Romanticism Behind Bars: An Inside-Out Poetry Workshop

Elizabeth Effinger[[1]](#footnote-2)

“The pedagogy of community-based learning, when done with great care and integrity, has the power to turn things inside-out and upside-down for those engaged in it. It provokes one to think differently about the world, and consider one’s relationship to the world in a new way” — Lori Pompa, “Drawing Forth,” 24

“The ability to read critically the messages that society, politics, and culture bombards us with is, more than ever, needed training in a society in which the manipulation of minds and hearts is increasingly what running the world is all about” — Peter Brooks, *The Humanities and Public Life*, 2

For years, I have walked my dog along a winding, picturesque trail that hugs a quiet section of the Grand River in Kitchener, Ontario (Canada). Along this trail two institutions enter into view: the city’s wastewater treatment facility, and Canada’s newest and largest federal women’s prison, the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI). While Canadians might remember this prison as the place that housed convicted serial killer Karla Holmolka, the GVI has been increasingly garnering attention for its internal troubles, such as the case of Ashley Smith, an inmate who in 2007 took her own life while under watch of multiple correctional officers — a story that received national media coverage — and the 2016 death of Terry Baker, another incarcerated woman at the GVI.

On these walks, I have often thought about Foucault’s remarks on heterotopic spaces, for surely it is symbolic that the site selected for the new prison was near the waste facility.[[2]](#footnote-3) But it was on one particular summer stroll, while I was thinking about Romantic poetry, that I found myself wondering about the other insidious proximities that marked our spaces. Standing on the trail, looking at the prison that was jarringly framed through both the green canopy of the forest and the dull grey barbed wire and chain-link fence, what came into focus was the uneasy silence in which these two radically different spaces co-existed. Questions pressed me: Where were the continuities between our spaces? In what ways were we all — perhaps with the exception of my dog, now splashing about in the river — suffering from what Blake famously called our “mind-forg’d manacles” (Erdman 27)? Could the incarcerated women see the woods? What did nature mean to them? What place, if any, did nature have in prison? Did they look at the woods or perhaps even the walking trail as Coleridge might have in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”? What place, if any, did poetry have in their lives while in prison? These questions stuck with me. That moment became the germ behind a community-based experiential learning assignment that I developed for an undergraduate Nineteenth-Century British Literature course, a year-long, third-year survey class for English majors. In what follows, I describe the planning, development, and execution of the assignment before turning to a consideration of how community-based learning (CBL) initiatives, such as this one, activate the potential of three growing, but currently separate, sympathetic discourses within Romantic scholarship: the public humanities, the discourse of care, and the prison narrative.[[3]](#footnote-4) As a pedagogy that connects the classroom and the community, while recognizing them as mutually informing bodies aimed at making a positive difference, CBL offers community partners access to a greater, engaged audience committed to social and community awareness and action, and offers students and scholars of Romanticism an expanded sense of how our field can make a positive difference in building communities when we turn our work inside out.

In February 2016, I facilitated a one-day poetry workshop, held in a classroom at the GVI. Modelled, in part, on the Walls to Bridges program (W2B), a Canadian program rooted in the pedagogic principles of the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the project involved bringing together incarcerated (or “inside”) students and thirteen university (“outside”) students from my Nineteenth-Century British Literature course at Huron University (London, Ontario) in order to create a brief but meaningful exchange between these different student bodies. In fact, one of the challenges in designing this activity was thinking about the outcomes for not only my own students, but the incarcerated students, too.

I learned through my research and early discussions with the education director of the GVI and the staff of the Walls to Bridges program that this workshop would be meaningful for the inside students because education programming enhances prisoner wellbeing, including their mental health and personal growth (Davis *et al* 2013; Duguid and Pawson 1998; Lockwood *et al* 2012; Sokoloff and Schenck-Fontaine 2017, Vacca 2004). Moreover, the benefits to their wellbeing extend beyond the prison walls, as exchanges between inside and outside students expose both groups to a multiplicity of perspectives and help challenge preconceptions. Through these thoughtful exchanges, the outside students may come to rethink their positions on crime and the prison-industrial complex. Education initiatives also contribute to the health of the prison system; it gains new learning opportunities for its inmates, who benefit from creative expression and collective scholarly discussion, which allows them to experience their voices as meaningfully engaged with non-incarcerated voices. Finally, in practical ways, educational activities may positively impact plans for release and reintegration, as participation demonstrates the inside students’ ability to self-regulate, collaborate, and work both independently and with a diverse group of others. Participation in education programming, including workshops like this one, may thus support future job possibilities or entry into higher education programs (Tewksbury and Stengel 2006). With a clear sense, then, of how this workshop could contribute to the public good, we began.

The outside students were mostly third- and fourth-year English majors in their early twenties. Few had ever participated in community-based learning projects, and none had ever visited a prison or jail or had conversations with incarcerated peoples. As in-class discussions prior to our workshop revealed, their understandings and expectations of prison were largely shaped by media representations, including popular tele-series like *Orange is the New Black*. Conversely, the inside students were drawn from the medium- and maximum-security units of the prison and ranged in ages from early twenties to thirties. They had spent varying durations of time (some in months, others in years) in both provincial and federal prisons from across the country for sentences, including life-sentences, pertaining to drugs, violence, and murder. They had varying degrees of education among them; some were working on obtaining their high-school diploma, others were taking university courses either in-person through W2B or online through other institutions, and one woman already had an undergraduate degree with plans towards graduate-level work. Mostly, their experiences with university courses were rooted in the social sciences, unlike the literature-based background of the outside students. However, what might be the most pragmatic difference between these inside and outside participants was the (in)accessibility to the internet. While outside students readily make use of the internet – a quick trip to Google or Wikipedia – as a way to help decipher a text, no such an opportunity exists for incarcerated peoples in Canadian provincial and federal prisons. This meant that the close readings that the incarcerated women shared with the class during the workshop were entirely their own – a fact not lost on the outside students, many of whom admitted on the bus ride back to campus that they felt deeply humbled by the insightful observations and comments made by the inmates. More on that bus ride later.

While the prison workshop itself was brief, preparations were months in the making and essential to its success. Photocopies of the poems to be discussed were shared with the inside students prior to the workshop. Both inside and outside students read, in advance, the same selection of Romantic poems that treat the prison as experience or metaphor. As I explained in some introductory remarks before we launched into a discussion of the texts, many Romantic writers were intensely concerned with questions of freedom, authority, social injustices, resistance and revolution. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité!* While some writers themselves spent time behind bars or had brushes with the (in)justice system (cf. Thelwall, Blake, Helen Maria Williams, the Lambs, De Quincey, Shelley), others were drawn to the imaginative space of the prison as a way of exploring various states of confinement (cf. Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Byron, Coleridge).[[4]](#footnote-5)

While sitting in a circle (a formation designed to bring all students face-to-face with one another), we completed creative writing exercises, critically discussed the texts at hand, and shared our reflective responses to the work with one another. The very act of sharing responses with the group was intended to help mark the emergence of a reflective space, emphasizing the role that literature can play in the creation of community. A more detailed description of the assignment follows in the subsequent sections.

In the planning-stage of the project, I consulted with both community and campus partners: the prison’s Education Director and the program coordinators from the Walls to Bridges Collective (W2BC), which is a think tank based in Wilfrid Laurier University’s Faculty of Social Work that since 2011 has offered university-based programming at the GVI.[[5]](#footnote-6) Emailing with the W2BC was essential to first determine if there was interest among the incarcerated women for such a collaboration. I secured funding from the RBC Foundation and Willie May & William H. Lumpkin Community-Based Learning Grant, which covered the cost of transportation to and from the prison and refreshments for the event. Teresa Hubel, then Chair of Huron University’s English Department, generously supplied workshop materials for the incarcerated students, which the women were able to keep. Finally, all workshop participants from the university were required to complete a background check a few months prior to the visit before being granted permission to participate. Like all visitors at the GVI, our class was subject to a security screening, much like in an airport. Photo IDs were scrutinized and hands were swabbed for drugs (a major security concern).

While it was a mandatory assignment for the outside students, it was strictly voluntary for those on the inside. Many of the inside students had prior experience in a classroom setting with university students, while others simply had a general interest in poetry and creative writing. For the outside students, this assignment consisted of three parts: (1) attendance and participation at the GVI; (2) participation in a post-workshop discussion back at the university; and (3) a formal, written reflection on the workshop to submitted at the end of term, as part of the final exam. The final assignment sheet can be found below in “Appendix A.” This assignment was designed to be an opportunity to include CBL opportunities for students within the parameters of a traditional literature survey course. This was not a specialized course exploring the campus-community connection, nor was it focused on Romantic prison writings – although, of course, this project would be at home in such courses. Instead, my goal was to design a CBL-component in the traditional literature survey course, as a way of exploring how individual projects can make connections between the classroom and the community. After all, this is part of the challenge many instructors perceive in making course material relevant to students beyond the classroom and in other areas of their lives.

In the prison classroom, students sat in a circle, in keeping with the circle pedagogy central to both Canada’s W2B program and the US Inside-Out program. Within the circle, each student is equal and has a shared responsibility in the life of the class, while the instructor serves as group facilitator and shares, like everyone else, in the learning process.[[6]](#footnote-7) However, outside the circle, my role in the outside classroom was more formal; I delivered a lecture-discussion on the history of incarceration and penal reform throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and assigned selections from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Bentham’s *Panopticon*, and Elizabeth Fry’s *Observations in Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners*.[[7]](#footnote-8) This helped establish a general movement away from prisons as disorderly places in the eighteenth century toward orderly and strictly regulated places by the mid-nineteenth century. Such knowledge would further enhance our visit to a twenty-first century prison.

I also prepared my students by lecturing on the politics of incarceration and the role of prison-based educational programming in Canada. For the outside students, whose exposure to incarceration was virtually non-existent, it was important to stress that incarceration in Canada differs from that in the United States (where most of the media representations of prisons are based). In Canada, there is what Simone Weil Davis calls “the blistering and tragic scale of criminalization and overincarceration of Indigenous people,” a group which alone makes up 23% of Canada’s prison population, though in some provinces Indigenous peoples make up between 90-98% of the population in jails and prisons (Davis, “Beyond ‘Replication’” 259-60). In Canadian federal prisons, educational programs are understood to “facilitate inmates’ reintegration by increasing educational skill levels through the provision of accredited programs.”[[8]](#footnote-9) While Adult Basic Education (grades 1 to 12) is Correctional Service Canada’s educational priority, additional education programs are available, including Additional Language Programs, Adapted Education Programs, and General Educational Development. Prisoners have access to post-secondary education programs, in most cases through paper-based correspondence with an accredited university, college or CEGEP, and normally pay the costs themselves, although the institution may cover some or all of the cost of education.[[9]](#footnote-10) However, the mid-1990s in both the US and Canada saw government cutbacks and program closures to postsecondary educational opportunities for incarcerated peoples.[[10]](#footnote-11)

While there are differences between the Canadian W2B program and the American Inside-Out models, what is common to both is the semi-anonymous space of the incarcerated classroom:[[11]](#footnote-12) students use only first names and are prohibited from communicating outside of the course or workshop. “It is important,” notes Lori Pompa, founder and director of Inside-Out, “that outside participants are not studying their incarcerated classmates; they are not serving in a counselling or teaching or advising capacity” toward the incarcerated students, nor are they privy to the details or circumstances surrounding their incarceration (“Breaking Down the Walls” 257).

The three-hour workshop at the GVI consisted of two clusters of activities. First, we performed a number of short creative writing ice-breaker exercises that were linked to the readings and topics at hand. For example, one activity was to collectively write a story through a spoken word-chain (where one person says a word, and the next person says the first word that comes into their mind as quickly as possible) — an exercise designed to create group cohesion through sharing, but also to show language and storytelling as spaces of freedom. Students were encouraged to say any word that came to mind — a task that proved to be very challenging. Another activity was timed writing, which involved students writing for three minutes without stopping (then two minutes, then one minute), each time beginning with a single word as their inspiration or writing prompt. Inside and outside students took turns selecting the words. One word in particular, “window,” produced many moving creative reflections from the students, even a short poem. After each exercise ended, students were encouraged to share their writing out loud with the group. The incarcerated women were consistently the first volunteering to share, and their contributions were enthusiastic, reflective, self-expressive, and respectful.

The second activity was an informal discussion of a few short poems from the Romantic period, a period that, as John Bugg notes, saw the rise and reform of prisons throughout Europe, and that subsequently gave birth to the genre of prison literature (50). One week prior to the workshop, all inside and outside students received a handout with the texts to be discussed. These poems, which were selected by my class, included Anna Barbauld’s “The Mouse’s Petition” (1773), William Blake’s “London” (1794), John Thelwall’s “The Cell” (1795), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797), and Dorothy Wordsworth’s “Thoughts on My Sick-Bed” (1832). These poems treated the prison as an experience or a metaphor, drawing on themes of enclosure, confinement, and solitude in various senses (intellectual, emotional, political, as well as physical). While some of these texts treated these conditions or states in positive terms, as necessary conditions for artistic, creative expression, others framed them as oppressive architectures of power and obstacles to change.

Students collectively shared their personal responses to these texts and made intertextual connections between them. We all shared a laugh when one inside student commented on how “whiny” Coleridge sounded as he complained about his lime-tree bower. He wouldn’t have lasted, quipped another inside student, a single day in the GVI.[[12]](#footnote-13) Conversation gravitated toward the major common threads within these poems, such as the positive influence of nature and the importance of the imagination. The incarcerated students described their own strained relationships with the natural world. A number of women spoke candidly about their combined efforts to save food to feed the squirrels and rabbits that breach the prison fences. Indeed, one inside woman, who admitted to being envious of animals’ freedom to cross the barbed-wire fence, reminded me of the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor* who laments the beauty and freedom of the swan flying overhead while he remains mired in the “wide and melancholy waste” (273). Another incarcerated woman spoke of her attempt to save and germinate apple seeds in her cell as a way of bringing beauty and life into an inhospitable environment (they were removed by the prison guards during a raid). Beyond reflections on nature, another incarcerated student shared how one of the poems we read, Dorothy Wordsworth’s “Thoughts on My Sick-Bed,” spoke to her own feelings of loneliness as well as the freedom afforded by her memories.

At the conclusion of the workshop, inside students admitted that while they were not frequent readers of poetry (preferring mostly self-help books), they had enjoyed the poems and they might seek out poetry in the future.[[13]](#footnote-14) Outside students participated in a debriefing of the workshop in the class following the event. Back in the university classroom, outside students were asked to evaluate themselves, specifically their engagement and performance within the experience, and to share their insights and observations with the class. Numerous outside students described how the space of the incarcerated classroom quickly felt familiar, and how jarring it was to be reminded at various points, such as when an alarm went off, that they were inside a prison. Some outside students confessed to feeling somewhat shadowed by the depth and intensity of the inside students’ comments and readings of the poems. One outside student shared that she felt emotionally overwhelmed by their stories. One student later wrote on course evaluations that this experience was the highlight of their entire undergraduate education.

I suspected this post-workshop debriefing would produce these kinds of responses, for what was a very energetic, boisterous bus ride from the university to the prison was, on the hour-long drive back, a very quiet ride. When asked about why they were so quiet, my students said that they were processing the experience. Some said they were frustrated that the experience was so short and had wanted more time to talk with the incarcerated women. One student shared that she was holding back tears at multiple points throughout the workshop, upset over the inside women’s lack of freedom. Many students expressed feeling guilty over being able to leave the prison with the knowledge that their new classmates could not. All outside students agreed that their expectations changed.

My goal in designing this experiential activity was to recast Romantic poetry and inject it with new life and new lives, by bringing this poetry into meaningful connection with a greater public beyond the parameters of the traditional university classroom. Could there be a way to reduce not only the historical distance between our present and the Romantic past, but also the more challenging distance between the discourse and experience of incarceration? At its heart, this was a project about collapsing distances. If Romantic poetry about incarceration seemed doubly removed, discussing it in a prison classroom with currently incarcerated individuals helped make this poetry more accessible. For instance, the incarcerated women shared that in important ways their current conditions were not those facing Romantic prisoners. Their cells were not as Thelwall describes his in “The Cell,” with its “damp foul floor, the ragged wall / And shattered window, grated high” (5-6).[[14]](#footnote-15) And yet, for as physically different as Romantic and present-day prisons are, the incarcerated women were quick to connect with the poem’s “Patriot” (2), who within the “noxious gloom” (1) is still able to “smile” (4) because of his memories, as he “Looks inward to his heart and sees / The objects that must ever please” (13-14). While outside students immediately read the poem’s “Patriot” as a political prisoner, having learned about the French Revolution in the early weeks of our course, one incarcerated woman thoughtfully offered a different reading of the word “patriot,” as someone who fights for what they believe in. The challenge of incarceration, she explained, is to remain a patriot, that is, to stay committed to those things worth fighting for, such as freedom, without losing hope. Many of the women spoke about the importance of returning to their memories as a critical way of managing their mental health and personal wellbeing while serving their sentences.

During the workshop, I asked the group to think about what today’s equivalent of “The Cell” might be, in light of these historical differences. The incarcerated women insisted that if written today, Thelwall’s poem would refer to the biggest problems of the prison industrial complex: overcrowding, interpersonal violence, lack of supports for mental health, and administrative segregation (otherwise known as solitary confinement). This discussion in particular emphasized the continuity between these historical moments; deplorable conditions and methods persist albeit in different forms. For those of us from the outside, the discussions that followed from this poem made us aware of a different kind of insidious dampness behind the exterior walls of a modern penal institution with its manicured landscaping, well-maintained parking lot, and friendly correctional officers’ faces.

Admittedly, this workshop was a mere toe-dip into the deep waters of inside-out learning, but it gave me a sense of what a more sustained engagement could accomplish. The project has also opened doors for undergraduate students: one outside student who actively participated in the workshop accepted a meaningful summer research assistantship at Huron University where she worked to develop future community-based learning (CBL) opportunities. In September 2016, she travelled on behalf of the university to Norway to research potential international CBL-partnerships.

Beyond this one individual student success story, the hope and biggest payoff of this kind of learning is to trigger, as Pompa puts it, “a new way of seeing the world, in which everyone involved shares an opportunity to work through their stereotypes and myths” (257), and to which I would add *and recognizes the importance of the humanities in building bridges across institutions and communities*. The transformative pedagogical work of W2B and Inside-Out, and the linkages they create between the university and the prison, raise larger questions and new perspectives through which to cross-examine each institutional body. Is there a way to see their various crises as interlinked? For example, at a time when prisons are increasingly faced with growing populations, and humanities programs and classrooms the inverse trend, how might these two bodies in “crisis” speak *positively* to one another?[[15]](#footnote-16) Indeed, prisons and universities might benefit from a more sustained thinking about the impact of humanities programming in the reduction of recidivism and in thoughtfully informing policies and processes around segregation and reintegration. After all, the number of complaints from incarcerated women at the GVI has dramatically increased (139%) within the last three years. Canada’s federal Correctional Investigator, Howard Sapers, received 344 complaints from the GVI in 2015-2016, a number that comprises nearly 41 percent of complaints from federally incarcerated women in all of Canada.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Romanticists are increasingly thinking through the relationship between classrooms and communities, and with good reason.[[17]](#footnote-18) The payoff of community-based learning, such as that modelled in the W2B, Inside-Out and public humanities movements, is contributing to the public good, and to expand the range and impact of academic discussions beyond the parameters of the campus classroom. Yet one critique levelled against community-based learning is precisely on the grounds of this paternalistic drive to be helpful to the community Other (Mitchell 2008). Intentionally by design, this workshop was not curative; it was not aimed at healing individuals or the incarcerated community. In keeping with the spirit of W2B and Inside-Out, the workshop was “*not* about helping, researching, or mentoring incarcerated students; the pedagogical foundation is collaborative learning in which all students are equal carriers of knowledge” (Pollack “Building Bridges” 504). This, however, is not to deny the palliative experiences of this kind of learning, facilitated by our conversations of Romantic poetry. Indeed, as Nyki Kish notes, in reference to her experience of taking a W2B course while locked up in the GVI’s maximum security unit, there is “a healing quality to the circle setting” (Freitas, McAuley and Kish 308). In the class circles, Kish continues:

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. (308)

Helping incarcerated peoples to find their voices is often cited as a desired outcome of prison writing programs. Lisa Rhodes, reflecting on her time spent mentoring prisoners through Pen America’s Prison Writing Mentorship, sees writing as “the catharsis to help them [prisoners] through their struggles” (164). North of the border, Sylvie Frigon describes the goal of the creative writing prison workshops developed by the Ontario Francophone Authors Association as providing “les voies/voix de la fiction” (129; *the paths/voice of fiction*) to inmates in Québec prisons by publishing their texts on the outside. Writing is frequently framed as offering prisoners both a space for self-expression and a vehicle for reconnection to both the outside world and the self. Indeed, research specifically supports the impact of arts and writing programs on prisoners’ lives. In 2014, Larry Brewster studied projects modeled after the Arts-In-Corrections (AIC) program in four California state prisons and measured changes in attitude and behavior of inmates participating in a 12-week arts program (poetry, writing, theatre, visual arts). There was a positive correlation between participation in the arts programming and improved time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, emotional control and self-confidence, among others. The study also found a reduction in disciplinary reports and a greater participation in other academic programming. Thus, we can speak of education’s palliative work in the prison, and also more specifically of the arts.

What was interesting to learn, however, was that this experience was positive not only for the inside students but those outside as well, and this largely rested on how this learning happened. As students told me during our post-workshop discussion, they thought it was the larger experience of sitting in a circle, collaboratively working with new classmates from such different lived realities as them, listening to first-hand experiences of incarceration, and having intense discussions over the shared content that made it so meaningful. For me, their answers raised some more questions: what role, then, did these particular poems play in creating this experience? What if it had been a different genre?[[18]](#footnote-19) And how did the fact that it was a one-time, intense but fleeting experience shape students’ impressions? What was the relationship here between the workshop’s content and form?

I suspect that the fact that the poems were about incarceration helped shift the perceived authority in the space of the prison classroom away from the outside students toward the inside students. In giving the incarcerated women the lead in our discussions, in having the outside students listen to their responses to the historical differences and continuities of the incarcerated experience from the Romantic period to the present day, everyone in the room was learning with and from one another. More than anything, Romantic poetry ultimately served as the conduit for more profound learning outcomes: first, through these conversations, the outside students confronted their preconceptions about prisoners as dangerous, uneducated, inarticulate, and uninterested in poetry; and second, the outside students gained literary insights from the prisoners, as “the potential objects of knowledge in those jail classrooms (e.g. prisoners) become subjects of literary study” (Wiltse 21). In coming to recognize how they learned about the Romantics with and from the prisoners in these intellectual discussions about literature (rather than the other way around), I am pleased to think that my students experienced a positive disruption to their preconceptions about their sense of privilege and the flow of knowledge in their encounters with groups and communities beyond the campus. Thus, I came away from the experience thinking in broader ways about how formal or structural changes to pedagogy can shape our relationship to the content in profound ways. In this sense, the experience of teaching Romantic poetry in the prison classroom contributed to my own pedagogical wellbeing; it opened me up to thinking about new spaces and configurations for teaching within the humanities.

Increasingly the mission of the humanities is an outward-looking one: a key objective of public humanities initiatives is “to cultivate a renewed spirit of citizenship and engagement through arts and humanities research and collaboration,”[[19]](#footnote-20) an objective deeply rooted in the Romantic ideals of *Bildung*. Similarly, the revaluation of Schiller’s concept of aesthetic education is at the heart of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s hope for the socially engaged humanities. We, who practice and study within the humanities, need to become, as Peter Brooks puts it in *The Humanities and the Public Life*, “less modest, and to stake a claim to the public importance of our task” (2). Tellingly, Brooks turns to a Romantic poet to sharpen his point: “Shelley was not entirely wrong to insist that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind: Cultural change carries everything in its wake” (2). Community-based learning projects, whether on a micro- or macro-scale, have the potential to transform and reinvigorate all those involved: faculty, students, community partners, research, activism, poetry and its publics.

This workshop attempted to create an academic and experiential learning opportunity that would foster a greater kind of civically engaged wellbeing. As Shoshana Pollack, coordinator of the national W2B program argues, workshops and courses that cultivate an exchange between inside and outside learners help to “dispel stereotypes, create a sense of connection and community across perceived differences, and cultivate a drive for social action, both within the criminal justice system and in the wider community” (517). There is a place for the enmeshed academic and experiential study of Romanticism, and it can contribute to the enhanced personal development of all co-learners, inside and out.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Assignment: Final Reflection on Prison Poetry Workshop**

Format: typed, double-spaced (approx. 2000 words)

Weight: 15%

Due: at the start of the final exam.

This term we participated in a new community-based learning (CBL) project. Its aim was the creation of a brief but meaningful exchange between different bodies of students: the “inside” students (the inmates of the Grand Valley Institution for Women) and the “outside” students (Huron University students). Modelled, in part, on the Walls to Bridges Program (a Canadian program rooted in the pedagogic principles of the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program), this project involved a one-day visit to the GVI, and a collaborative classroom dialogue between Inside-Out students.

You are being evaluated in three ways, two of which you have already completed: (1) participation during the inside-out visit; (2) participation in an in-class discussion following the visit; and (3) a written, reflective response to the visit, to be submitted as part of the final exam. As with the other two parts of this project, successful students will be attentive, reflective, thoughtful, and critically engaged with their own experience with this CBL workshop.

**The Task**

This final reflection requires you to reflect on the prison poetry workshop at the GVI at greater length and detail on your thoughts, impressions, and to make critical connections between your experience and course material. You will be evaluated based on the professionalism, thoroughness, and demonstrated effort and engagement of your answers.

Please answer the following questions in your final reflection. While you do not have to answer these questions in order, your reflection must address them all.

1. Briefly describe the event.
2. What were your expectations of this workshop? Did they change after the workshop?
3. What did you hope to gain by participating in it?
4. What is the one thing that you were most interested in learning during the workshop?
5. Before this experience, what kinds of experience did you have in the areas of (a) community-based learning, or (b) prison-outreach?
6. What is your definition of experiential learning?
7. How did the community partners (the GVI, the inside students) enhance student learning?
8. What is your impression of experiential learning?
9. What were some of the challenges that you encountered?
10. What was your favourite part of most meaningful part of the workshop? Why?
11. What was your least favourite part? Why?
12. Describe your level of engagement at all stages of this project. Briefly describe the opportunities you had to play an active role in the formation of the project. What was your participation like during the workshop and in our follow-up class discussion?
13. Describe your feelings about participating in this workshop. What were your feelings going into this? Why do you think you felt that way? Try your best to give a detailed self-analysis of your feelings before and after the workshop.
14. What are some ways that this CBL project, and the larger CBL program at Huron, could be improved?
15. How do you see this workshop connecting with the coursework? What specific texts or readings resonated with this project? (hint: make connections)
16. What were some of the critical issues, concepts, or topics that we examined during the workshop?
17. In your opinion, how might community-based learning projects, such as ours, cause improvements within our communities?

1. Thanks to Simone Davis, Randell Duguid, Shoshana Pollack, Peter Stuart, the Walls to Bridges Collective, the incarcerated women of GVI who participated in the workshop, and my students of English 3444E. Thanks to Teresa Hubel and the English Department at Huron University, Catharine Dishke Hondzel and the RBC Foundation and the Willie May & William H. Lumpkin Community-Based Learning Grant for financial support that made this workshop possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. On the concept of “heterotopia” see Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. On discourses of care, see Sara Guyer, *Romanticism After Auschwitz* (2007), and Brittany Pladek, “‘Soothing Thoughts’: Romantic Palliative Care and the Poetics of Relief,” *European Romantic Review* 23.3 (2012): 403-413. On Romantic incarceration see, for example, John Bugg, *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* (2014); Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* (2012); and, extending into the longer nineteenth century, Jason Haslam, *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives* (2005). See my note 15 on Romanticism and the public humanities. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. In the future, I imagine teaching an entire course on Romantic imprisonment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Walls to Bridges understands itself as creating “collaborative and innovative learning communities within correctional settings.” For more information visit their website: <http://wallstobridges.ca> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For a more detailed rationale of the use of circle pedagogy in Inside-Out, see Lori Pompa’s “Drawing Forth, Finding Voice, Making Change: Inside-Out Learning as Transformative Pedagogy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Later in the course, we also read Dickens’s *A Visit to Newgate* and selections from Wilde’s *De Profundis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Commissioner’s Directive <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/acts-and-regulations/720-cd-eng.shtml#s2g> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Canadian inmates do not pay the cost of postsecondary education if there is a federal or provincial arrangement to provide these programs within the institution, or if the Institutional Head of the prison finds that these criteria are met: 1) the educational costs are within the budget limits; 2) the inmate meets the criteria set out by the Ministry of Education; 3) the program is a priority in the inmate’s Correctional Plan; and 4)the program is from a recognized and accredited post-secondary institution. See sections 28 and 29 of the Commissioner’s Directive: <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/acts-and-regulations/720-cd-eng.shtml#s2g> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Since the mid-1990s, federal and state prisoners have been denied access to Pell grants, which provide funding for post-secondary education. In 2015, under the Obama Administration, the Department of Education launched the Second Chance Pell pilot program, which sees the return of financial assistance for incarcerated individuals pursuing higher education. In Canada, government cutbacks in the mid-1990s closed the University of Victoria (later Simon Fraser University) prison postsecondary education program in British Columbia. For a history of the this program in Canada, see Stephen Duguid’s *Can Prisons Work?,* chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. On the differences between Walls to Bridges and Inside-Out, see Simone Weil Davis’s essay, “Beyond ‘Replication’.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Although it didn’t come up during that discussion, in retrospect I think this would have been an opportune moment to discuss the intersection of race, class, and privilege, and the distances that exist between the lived carceral experience and the prison as metaphor. Future iterations of this project might tease out the connections between the horrors of slavery and incarceration and include selections from Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Since then, I was invited back to facilitate poetry workshops at the GVI. I co-directed a subsequent project, titled *Erasing Frankenstein*, a collaborative poetic adaptation of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* created by incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals from the Walls to Bridges Collective at the GVI and university students at UNB. For more, visit www.erasingfrankenstein.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For a photographic tour of the Grand Valley Institution for Women, including images of administrative segregation, see <http://kitchener.ctvnews.ca/in-pictures/inside-the-grand-valley-prison-for-women-1.3602398> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. I emphasize *positively*, for there are already unhealthy relationships between higher education and prisons, such as the financial investments of American universities with the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group, two major private prison operators in the United States. In 2015, *CNN* reported that as the result of a successful student-activist campaign, Columbia University became the first university in the United States to announce its divestiture from these private prison companies (Chan). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Catherine Thompson, “Complaints skyrocket at Grand Valley women’s prison” *Waterloo Region Record* Nov. 4, 2016. <http://www.therecord.com/news-story/6948432-complaints-skyrocket-at-grand-valley-women-s-prison/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. To name just a few scholars doing this work, see Julie Ellison, Founding Director of *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, and co-author of “Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University”; Joshua Lambier, Program Director of The Public Humanities at Western; and Sara Guyer, who developed “Public Romanticism and the Public Humanities,” a graduate seminar that she describes as a first-step toward a full-scale graduate certificate in the Public Humanities. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. I would go on to explore this question in a subsequent collaboration also at the GVI, *Erasing Frankenstein*, in which we discussed Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. This is a key objective of the Public Humanities at Western project. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)