

we are all integral parts of colonial, racist, sexist, and exploitative systems. I think both the Inside-Out classes and the work carried out through the Walls to Bridges Collective engage directly with the issue of distance and spectatorship and grapple with the complex and uncomfortable reality of doing work about and within penal spaces with its multiple contradictions, messiness, and disruptions. Those disruptions — like the ones I have touched on in this chapter — have the potential to “rattle” subjectivities and trouble notions about who can and cannot be a “knower” and an agent of change.

## Experiencing the Inside-Out Program in a Maximum-Security Prison

*Monica Freitas, Bonnie McAuley & Nyki Kish*

### Inside-Out and Its Effect on

#### My Imprisonment: Monica Freitas

Sitting in my cell, I reflect on the past two years of my life and the intense emotions I have experienced within the Canadian judicial system. Many women experience very low self-confidence and quite frankly do not see any way out of the crime cycle that most are accustomed to in order to survive life's hardships. Having harmful thoughts, negative self-talk, and experiencing marginalization, oppression, and constant judgment at the hands of the people that are supposed to assist us with rehabilitation and reintegration into our communities prove to be very challenging. Due to the numerous challenges that I have been facing — having a criminal record, being away from my supports and loved ones, and experiencing extreme emotions of guilt, shame, and loneliness — my efforts and focus during my incarceration have been on obtaining higher education, advocating for and empowering female inmates, and educating our communities about the criminalization of women and its long-term effects on society as a whole. I attribute my passion and fervour for these important causes to the Inside-Out program.

Inside-Out completely changed my perspective on learning and encouraged me both through the class dialogue/activities and essays to challenge myself and others. The course facilitator and her assistant were there to encourage healthy dialogue and a positive environment, where each participant could explore their personal boundaries and perhaps challenge society's perceptions of prisons, punishment, and incarcerated women. There was no evidence of anyone exercising power or privilege over one another, as the class had mutually and democratically agreed upon guidelines of conduct at the beginning of the program. By doing this, the facilitator empowered each person to become not only students, but teachers in their own right.

I have concluded during my time behind “the walls” that we all have a plan, whether we chose it or it was chosen for us. We cannot help who, what, and where we are, but it is what we do with our lives that differenti-

ates us from becoming oppressed, oppressors, and the liberated. I believe that education is necessary from the grassroots level in order to ensure that society creates an environment where all individuals feel respected and equal and have fair access to the basic necessities of life.

### "Inside the Walls": Bonnie McAuley

My name is Bonnie and I am doing a life/twenty-five sentence for the murder of my husband. I completed year eighteen on August 22, 2013. I began my sentence at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, in 1995 and at that time I also began taking courses from Queen's University by correspondence. I have three adult children and two grandchildren. I was a registered nurse outside and when I obtain this second degree I may be eligible to teach nursing in a college setting. Unfortunately, as the years have passed my chances at bursaries and outside funds for education have decreased considerably. I am now in a financial position where I'm not able to continue my education without financial help from others.

Three years ago the opportunity arose where I was able to apply for a degree course through Wilfrid Laurier University in a program referred to as Inside-Out. My hopes were increased immediately. The course would be compensated entirely by the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, which awarded Wilfrid Laurier with a substantial amount of money. The course would be funded through Wilfrid Laurier and paid for me in its entirety. Unfortunately, I did not get into the first course. I was devastated. In December 2011, I applied to a social work course called "What is Family?" and I was accepted into the program. Since then I have applied to and completed three courses — with outstanding marks.

When I started the class in the first Inside-Out course I glanced around at the students and I have to admit that what I saw was mostly upper-class, privileged, educated females who I thought I would never fit in with. But the circle and the icebreakers helped me to get to know and like each person on an equal level. They also made me realize that for the most part these women were just the same as me. The circle also enhanced our learning in the Inside-Out program. It brought university outside to the inside. These wonderful circles became "circles of trust" and it definitely removed that upper-class feeling that I had developed at the beginning. The circle also encouraged dialogue among two very different classes of students.

I am privileged enough to be starting a fourth Inside-Out course on social literature. These courses have helped increase both my self-esteem and self-confidence. I am truly blessed to be part of this wonderful program.

### Jail the Body, Free the Mind: Nyki Kish

I spent two years and nearly four months imprisoned within a maximum-security unit at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVW), a multi-security-level women's federal penitentiary in Ontario. In what follows I share the hurdles, rewards, and general experiences I encountered in studying at a post-secondary level from inside a maximum-security prison. I explore issues around participating in a prison educational program during Canada's shift into a "tough on crime" penal policy, and I also attempt to express, through my own experience, how Inside-Out pedagogy and the prison environment interact, and how the two are entirely contradictory in effect.

### *Being Held in a Maximum-Security Prison*

At the time I was introduced to the Inside-Out program, I was being held in a maximum-security wing of the Grand Valley Institution for Women for a mandatory twenty-seven-month period, a sentence stipulation anyone with a life sentence, like myself, must endure. The maximum-security unit, which the Correctional Service of Canada calls the secure unit and which everyone else refers to as "max," is a fifteen-cell, twenty-seven-bed "supermax"-inspired wing, containing three isolated five-cell corridors where women are kept. The small, narrow, fluorescent-lit, self-contained corridors are known as "pods." We spent the majority of our time on the pods; we were allowed out of the unit only to ask for a maximum of one hour outside in the evenings and for visits and programs. On pod, we were locked in the cells for 14.5 hours daily. We were often double-bunked. When I first arrived, I remember clearly my first impression being: How could anyone exist for two years in such a small, uncomfortable space? My second impression quickly followed: What meaningful experience could one even craft from such an existence?

All pursuits that interest me, from volunteering, to making art, to connecting to the natural world, were cauterized from my life upon my being put into Grand Valley's max, and I quickly hoped that education could be that time's saving grace. But from a resource and opportunity standpoint, the max offers less than little. An option to privately purchase correspondence courses exists, should an imprisoned woman have access to the \$500 to \$800 course fees; however, a switch to online learning increasingly limits choices for the select few who can afford this option, as imprisoned people in Canada have no access to the Internet. Further, what available government assistance for post-secondary courses to inmates used to exist in Ontario was also cut from the federal budget in 2012. Indeed, post-secondary pursuits in the Grand Valley Institution's maximum-security unit have always been

rare and are increasingly becoming rarer. Further, they are pursuits that, by my experience, are warned against by most of the max staff because of the limitations of the unit.

There are four dated computers installed between two program rooms near the pods that are prioritized for women working through secondary school, not all of which ever steadily work. Accessing them is *always* a challenge. Movement in max is authorized by guard discretion in conjunction with room scheduling, and the two rooms are also used as the library, chapel, gym, court, intervention, psychology, and institutional program room, and even the women enrolled in secondary school are denied access regularly. Being able to type, research, or even work safely in a calm or quiet environment presented daily hurdles, most of which we never satisfied. As mentioned, the majority of our time was spent on pod and in cell where there are no computers, no working space, and only what study supplies we purchase through the canteen, which are limited to lined paper, pens, and erasers.

Access barriers, though significant, were not enough to stop us from wanting to pursue schooling. Beyond structural limitations, however, regular violent disruptions and emotional upheaval occurring between women and staff and among the women make the max one of the most hostile, unstable places a person could study in. In Grand Valley, the secure unit is used to hold not just people with life sentences, but also women with violent histories and women who experience varying mental illnesses and who do not function in the general population. The max offers little for us to do and is not a treatment unit to which those with mental illnesses should be surrendered. The conditions culminate to make max the perfect environment for violence. Moreover, aside from chemically restraining women, discipline and isolation are the utilized responses to any emotion or incident in max, which only perpetuate incidents and chaos on the unit, as emotional responses were, generally, our natural reactions to the intensely regulated, regimented institutional environment. Finally, because of the small size of the pods, when incidents occur, they generally shut down at least the involved pod, if not the entire unit, affecting us all. Such was the daily reality of being kept in the max. Still, as Inside-Out was being introduced into Canada and into GVRW, organizers were quite careful in pushing for the inclusion of max women, and included we were.

I completed the first four Inside-Out courses that were offered at GVRW while imprisoned in the max; it was Canada's very first Inside-Out class that I shared as my first experience with the program. "Diversity, Marginalization,

and Oppression" was the course title, and with this course began the most meaningful experience I had during my imprisonment in max. ▸

### *The Inside-Out Program's Pedagogy and Format*

Inside -Out pedagogy promotes a collective, dialogue-based experiential learning. Every class takes place with university students who are both imprisoned and not imprisoned. A supportive rather than competitive tone is encouraged and equality in voice is promoted. Assigned readings are discussed, usually in one large class circle, followed by dialogue-based activities that are carried out within smaller class groups to deepen our analyses. The large circle is generally re-formed to end each class with personal reflection on the session. The opening, dispersing, regrouping ritual of the large and small circles in Inside-Out created something of a sacredness to the classes for me. Inside-Out as a whole does not follow conventional education mechanics, but presents instead as a transformative life and academic experience.

▸ Toward the end of each course, a final project is developed by the entire class. Final projects are usually action-oriented and are often produced with themes of social justice and advocacy. By the end of the courses strong bonds tend to form between the imprisoned and outside students; both because of the starkly unconventional nature of the program that we students mutually experience, and because syllabi tend to be tailored to be relevant to issues of imprisonment (for example, the courses I participated in studied prisons, punishment, human rights, and oppression, which always gave us amply solid grounds upon which we became united and galvanized).

### *My Experiences with the Inside-Out Program*

The courses are held in the medium-security compound of the prison, meaning that in order to attend I had to be taken off pod by guards, frisked, and escorted to and from the classroom, while during class being under constant supervision of prison staff. During class I sat among all the students, both the women in this prison and as well, the outside students. In that setting and *only* in that setting there was no way to identify me as a maximum-security prisoner. At the time of our very first class, I had been in a max pod for eight months, and I remember feeling instantly more human than I had since being convicted. It was not long after that first Inside-Out class when I realized how compromised my social skills had become as a result of my living conditions. I was no longer, by that time, accustomed to being spoken to with respect, or having any atmosphere where my thoughts were valued or where I could express my opinions unpenalized. The allow-

*Public Perception, Deservingness, and Stigma*

The trend of labelling criminalized people as “undeserving” of education and other opportunities is neither new nor undocumented, and with our having access to the limited, however meaningful, post-secondary education that the Inside-Out program offers comes a great degree of carefulness and public relations management on the part of the prison administration and involved universities. While forces within both institutions vocally proclaim the program internally, frequent were our class conversations which navigated toning down, tailoring to “public perception,” and properly presenting the products our classes produced through the final project of the Inside-Out course. Within CSC, almost every change that is implemented is announced to the prison population with a clause about how said change interacts with Canada’s public perception of this prison system. Indeed, public perception is most often the guise under which we as an imprisoned population are denied even the most basic human rights and dignities. It is the excuse given to keep computers from being purchased and from allowing the ranges to be air-conditioned (though we endure soaring temperatures regularly), and it is the most common reason we are given when we are told what a gift it is that a few of us are able to learn. I do not dispute that under our current system, programs like Inside-Out are indeed a privilege; I dispute that they ought to be.

The acceptance on the part of imprisoned participants that we were receiving a privilege in our ability to study university courses comes about in relation to the arguments that we are imprisoned and learning while many non-imprisoned Canadians are never able to engage in university, and that the costs of these courses for imprisoned students are largely carried by the program. It is said to us that much of the public does not believe imprisoned people should have meaningful opportunity. This argument against meaningful opportunity for imprisoned people generally stands upon the logic that imprisoned people should be experiencing punishment in a setting undesirable enough and reduced enough from the average quality of existence in Canada to deter the next citizen from partaking in crime, rather than being able to develop oneself in any positive, significant manner. This logic of course rests upon the notion of individualized responsibility within a reactionary approach to the social issue of crime; it does not consider that imprisoned people might experience imprisonment as a result of lack of opportunity and marginalization. Nor does this logic consider the ripple social effects of an institution that would return educated people into communities rather than people who have only experienced trauma, isolation.

ance of my being able to have the limited periods of free expression that came through Inside-Out ultimately became invaluable to my surviving the max, and I stress that this aspect of the program will continue to be invaluable to any imprisoned women being held in the max who engages in Inside-Out.

The supermax style of imprisonment that Canada has embraced within several aspects of the country’s prison industry is, in my opinion, inherently dehumanizing. Supermax-style units are not built with anything but containment, control, and minimized maintenance in mind, and this led to atrocious effects on the hearts and minds of those of us who were subjected to exist within their walls. Very rarely did I ever get the opportunity to connect with others in any way that was not superficial or quite guarded in nature. And while no prison guards are stationed on pod with us, women in the max are watched all day through multiple cameras; as well, all of our conversations can be listened to by staff through a speaker system. What we said and did on the pods was constantly monitored, scrutinized, and used to determine our “institutional progress.” Such control over ideas and casual conversation left me wary to engage at all, and I spent the majority of my first twenty months in the prison in the cells to which I was assigned. Even when I did interact with the other women on pod, because the pods only typically imprison three to five other women, the environment was always extremely isolating and socially strenuous.

Contrary to the max environment, it has consistently been my experience that there is a healing quality to the circle setting that Inside-Out embraces. In class circles there was no hierarchy and there were not the power struggles that dominated my experience with both guards and other imprisoned women in max. In class circles I felt safe to think and share and interact, and especially as our class read texts and poetry relevant to oppression, criminalization, and issues of imprisonment, I began to find something I had lost in the trauma of experiencing the penal system: my voice. Even the simplest activities that occur within the Inside-Out setting, such as reading aloud, listening and being listened to within a group of people, and being encouraged to disagree and challenge ideas, counteracted the negative impacts of imprisonment in max. Being allowed to be this way during classes reminded me of the self I developed before my imprisonment and class after class, slowly but surely, I regained confidence, vitality, and drive that I was not aware I had lost. I finished my first Inside-Out class feeling like I had found liberation from within prison walls. It has been echoed to me by other participants that such is the case for many Inside-Out students, both imprisoned and not.

and deprivation for extended periods of time.

In this prison we often listen to mainstream media expressing supportive narratives about Canada's turn away from an alternative, non-punitive penal system toward the neo-liberal, reactionary, "tough on crime" prison industrial phenomenon that has spread globally. I have been imprisoned through the implementation of the Stephen Harper government's 2012 Omnibus Crime Bill C-10; I have experienced, since my conviction, the increasing social aggression being imposed upon the marginal and most often impoverished identities that comprise the majority of Canada's women's prison population. I have felt the devastation, and I do not use the word lightly, of existing within a cage within a society that is accepting a drastic policy overhaul of one of its dominant institutions, its prison system, without understanding the changes or their immediate or long-term effects. It has felt inexpressibly awful. We were told in the max that the public essentially wants us to suffer, that suffering is what we deserve, and that this is why max is so structurally suppressive. Even though the Inside-Out program began in Canada in the fall of 2011, just as the Conservative "tough on crime" agenda was producing its effects, the program can only ever reach a small portion of the women in this prison, even fewer of the max population. For those few of us who are eligible and allowed to participate from max, maintaining the security clearance to attend in the medium-security compound presented itself as a constant hurdle, one which I always found to be nearly too stressful to maintain.

#### *No Security: The Constant Threat of the Max Unit's Level System*

Because there is a constant surveillance of us in max, even our most menial actions and interactions are documented, assessed, and used by staff to guide decisions about how our time is spent. Decisions impact all of us — from long-term realities, such as parole, to our immediate quality of life. Most significantly, the max unit operates with every prisoner being represented by a level, in a four-level system, with level one offering the most restrictions and level four offering the most privilege. Level one prisoners may not leave the unit without being shackled and handcuffed and without being escorted by several guards. Level four prisoners can leave the unit without any handcuffs or shackles and with only one CSC staff, who does not necessarily have to be a guard (for example, a teacher or prison psychologist may escort a level four maximum-security prisoner throughout the medium-security compound). Levels are assessed weekly at staff meetings and provide the max staff an enormous, immediate, and generally arbitrary form of control

over our realities. Only at level four may one participate in most programs institutionally, including Inside-Out, and throughout my participation in four separate Inside-Out courses I was not able to maintain a level four status.

I did maintain the required level four for three courses; it was during the fourth course my level four was reduced. There had been several prior occasions when staff had threatened to reduce my level. Levels could be reduced on grounds as generic as "deteriorating behaviour," and the standard of our behaviour was determined largely by the opinions of our jailers. The jeopardy of Inside-Out always being taken from me created a permanent tension in my prison life; Inside-Out was the only meaningful activity I had access to during the two-year-plus period I was imprisoned in the max. There were countless weeks that I worried whether or not I would even be able to participate, let alone worrying about accessing the computers or having a safe space to study.

The actual course material never caused me stress, though I often found myself wishing that I was not involved in the program so that the prison would have nothing to constantly threaten me with. Still, readings and essays became my escape from prison reality; through Inside-Out I found a way to engage about issues that matter to me. I sat in many cells and read Freire and Foucault and felt in those moments connected to the world, not isolated, both physically and in ideas and beliefs. I continually regained confidence through Inside-Out courses. In hindsight, the contradiction of the confidence and social skills I was able to rebuild during class against the low self-worth, guardedness, and social anxieties I developed through time in max highlight how the living conditions of the max unit are entirely detrimental to human emotional and mental health. Being isolated, monitored, deprived of community, and constantly scrutinized and put down for so long was traumatic in a sense that I do not yet fully comprehend (it has presently been three months since I left max). I was extremely fortunate in my ability to use Inside-Out, aside from an opportunity to develop academically, as the tool with which I rebuilt and maintained some social skills and normalcy.

When I was finally pulled from completing my fourth course, although I was able to finish with a pass, I was devastated. This was the human rights course and it was unfortunately ironic that the only access to education that I had was being taken; that the staff would rather keep me on the unit and for all purposes — mentally and socially broken — than to be participating in a meaningful, productive social and academic experience. But such is the reality of the max unit. Such is the reality of the general attitude behind the

Canadian penal system. The Inside-Out program was and continues to be one of the only substantial opportunities available to women imprisoned at GVIW, let alone the max, and it is only available because of the prolonged determination of outside forces. Nothing similar has been developed within the institution; the majority of the women in max sit from periods of months to periods of years with absolutely nothing to do. The majority of us are not even eligible to participate. If there is any emotion expressed by an imprisoned person in max, let alone violence (which most women in max experience), the Inside-Out program would be not more than something one or two of the women's pod-mates left to do once weekly.

### *Inside-Out as a Stepping Stone*

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange program does and will continue to get nothing but support from me, but in praising it I will not let the system within which it exists be overshadowed. Long-term isolation is a difficult experience to express; I strongly urge anyone studying or interacting in the Canadian penal system to look at programs like Inside-Out as stepping stones away from the effects of isolation, and more generally as movement away from the development (or permanence) of a mass, industrialized imprisonment culture. Few know what women are sentenced to when shipped to any of Canada's maximum-security prisons, and I certainly did not foresee that such trauma could be inflicted upon me by the state, nor that a private organization could provide such a profound experience that my deterioration in max could be managed. I held onto the Inside-Out program for the majority of my imprisonment in the max as the reason and meaning by which I endured. Several peers of mine in max collapsed and became entirely institutionalized through the lack of dignity and opportunity we experienced, and many are still in max today as result. I do not doubt whatsoever that without my having had the ability to hang onto Inside-Out as I did, as a routine, as a source of hope for a potential future for myself, and as a healthy social setting, I too would have broken down long ago in that unit.

There is an abundance of literature on the benefits of imprisoned people studying, and surely as the Inside-Out program ages, bodies of literature will arise to support the effects of imprisoned people studying through the experiential form that the program provides. But the unfortunate reality is that in the majority of places where Inside-Out exists, the imprisoned people who could benefit the most deeply will not be institutionally supported to engage.

In Canada and in penal culture globally, there is increasing support for punitive systems. However a punitive system nearly broke me, and in sharing my experience I hope readers are imbued with the importance of programs like Inside-Out within these systems, if these systems must exist. The inclusion of maximum-security prisoners in the Inside-Out program was thankfully not overlooked at GVIW. Let it not be overlooked anywhere as the program expands and finds roots in the Canadian prison system.