: Vicki

Midway through the session, the door opens and a uniform noses in. *Med line*, it announces. Several of the men sitting in the chairs at the tables arranged in a circle get up, go out. *Thank you*, I say. I always say *thank you*. The uniform steps right back out.

Those of us still sitting in the chairs at the tables arranged in a circle pick right back up where we were. We barely miss a beat. In fact, some nights no beat is missed at all, and the person speaking does not stop, even when the uniform makes its statement. It is like he—it is almost always a he—had never been there at all, his *med line* whispered as if by a ghost to the breeze.

∞

Or this is romantic malarkey, the sort of thing only a person who has never been incarcerated could say. When the uniform shows up, I am never the one who leaves the room. Even if there are meds I want, meds I need, his announcement is not meant for me. Only a never-incarcerated person could sit in a chair in a circle inside a prison and feel that the correctional officer opening the door, there to continue running the lives of those who not only have been, but currently are, incarcerated, is a ghost.

∞

But still. The performance has an air of the merely functional to it. When they lean into the room, most of them seem okay enough as humans to this never-been-incarcerated person. They are just doing their job. In that moment, to me, they are just doing their job, and in that moment their job seems to be like the job of the person who takes customers, number by number, at the deli counter, each in their turn.

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<sup>6</sup> Walidah Imarisha, personal communication with author Benjamin J. Hall 18 April, 2017.

It feels that perfunctory. What we are creating in the circle in this room does not have room for him. He does not have a place there. His entering and exiting feel that inconsequential, particularly beside what is going on, nearly nonstop, in the room.

∞

Which does not necessarily look like much. It looks like a bunch of people—in our case, about two dozen—sitting in chairs at tables arranged in a circle, writing or talking. Writing, then talking. Saying, and leaving things unsaid. Building a world that way.

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The world we build, twice for two hours each week: Incarcerated and not-incarcerated, one by one by one. A check-in question that leads someone unexpectedly to tears. A read-around after a prompt that ties a thread between us. The fact of actions and consequences, and the equal and opposite fact of actions without consequences, at least the sort that puts a person on the inside of this machine.

All that, just being what it is. Afterwards—not after the med line uniform enters and exits the room, and not after each class session stacks up like those deli tickets left in the little wicker basket after the customer has been served, and not after the chairs at the tables in the circle are abandoned for the final time and we have to imagine what it is to never see each other again—but after the fact of the end of this carceral reality, it will just be this way, all of us sitting around, amazed by each other, and bored by each other, and irritated by each other, and caring about each other, and knowing each other in ways that require our forgiving each other. Especially forgiving each other.

That world. The world after this world, that our twice-for-two-hours-each-week is working to build.

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But not forgiving each other in the maudlin way, in that surface way, in the Hallmark movie kind of way. It is the wrong word, forgiving.

I do not know another word for how we will be with each other when we have decided we do not need or want prisons anymore to pretend to do the work we humans, who can and do hurt each other over and over and over, need done. What will pass between us then? Where, and how, will we all live if some of us do not have to live there, behind that gate and that second gate and that barbed wire and that uniform reminding us who and what are in charge, reminding us who could be next? How will we all live then? How will we know how to reconcile what we break? What will need to pass among us for that healing to happen, and how will we not break it even as we share it hand to hand and mouth to ear? What words will we need, and how must we shape our hands and our pens and our mouths and our hearts to form those words now?

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Who knows? *Just start writing. Just put it down on the page.*

[and we do, we all do]

*About a minute left.*

[we all still do]

*Start wrapping up, if you're still writing.*

[some still are]

*The space is open for sharing. Who wants to start?*

[pay no attention to the ghost, whispering to the breeze]

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[we build the words, the words build and build, the words build the world]

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