

ON THE WALL: REFLECTIONS ON CLASS AND INCARCERATION

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of this term I often studied in the basement of Baker Library, emboldened by the colors of Orozco's mural, *The Epic Of American Civilization*. I like the space because of its walls, but also because of its silence. It is a safe container for my senses to come to rest and stew in its contents. I used this container to absorb a difficult subject: mass incarceration. I was studying incarceration as part of a class entitled "Telling Stories for Social Change," facilitated by Chilean-born artist and activist Pati Hernandez. A disciple of philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, Hernandez models critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy pairs reflective thought and action with theoretical study. The practice of integrating the two is known as "praxis."

Telling Stories for Social Change combines the theoretical work of radical thinkers such as Freire, Bell Hooks, Michel Foucault, and Angela Davis with a creative platform. The platform is a collaborative performance interweaving narrative with music, theater, poetry and testimonials. Developed by Hernandez over a 15-year period, the platform has become known as Telling My Story. For this class, Telling My Story partnered with the Sullivan County Correctional Facility in Claremont, NH, allowing Dartmouth students to work along-side inmates.

When I saw that the course was offered during my first semester in Dartmouth's Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program, it seemed like the perfect gateway into academia from my professional work. I tried to imagine what it would be like based on the description:

Our social structure is full of unseen, unspoken, and unheard dynamics. These hidden and irresponsible social behaviors have always contributed to the building of visible and invisible social walls. Behind these walls, a growing invisible population has

found a way to social visibility through addiction, violence, and crime. This course offers students the unique opportunity to collaborate with a group of people from behind those social walls from two distinct perspectives: theoretical and practical.

Something kept calling me to this course. The use of the word “walls” – and how it spoke to the process that had brought me to Dartmouth. It excited me as an explorer. I wanted to excavate the walls that framed my own known reality. Were they solid, like the foundation of Baker Library, radicalized by Orozco’s colorful visions? One of these visions, entitled *Modern Migration of the Spirit*, depicts a defiant, messianic figure that has molted to reveal a new, raw, sensing-self. In the act of rejecting his “destiny,” the oppressive ideas, institutions and systems that frustrate the emancipation of humanity are “relegated to the junk heap of history” (Baas 11).

How was I to know *Modern Migration of the Spirit* would serve as a blue print to remodel my reality through *Telling My Story*? Could I have sensed that my own “destiny” was surrounded by walls, built on the acceptance of oppressive ideas, institutions, and systems? Or more profoundly, that the emancipation of my own humanity could only manifest through a process of humanizing those around me?

INSTITUTIONS

In my work, I have been surrounded by striving idealists for the past decade. I was exhausted. Not by the work, but by the “scene.” A scene comprised of liberals co-opting the struggles of others for pats on the back. Using others as the silver lining to their work: a merit badge. Or by ever-so-clever art that frames honest, human experience as spectacle. Or by radical activism that fights for social causes because of the individual’s compulsion and perfectionism. Or by technical masters who use art to impress, rather than express. Tired of behavior that perpetuates the subordination of others by the creation of an upper hand; dichotomies such as “artists are special,” “only some are born with talent,” “few people have what it takes to be successful.” I needed a break from my work in social justice and the arts.

The idea to attend Dartmouth arose as I walked along a precipice on a southern Vermont trail. It started as a sensation that ascended from

my guts. My mind questioned where this impulse had come from. Why on earth would I do a liberal studies program? My application to grad school should have been a time of respite – sorely needed personal time. A time to reel in and map the parameters of my identity once more, and relocate where my individual contributions came from and came to rest. I had been surrounded by people who were project/product driven addicts, justifying their compulsion with a “cause” for too long. Couldn’t I just be a fighter fighting my own fight (for once)? But stronger than that consideration was an innocent desire: to broaden my social connectivity. Mainly, to traverse the cultural boundaries that separates the strata of “class.” Why? Because as an artist, I am paid by the highest class, yet I teach the middle class, but I live in the lowest class. Dartmouth seemed like the ideal environment to step outside of the collective brawl and articulate my fight. For some reason, I suspected the perfect environment for this would be a wealthy, traditional institution. Within the walls of the Ivory Tower. A place in which I had no experience.

It is quite a contradiction. Because, the institution I was coming from was the institution of poverty. I think of poverty as an institution because it is largely created and maintained by the cultural desires of the upper classes. Like an art museum. It is an establishment. Although it is hard to recognize in our country, we are functioning in a complex and invisible, “caste or apartheid system” (Meiners 16). In the words of Bell Hooks, “It is apparent that one of the primary reasons we have not experienced a revolution of values is that a culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial.” Hooks notes that this addiction is masked in mythology to hide, “the fact that capitalism requires the existence of a mass underclass of surplus labor.”

Raised in a trailer park near the automobile factories of Detroit, I have always been a card-carrying member of this underclass. But it is not an institution that you get accepted into, like Dartmouth. I had been pushed into the institution of poverty. Because as a girl, I had been pushed out of high school and pushed into adulthood, and as a single mother, pushed out the workplace and pushed into the welfare system. I always pushed back, but never thought that I would push my way out of the one institution that had consistently molded me. Consistently reinforced my “place.” Much like the reinforcement, security and predictability an Ivy-League institution can offer one’s future.

But the institution of poverty had not increased my capacity for connectivity. It is an isolating institution, because you are invisible to the people who created it. When admitted to this institution you feel hoodwinked by its creators. You are forced to recognize that you've been "kept" from higher education and encouraged to become a workhorse for another man's success. You are told its best to focus on your athleticism, or your looks, or finding a husband that can take care of you if you are not satisfied with the scant opportunities the institution offers. Invisible walls are built around you. Walls.

ADMITTANCE

Mainly, I enrolled in Telling Stories for Social Change, because I felt I had been wrongly admitted to the institution of poverty. I sensed this was related to incarceration. My ability to identify walls had brought me to Dartmouth. I was certain that by committing to the MALS program and Telling My Story course, I would spring board into higher levels of social connectivity. Yet, the first weeks of the course those old walls – stigma, limitation and judgment, were even more fortified. I was crashing up against them trying to makes sense of why I felt alien. I wrote:

Thursday was the first day I've had culture shock in a long while. Not because of the female inmates, but because of the difference between Claremont and Hanover. Sullivan County Correctional Facility and Dartmouth. Honestly I felt more comfortable with the women in the jail than I did on campus! I have never been in an environment like Dartmouth. Where Equestrian Teams and Boarding Schools and Weekend-Vacations- To-Warm-Places-During-The-Winter are norms. It is going to take a lot of getting used to (Denton, Week 1).

I was entering into a state of alterity – the sense of being radically alien to the self or a particular cultural orientation. A few weeks in, I noted:

I continued to feel like a fish out of water on Tuesday. When I am alone on the campus at Dartmouth, it seems like the

world is my oyster and I'm finally making strides towards legitimacy in my profession... being more connected... seeking truth through the commitment to my path. But as soon as I have any social interactions, I'm struck by such a strong "I" and "you," "us" and "them" barrage of feelings (Denton, Week 3).

The initial class readings were from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Bell Hook's *Teaching to Transgress*. My aggravated state was prodded by the texts, which highlighted polarizations of "oppressed/oppressor" and "black/white" and "feminist/patriarch." As a woman who has felt "kept" from the world, it was all too easy for me to identify with their "oppressed." But I could not swallow the work whole, noting:

In general, I dislike reading revolutionary texts. Those of the anarchists, socialists and radicals that deeply influenced the communities that made me. The social clans of my punk rock youth, my vagabond years, impressionable undergraduate at Goddard, and now, the lively crew of the Old North End in Burlington. It has always been intuitive for me to think along these lines, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Sharrow's ideas of deep listening and community, McIntosh's commitment to self-awareness and social sensitivity, but to read these things has been difficult for me in the past. Not difficult because it's too challenging in vocabulary or concepts, but difficult because words like "oppressed" and other strong language feel impractical or too jarring or confrontational to someone who identifies with the material. Me. Single Mother. Woman. Artist. Working Class. I don't or didn't or won't know where to start to escape the isolation that these words imply. And the intensity [suggests it is] the worst place to be – on the bottom. In these texts, it is made to seem like being poor is the ugliest thing one can be. Your days are devoid of any beauty or small acts of hope (Denton, Week 1).

I resented the suggestion that the constraints I had experienced growing up poor were of no value. That my experience of persevering through subjugation or alienation was devoid of worth. Quite honestly,

I value the adversity of home instability, food insecurity, an absent family, interrupted education and lack of opportunities. These circumstances enabled me to cultivate amazing inner resources – foremost, the development of the core of hope, optimism and resistance: IMAGINATION.

Where would I be without strength of imagination? I value this aspect of consciousness above anything else. In an essay from *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now*, NPR correspondent, Eric Weiner writes:

Imagination then is, in part, manifested in the act of seeing what is not yet there, speculating how it might come about, rewriting what has come before, and breaking through “the real;” it is thinking the improbable as possible, just as it is feeling, seeing, hearing, sensing, and doing that which is not supposed to be felt, saw, heard, sensed and done (Weiner 58).

Hadn’t the idea to attend Dartmouth arisen from my imagination in the first place? Did I intuit that this would be the setting that would allow me to break through “the real” that I felt held back by; break through walls created by oppressive ideas, institutions, and systems?

THE “OTHER”

One exercise we used in *Telling My Story* is called a “bombardment.” Seated in a circle, each individual was given undivided attention to say their piece. Given a prompt, each participant speaks without interruption, response or feedback. During a bombardment at the facility, the prompt was to name five things you like and five things you did not like. I was challenged by this session, because if the intention had been to recognize common themes in the responses, I felt:

Painfully aware of the disparity of experience between the prisoners and the students. The prisoners mainly spoke fondly of the things they missed and their present struggles, whereas most of the students could have come up with long lists of preferences that defined who they were. It almost felt embarrassing to hear about “traveling” and “yoga on the beach”, not because I don’t thoroughly enjoy these things – but they seemed like pretentious or inaccessible [past times] to the inmates. I’m afraid it might

arouse jealousy or worse, intimidation to bring these things up (Denton, Week 2).

I was not afraid of offending the inmates with the honesty of our responses, but I felt sensitive about mentioning things that would make their lives feel inferior. Claustrophobic. They were in a more vulnerable position than those of us coming from “the outside.” I had developed a chip-on-my-shoulder toward my fellow students that was so large it could have been a wall. I was annoyed that I was grouped with the Dartmouth students, and did not want to be judged by the same standards. I felt like they were bred and breeding a culture of elitism and those values were embodied regardless of their good nature. I was not cut of that cloth.

Commenting on the artificial boundaries of this insider/outside mentality, Hooks states in *Teaching to Transgress* that, “racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structures of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins” (Hooks 81). I was wary, thinking the ghosts of the patriarchs that designed our academic culture would haunt the circles we held at the facility. And that the societal differences would be too great to overcome to access a shared learning experience.

In an attempt to overcome this, I observed Hernandez’s masterful ability to disarm power-dynamics. To soothe intimidation and vulnerability, she advised us to simply “be presence.” I struggled in my attempts to emulate this because I felt like I had to do something. I argued:

Does being “presence” (to some extent) mean being silent? I don’t want to model silence. At least not all the time. Mainly when the inmates’ stories move and inspire me. Do I have to perpetuate the seesaw of power play by adopting silence due to the chance that I might be seen as oppressive, up on a pulpit of privilege? I really think that if we want to do away with the myth of interpersonal divisions then there has to be authenticity of sharing. Because maybe it is okay if “privilege” is revealed. Or lack thereof. Otherwise, it is a missed opportunity for connection that gets written about as an “interesting” social experiment/experience, because there wasn’t any true adherence, cohesion, identification (Denton, Week 4).

Over time, in my attempts to be “presence,” I was overcome by an awareness of a painful duality within. I could not tell if I was feeling it, experiencing it or witnessing it. If it came from inside or out. Freire articulates the duality:

The oppressed suffer from the duality, which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create in their power to transform the world (Freire 48).

In reading about this and maintaining “presence,” the giant chip-on-the-shoulder slowly softened. I had grown to regard the students as just as unfortunate as the inmates in how they experienced “freedom.” That “yoga on the beach” and “traveling” did not necessarily balance out the pressures of a competitive, market-driven culture. These students were considered “fortunate” and “gifted,” but didn’t have permission to enjoy the freedom that their privileges afforded them. They were constantly being pushed towards grander ideals of greatness. I was shifting into this lens where I began to see everyone around me as victims of a dark, dehumanizing system – capitalism. Contrary to my writings from the first couple weeks, I was no longer comforted by Freire’s straightforward divisions of hierarchical structure. The innocent “oppressed” and the corrupt “oppressors” felt like the same sort of deductive reasoning that builds and maintains the top-down hierarchies he complains of. Freire’s chip-on-the-shoulder toward the “rich and powerful” still paid homage to the myth that the rich and powerful “own” all our power. I had come to believe that the walls built around class, sex, and race, were only impassable because of a flawed buy-in system of belief that ALL of us are unwittingly buying into. Some

of us benefit from it unwittingly. Some of us benefit from it wittingly. And some of us suffer from it. Without wit.

IMAGINING THE REAL

I was frustrated with the creative process of *Telling My Story*, until the last couple weeks. During a brainstorming session for our performance “Strength in The Number Yellow,” one of the inmates in my cohort had a vision. She saw the image of an inmate standing behind a window. Although there were many things happening beyond the window, there was only a small opening through which she could see out. This was because full visibility was obscured by oppressive concepts blinding her perspective. The words “Manipulation,” “Deceit,” “Society,” “Loss,” “Anxiety,” and “Incarceration,” blocked the woman’s view of the world outside. The brilliant woman that presented this image, contextualized the concept further by saying that the inmate behind the window was the only one who could remove these blinders from her own perspective. She could practice to strip them away, piece by piece in hope of fully accessing the experiences of her own life.

Canadian physician and professor, Dr. Gabor Maté writes in his introduction to *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts*:

The mandala, the Buddhist Wheel of Life, revolves through six realms. Each realm is populated by characters representing aspects of human existence—our various ways of being. In the Beast Realm we are driven by basic survival instincts and appetites such as physical hunger and sexuality, what Freud called the Id. The denizens of the Hell Realm are trapped in states of unbearable rage and anxiety. In the God Realm we transcend our troubles and our egos through sensual, aesthetic or religious experience, but only temporarily and in ignorance of spiritual truth. Even this enviable state is tinged with loss and suffering. The inhabitants of the Hungry Ghost Realm are depicted as creatures with scrawny necks, small mouths, emaciated limbs and large, bloated, empty bellies. This is the domain of addiction, where we constantly seek something outside ourselves to curb an insatiable yearning for relief or fulfillment. The aching emptiness is perpetual because the substances, objects or pursuits we hope will soothe it are not what we really need. We don’t know what we need, and so long

as we stay in the hungry ghost mode, we'll never know. We haunt our lives without being fully present (Mate 1).

Our culture teaches us to idealize a higher status. We worship celebrity and wealth. But in doing that we are investing our power into a myth of power. We waste our power by displacing it outside of ourselves. Our culture cultivates power-hunger: addiction to domination and constant yearning, striving for something outside of ourselves that we don't even need. The image of someone as a ghost that haunts their own life is so powerful to me. Only when we are fully present are we liberated. The "rich and powerful" may have a wealth of resources, opportunities and social leverage, but it is not freedom. Or authenticity. Or joy. It is my personal belief that remaining neutral or making choices that result in oppression manifest as internalized anguish. Anxiety and fear. Therefore, people who stronghold power for their own self-interests, are plagued by these symptoms and unable to access the comfort we all believe wealth and power promise us.

In this sense, if we are to rethink/re-imagine the real by dissolving the illusions of this buy-in system, I am suggesting a place to start. Oppressed and oppressor alike, need to examine our idolization and aggrandizement of "the rich and powerful." By changing the assumption that being "rich and powerful" is superior, we can begin to accurately acknowledge our own self-worth. We will find that we are all powerful. We will recognize the power of humanity, outside these systems of classification that are based on quantity vs. quality, and contrived, artificial boundaries. We will find our own true agency in interconnectedness. But, to do this there needs to be a commitment to abolishing our culture "of lying and denial." From any standpoint, we must reclaim truth by refusing to give power to the mythmakers and stakeholders of this system of deceit. We must instead invest belief into one another by refusing the tenements of capitalism – status, wealth, competition and domination.

Freire reminds us that, "Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in an ivory tower isolation, but only in communication." Telling My Story has taught me that two of the most powerful tools we can use for this are within our power – communication and imagination. Through authentic communication with the inmates, I was able to access deep, new learning. The woman that envisioned the inmate behind the window enabled me to tear down some blinders

that were keeping me from fully accessing the experiences of my own life. Weiner articulates my process in *Crisis of The Imagination*:

Constructing a new critical imaginary is about rejecting the imperatives of realism. This is different than embracing fantasy; rejecting the imperative of realism – rewriting the categories of the real – means on one hand, questioning the very epistemological foundation upon which our most cherished social and political assumptions rest, while on the other hand, developing new categories from which to design new theoretical models of thought and action. This process requires a rewriting/renewing/reviving of our epistemological imaginations; only from this activity can we begin to radically intervene into the fetish of realism; a fetish which reduces imagination to the practice of escape (Weiner 58).

For me, liberation would not come in the form of immunity. Or invincibility. Escape from poverty. Or a master's degree. It would come from imagination – a great source of strength for the endurance needed to break through the walls of “the real” over and over and over again.

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