Chapter 1

THE HARMS OF INCARCERATION AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIALITY OF ART

Reflections from Experiential Knowledge

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"Always create from what you already have," writes Michel Foucault.[1] How fitting for the artistic work done through *Erasing Frankenstein*: a project through which a group of unlikely collaborators came together to erase the words of Mary Shelley's classic novel. *Erasing Frankenstein* is a project carried out by individuals occupying traditionally disparate spaces: prisons and classrooms. Collaborating across distance, we formed a group called the Erasing Frankenstein Collective—comprised of incarcerated and non-incarcerated members of the Walls to Bridges Collective, a renowned educational collective housed in Ontario's federal penitentiary designated for women, the Grand Valley Institution for Women, in partnership with students from the University of New Brunswick. Our goal was to apply the method of erasure poetry to the words Shelley published first in 1818, with each participant volunteering to erase a few pages of the novel. From the spaces that remained we

made art, and from that art grew possibility. Indeed, by this endeavour, we sought not just to transform *Frankenstein*: we saw an opportunity to address the wide conceptual gaps in social understandings of crime, punishment, and place.

I had the pleasure of being invited to participate in this project as a member of the Walls to Bridges Collective, as one of the incarcerated participants. But prior and subsequent to my involvement in this project I have led a life defined in many ways by prisons, and by efforts to reduce the harms they cause. I spent my first twenty years like so many people do: having little knowledge about the state of incarceration in Canada. It was only after being shaken, in the early 2000s, by experiencing first-hand the deplorable conditions in the Vanier Centre, a provincial prison in Ontario, that I was confronted with a hidden yet pervasive social problem: the Canadian prison system. There, I experienced the systemic and systematic deprivation of the human spirit for no purpose. Shocked that there were not even books for individuals to read, I founded a grassroots program in my hometown of Hamilton, Ontario, called Books to Bars.[2] Books to Bars worked to gather a range of literature (critical, scholarly, classics poetry, even children's books) in local coffee shops and pubs, to be donated to libraries in prisons and jails in Ontario. The effort was embraced not only by Hamilton's lively arts and activist cultures, but also by prison staff who welcomed our frequent and large book donations.[3] We routinely convened local artists and bands for benefit concerts; these were joyful gatherings that created a solid space to raise both resources and meaningful awareness about prisons among demographics of people who knew very little generally about incarceration. The program remains active today.

Through Books to Bars, I first experienced art and community as the antithesis of the harmful carceral system which exists largely invisibly in Canadian society. I witnessed in prisons a system designed to isolate and deprive people of their sense of worth and connection to others. Contrasting this, arts-based community work seemed to naturally build and restore the very things that prisons eroded. I recognized the strong potential for art-centred community action as the natural solution to carceral conditions: a responsible, care-based, and effective alternative.

The knowledges I was learning were juxtaposed against dominant understandings of what prisons do in society, namely the belief that prisons are a place where people can better themselves, and following this, the belief that people go to prison because they are deviant. Indeed, after spending nearly the next four years maintaining Books to Bars, the next nine years of my life would be spent in federal incarceration, and through this experience I came to understand that who is deemed

punishable in Canada has less to do with how deviant a person is than how many marginal social locations they occupy.

It was in the middle of these nine years of incarceration that I was invited to participate in *Erasing Frankenstein*, a project described by its creators, Elizabeth Effinger and Sue Sinclair, as being purposed to ignite "an enriched public discourse through an open-ended discussion about incarcerated voices in our culture and communities." At first thought, such a phrase reads as quite paradoxical: *incarcerated voices in our culture and community*. After all, this goes against yet another dominant assumption about incarceration: that prisons (and the people within them) are separate and removed from society. Yet, this framing may be the great myth from which all other structural violence of incarceration flows.

Prisons and those within them are not removed from society but central to it. As Mitchell Tiethof notes, "the modalities of repressive, productive, disciplinary, and biopolitical power are the cornerstone of modern power."[4] As a cornerstone of modern power, incarceration—and the incarcerated—remain ever present in the collective social imagination. In political debate, news and entertainment media, the prison system is continually presented as a "hard" but naturalized system filled with contained danger: unstable or aggressive individuals who are generally incapable of meaningful social contribution. This image is reproduced each time a politician or tabloid newspaper reports of dangerous criminals, despite that since 2014, homicide and related charges accounted for only 0.5 percent of all alleged crimes in Canada, with property crime, traffic crime, and administrations of justice breaches accounting for over 60 percent of all criminal charges.[5]

Despite these figures, which remain consistent over time, what imagery comes to mind when you think of incarcerated people? What do you think of when you hear the words "criminal," "offender," or "prisoner"? Often, people captured by these labels are perceived as dangerous, monstrous social "Others,"[6] dehumanized through official discourse as being sites of risk that need management,[7] rather than being rights-deserving human beings. Criminalized people are imagined as separated from society, removed from the public, which deserves safety.

As Angela Davis puts it, we "think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others," and the prison as "an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited."[8] Beginning in the 1970s, a period that Davis describes as one "marked by intense organizing within, outside, and across prison walls,"[9] scholars and activists were uncovering that this was precisely the intended function of prisons: for society to maintain a criminalized class whom the state can make an example of, who will be drawn overwhelmingly from marginalized and disadvantaged communities.[10]

Despite over fifty years of advocacy and scholarship raising attention to the harms of incarceration, carceral cultures have continually deepened to such an extent that this era might properly be characterized as that of the prison. Ours is a society rooted in the management of discord, rather than the resolution of it, and our institutions have come to be dominated by networks of professionals tasked with managing marginality under the guise of managing safety, a carceral culture which, as Davis notes, "generates profits as it devours social wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison."[11] The impacts of this underpinning social fabric persistently show up in consistently gross representations of Black and Indigenous people in prisons globally. In Canada, over 50 percent of people incarcerated in women's prisons are Indigenous.[12] In penitentiaries in western provinces, and in maximum-security units, these representations are higher.[13] Some Canadian prisons report populations of up to 90 percent Indigenous people.[14] Within the last decade, the fastest growing demographics of criminalized populations in Canada have been Indigenous people, gender diverse people, women, and people over fifty.[15]

And so, when it came time to give our erasure poem a new name and erase the long title of *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*, our new title—*I or Us*—dawned quite clearly. When we are imagining the problem of social harm, who are we imagining is producing it: individuals in society or our social structures and institutions? When imagining how to socially respond to harms, who do we imagine is responsible for responding? And when we trumpet calls for public safety, who falls within the public we want safety for? *I* or *us*?

This phrase, "I or us," when applied to the context of crime and punishment abbreviates these complex, long-debated social questions. Canadian courts and prisons are spaces entrenched in frameworks that erase collective or social considerations. Steeped in neoliberal logics of individual responsibility, people accused of and convicted of law breaking are only deemed rehabilitated once they can successfully present themselves as deviant individuals who made deviant choices and who need the state's intervention and reform.[16] Shoshana Pollack, co-founder and former director of Walls to Bridges, offers that the responsibilization function of the prison system is inherently violent, as it reproduces narratives of crime and punishment beneath dominant rhetoric which erases social context and structural considerations.[17] As Davis notes, we need to centre "the social and economic conditions that track so many children from poor communities, and especially communities of color, into the juvenile system and then on to prison."[18]

When consideration of incarceration shifts from *I* to *us*, from an

individual to a systemic frame, prisons wholly emerge as a violent practice: to incarcerate is to cage and devalue a human by forcefully maintaining them in conditions of physical, mental, emotional, economic, social, and structural deprivation. Perhaps no fact makes this clearer than the disturbing statistic showing that people who experience long-term incarceration in Canada have reduced life expectancies of an average of twenty years. This grim fact, argues Adelina Iftene, the researcher who uncovered this disparity, makes prison a human rights violation in and of itself.[19]

In problematizing the act of incarceration, we are still left with the conundrum of how to respond to social harm. Although many scholars and activists have aptly demonstrated how responding to social harm with violence is neither productive nor sustainable, we have been unable to collectively imagine an alternative system of public safety. This deficit, I offer, results from the prison's emergence within a history of colonialism that persists today.[20] Prisons have always and will necessarily continue to reflect the racist, classist ideals of colonial ideology, regardless of efforts toward reform. This is because it is the concept of caging humans that is flawed, as it originates in a logic of domination: no tweaking of the conditions in which the cage is produced can compensate for the harms it produces, nor can tweaking produce a more effective system.

Canada's history of the incarceration of women provides an apt example of the failure of prison reform on a national scale. During the mid-1980s, allegiances formed between feminist scholars, activists, and incarcerated people around the reform of Canada's only prison for women, the Correctional Service Canada Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario. These largely feminist communities were successful in problematizing incarceration across public, judicial, and academic spheres as a source of violence and injustice against women in ways that led to a complete overhaul of the system. A monumental national project resulted from a public inquiry into certain events at P4W and the development of *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*.[21] Heavily involved in this overhaul were both feminist scholars and people incarcerated in P4W themselves. *Creating Choices* was intended to offer a comprehensive strategy: a blueprint, in theory, for a supposedly less harmful system of incarceration. One of its most significant recommendations was that to mitigate the harm of incarceration to individuals and their families, prisons could not be divorced from community. Incarcerated people needed to remain close to their communities and maintain agency, choice, and opportunity. Following this, between 1997 and 2000, all federally incarcerated women in

Canada, who had until then been held in the country's singular women's prison, were transferred across the country into five newly constructed regional prisons built for the purpose of "empowerment" by keeping people closer to their families and communities.

Yet, from the outset of this new "kinder, gentler" system, underpinning carceral logics rendered its feminist goals impossible. The erosion of choice occurred immediately after the regionalized prisons opened and has been continually well-documented.[22] In fact, the failure of Correctional Service Canada to realize the recommendations of *Creating Choices* was the driving force that led to the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS)—one of the primary organizations involved in the national reform effort—to shift its mandate from prison reform to abolition. This failure of prison reform reinforces Robert Martinson's[23] famous 1970s conclusion in relation to improving the conditions or efficacy of prisons: "nothing works."[24] Moreover, recent scholarship shows that prisons are harmful not just to criminalized populations, but also to the people who work within them. Security staff and other frontline carceral workers have disproportionate experiences of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse issues relative to the general population in Canada.[25]

Indeed, harms have been shown to be produced through every facet of the prison system. Echoing the unfortunate fate of Justine in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Canada faces pervasive instances of wrongful conviction, coupled with an absence of effective redress mechanisms, to such an extent that an investigative commission has recently been convened: the Miscarriage of Justice Review Commission.[26] David Milgaard, who was wrongfully incarcerated for twenty-three years, and who died exonerated while advocating for others who have been wrongfully convicted, may be Canada's most publicized wrongfully convicted person, although by no means the only one.[27] As wrongfully convicted exoneree Ron Dalton, co-president of the non-profit organization Innocence Canada puts it, "These cases are a stain on the collective conscience of Canadians."[28] What a wonder it is, then, that despite the breadth of social and humanitarian issues plaguing prisons, the model of incarceration has not been more widely disrupted. Colonial law remains blind to the harm it causes.

Sitting in the wake of the pervasive adverse impacts created through institutions of incarceration, we remain tasked with how to positively transform them. I have had the pleasure of taking up this challenge in a variety of roles, and through several modalities. *Erasing Frankenstein* was one such modality, and I reflect on my participation believing that its goals and scope are something that we need much more of in the world to

both understand and to transform this era of prison. Having engaged in this project as an incarcerated participant, I was lucky to be witness to the creative processes of others who were incarcerated. I remember the excitement people felt as they received the pages they would erase; I remember the excitement they felt as we regrouped and shared our erasure poems and artwork. "I'm not a poet," shared one of my peers as I read their completed pages from the small space of a cell we shared, "but I am pretty proud of this." We had worked on our erasure poems together from that cell, each of us having been given a bag of artistic supplies to accompany a number of isolated pages printed from the full text which we were tasked with erasing. I remember sitting, mostly in comfortable silence together as we worked each on our erasures, then sharing our creations with each other feeling a fullness of spirit that most conditions in prison work to actively erode. I remember further the fulfillment I felt in the hours I was able to spend in the collective space of this project, during those times when Effinger and Sinclair would visit the prison and work directly with us, and when the Walls to Bridges members of our project met. These meetings would occur in the prison's classroom, in a space with shut doors apart from the direct eye of prison staff. In this space we were shielded from the broader prison environment; it was a rare space in the penitentiary where human potential was encouraged instead of being stifled.

In contrast, I unfortunately report that many people who I knew and cared for while incarcerated perished behind those prison walls, unable to cope with the constant onslaught of punishment and deprivation imposed on them. And though transformative projects existed, I experienced that they only ever had a small capacity, and generally were only able to include a fraction of people in prison. For example, at the Grand Valley Institution during the completion of the *Erasing Frankenstein* project, there were approximately 200 people incarcerated at any given time, yet only ten incarcerated people (those already participating in the Walls to Bridges program) participated in our *Erasing Frankenstein* creative endeavour. Real benefit was fostered for those of us who were involved, but we participated in this generative task submerged within broader conditions of violence and abandonment, and that is a tough contrast to experience. During the collaboration, we never met our student partners from the University of New Brunswick; we came to know them instead through exchanging letters with them and by reading their erased pages. Despite this, the project's design bolstered human potential by grounding relationships in mutual creative exploration. This frame made so visible that the answer to the problem of prisons is simple, albeit underutilized: Treat people with dignity. Create space that nurtures the best in people, and positive results will follow.

Whether or not people in such projects identify as poets or artists, art is an effective tool in the transformation of carceral systems because it involves moving away from adversarial and punishing logics, and it brings people into relationships with one another rooted in acts of joy and expression. The transformation of carceral practices necessarily involves the reconfiguration of the ways we relate to one another; it supports social unlearning, a process that can often be intellectually and emotionally challenging. But to move beyond the failed model of incarceration, we must unlearn the deeply socially entrenched practices of violence and oppression and instead consider why a person—or an institution—came to produce harm, and then respond not with anger or abandonment, but through acts of community building and care. Art provides a neutral space for people to come together in such a way, and the common ground it builds takes the emotional labour out of such unlearning. Artistic endeavours in carceral space naturally highlight the absurdity of the prison walls—they lift the veil that has made us complicit in assuming people in prison need or deserve to be there and emphasize the human potential of all. As Davis writes, "The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor."[29]

Some may offer that prison abolition is a romantic or unattainable goal. Yet, in my experience, making prisons redundant is quite naturally actualized through the building of care-based communities, and resultantly, the shrinking of practices rooted in violence.[30] The Walls to Bridges program, which partnered with UNB to form the Erasing Frankenstein Collective, provides a strong example of the viability of this goal. W2B is a collectively maintained university program that has gained national positive acclaims for its model which brings for-credit post-secondary courses into prison environments where half of students are incarcerated and the other half travel into the prison to learn alongside them. Students meet once a week over the course of a semester, and courses are taught through a dialogical, experiential, and creative pedagogy.[31]

 The motto of Walls to Bridges is "We are one, not the other." This motto was developed by students of the program, based on the realization many participants in the program come to, namely that the only difference between people in and out of prison is place. Overwhelmingly, incarcerated students who are released after participation in W2B are not only able to stay out of prison, but many alumni continue to engage in work that holds high degrees of social responsibility.[32] W2B demonstrates that providing individuals with care, community, and pathways to opportunity improves our communities and helps to create the outcome of public safety that prisons seek to create but necessarily cannot.[33]

Canada has many strong examples of the positive outcomes of people forming transformative communities that work to bring out the best in humanity, albeit that these are underutilized in comparison to the dominant punishment model. The LINC (Long-term Inmates Now in the Community) Society has for thirty years been supporting transformative justice in British Columbia, most notably through its operation of Emma's Acres, an eight-acre sustainable small lot farm in Mission, British Columbia. I volunteered at Emma's Acres during my final year in prison, then was employed with them in the years following my transition out. Emma's Acres brings together people who have experienced serious harm, often survivors of homicide, with people who are actively incarcerated, people who have been released from prison, community members, prison officials, and local politicians—all brought together by the shared goal of growing vegetables. At Emma's Acres, these traditionally siloed communities were not expected to discuss the traumas and harms in their lives, but rather were tasked with tackling the huge issue of food insecurity. Yet, through the act of growing food together, relationships formed, and I witnessed many harms healed in natural, nonconfrontational ways through this relational, community-centred process.

For me, the beautiful commonality across the projects I have described in this brief reflection is that by centring art and community building they combat social silos and divisiveness; they bring people together across perceived difference and help us realize we are not different at all. It was this very experience of coming together and creating a new community through a common creative project that made the *Erasing Frankenstein* project so meaningful. The art of erasure poetry can be described in many ways: it is the act of removing words, of uncovering different narratives buried within the dominant ones, of intentionally creating space to see what one previously could not. Some might see the work of erasure as an act of vandalism, while others might see it as homage and creating something new—a tension Sinclair addresses in her chapter on the ethics of erasure. But, for me, erasing the pages of Shelley's dark novel—grounded in struggles of humanity's fraught attempts to navigate social difference and the concept of justice—was a beautiful process to engage in, one rich in metaphor relevant to issues of incarceration.

And so, as you begin reading and fall into the colourful pages contained within this book, I invite you to hold this (new) image of people in prison: an image of people as poets, as artists, as volunteers and farmers growing vegetables and nourishing communities, as students, as people who think and feel deeply, as people who love and care and

dream about making better lives and communities for themselves and others. I invite you to question why, despite the promising potentialities inherent to every human being, we accept a system which abandons people convicted of breaking laws into cages where they are denied their human potential for years, decades, or, too often—forever. Imagine *who* has written *what* in this collection and remember that many of the people who erased these subsequent pages, so many years ago now, are still in the very cells where they were then. Then remember that half of the text's contributions come from university students, most of whom have never stepped foot in a prison. Allow the inability to identify incarcerated authors in *I or Us* to illustrate that humanity connects us all, and allow the intimacy of expression to illustrate that in our hopes, dreams, fears, and apprehensions, we are all inherently alike.

Perhaps, with this project, the world will not immediately or fundamentally change. Prisons will still stand, and more, as you read these words, are being built. Social harms will still occur. But possibility exists where projects such as *Erasing Frankenstein* are supported. By the culmination of our creative project—this erasure poetry collection's presence in the world—its ideas and potential take space away from divisive logics and offer instead hope to all those who come upon it. And so, read. Read, and if so inspired, connect to the humanity expressed by someone who may live within a social reality incomprehensible to you. Remember that conceptual gaps grow when we create structures that keep us apart. Look for ways to build bridges, not walls. Create ways to be together, just as the *Erasing Frankenstein* project did, across distance and perceived difference. And once more, in the words of Foucault: "Search for what is good and strong and beautiful in your society and elaborate from there. Push outward. Always create from what you already have. Then you will know what to do."[34]