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STRIVING TO THRIVE: BLACK AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN REFLECT ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN OREGON'S ONLY WOMEN'S PRISON

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Striving to Thrive: Black and Indigenous Women Reflect on Higher Education in Oregon's Only Women's Prison

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This collaborative and creative paper explores and documents the realities of Black and Indigenous transgender and cisgender women at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Oregon in their pursuit of higher education. Through poetry, essays, personal narratives, and art, this paper reveals how Black and Indigenous students experience and navigate the structural and systemic barriers they face in engaging with higher education opportunities while in prison, and reflects on strategies for dismantling those barriers.

According to the Oregon Department of Corrections, as of August 1, 2021, the population of people incarcerated at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF), Oregon's only prison for women, included 4.78% Black, and 5.6% American Indian (Oregon Department of Corrections, 2021). By contrast, the overall population of the state is about 2% Black, 1% American Indian (Oregon State Health Assessment, 2018). Not surprisingly, due to the systemic racism that continues to permeate every facet of the prison industrial complex, Black, and Indigenous people are overrepresented at Coffee Creek, as in prisons across the nation (Taylor et al., 2021).

Higher education in prison holds liberatory possibilities, helping women to transcend struggles and build resilience and joy, which in turn facilitates healing in children, families and communities. In the words of Angela Davis, “no liberation is possible without education” (personal communication [webinar], April 26, 2021). Education holds the possibility of simply replicating and confirming systems of oppression.

This collaborative paper explores and documents the experiences, feelings and realities of five Black and Indigenous women currently and formerly at Coffee Creek as they approach(ed) liberatory opportunities through higher education. Through poetry, personal narrative, and art, this paper reveals how Black and Indigenous women experience and navigate the structural and systemic barriers of racism in pursuing their education while imprisoned.

A Collaborative Effort Approach

This paper is a collaborative effort, taking an Indigenous and blended approach, including narrative inquiry, creative story-telling and emergent design (Gone, 2019). As we explored the intersections of race, opportunity, and prison education, we chose to use this blend of qualitative approaches, to ensure each author’s perspective was reflected in a way that made the most sense for them (Casey, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nash, 2004; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We come to this work with the recognition that knowledge is rooted in social relations, and that wisdom is generated in collaboration through personal stories, creatively and narratively conveyed (Gone, 2019).

Tanuia Davis

I am appreciative of this platform to weigh in on some issues I have experienced as an African American woman getting educated here at CCCF. I have come across a lot of challenges inside the prison when I try to express myself. Rather than being nurtured, I am often shut down. To handle situations such as this, I have learned to count to six before speaking, raise my hand, to be the last to answer or ask a question, as well as to not participate in most sidebar topics of conversation.

I am very resilient, and I must say that I have to be. I have a letter grade 'A' in *Christian Leadership* course, and I just signed up for a 4 credit, 400 level class *Intercultural Communication and Conflict Resolution* at the University of Oregon. I will not be surprised if my instructor is white and I am the only African American in the class. I am saying this to highlight that if we want more diversity in education here in the prison, then upon putting together the course, diversity must be considered.

Although I am very driven and spiritual, if it were not for two women in particular, I would have missed the education opportunities that are available inside of this prison. One CCCF staff member and one Portland State University professor are the only Academic Support Services that are available to me. To me, Academic Support Services includes being made aware of what is available, what opportunities are coming up, and having some explanation of where these fit into my overall educational plan. These two women have also included me and others in thinking through how we can make the opportunities more inclusive, accessible and available to everyone. I know that if I have problems or questions, they will be glad to help and to support me in accomplishing my goals. That is two people in a prison of 1,500; needless to say, we

are very underserved and we lack academic support. If prison is truly about rehabilitation, we need to start with education. We need more academic support, more instructors from diverse backgrounds because people need to see themselves reflected in the educational programs.

Since I have been receiving an education, I have changed. I have confidence and hope. I am prepared to help others and my family. I am continuing my education and self-study so that I can be a visible reflection of what education can do for a person who had no idea what life could be like.

Lanelle Rowe

I am an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a student, and for over a decade of my life I was at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. My intake experience is what stands out the most, because I am handed a piece of paper that has statistics: height, weight, hair/eye color, and race. This is where I pause to read through my choices of what to identify myself as, what will determine many factors in my prison time. Who chooses what I check in a box, the very last one; 'other' and write my own description – Native American. Why did not I just choose the selection – American Indian? There is a difference, one name is assumed and one is preferred.

During this time, it has given me a chance to find my direction. Time to set goals, reach them and move on to the next. One of my most enjoyable classes was *The Roots of Success Environmental Literacy Curriculum*. Through each module my curiosity was awakened and I wanted to explore solutions to social and environmental injustices. The

curriculum really touched on the inequality of resources, services, and underrepresented populations.

With my curiosity piqued I chose to attend Portland State University's (PSU) "Metamorphosis" course, first year general studies, and then moved on to sophomore classes. This is a big accomplishment for me because higher education is the key for making change in myself , our community and world. I took *Healthy People/Healthy Places* class through PSU, and this class required a community health project proposal. The course taught me to identify health and nutrition issues, and it drew me in. Being incarcerated so long made me value my traditional knowledge of sacred foods. When the chance came to explore this and write a proposal in partnership with research, I grew very interested in a class that taught about Indigenous first foods and nutritional value. I plan to propose this course to the Oregon Department of Corrections as an educational nutrition class on Indigenous foods.

This is a contribution I dedicate to my grandmother, Nina M. Rowe, who helped provide advice on the pamphlet in 1980 to maintain the ancestors' knowledge. It is a way of saying to the Native Women, *"you are a special, unique individual – there is nobody like you."* The ancestors left us to be their legacy. We need to rise and band together to keep our sacred circles strong. This is only the beginning. It is time to teach our future generations to value the Earth and the nutrition that is provided to us.

Now back to the boxes we check to identify ourselves and how the world sees us. Think outside that box, given titles, roles, stand up and stand out! I went from a student of Roots of Success to peer education and am now on the Roots of Success

Advisory committee. My proposal for the Nutrition on Indigenous First Foods will be integrated into the food and agricultural module to become a class on its own.

I end my story by offering these art pieces that I created.

Art is a way that I can express my emotions when I do not have words. I can channel my feelings of gratitude, excitement, and accomplishment through this artistic vessel. Sometimes words are not enough. Creating continues the sacred circle of those who come together to push outside of comfort zones and personal struggles. The butterflies represent this transformation, this metamorphosis. This time in my life, and the opportunity to learn and to grow, has truly changed me forever.

Rinita Lowe

I am 28 years old. I got my GED at 16 years old and did not want to further my education after that. The main reason is because I struggled with getting my G.E.D and did not think I was smart enough to do anything else. Since my incarceration, I have learned this is not the case. I am currently enrolled in the cosmetology program at CCCF through Portland Community College. I am 7 months away from completing the program and I can taste it. I have never wanted anything more than this. Saying I completed something for the first time in my life makes all the hard work worth it. To

anybody that thinks they cannot further their education, I am walking and talking proof that you can. I wrote this poem to reflect my experience:

> **Unseen Me:** Have you ever been denied so many times for so long you got used to it? When you walk into a place where there are only pictures of white people being displayed, and your beauty is nowhere on display? I want to be celebrated, but I am hit with a 2021 version of segregation. Lack of representation causes lack of motivation. I want to find a solution without the confusion.
>
> **Seen Me:** Being celebrated makes me motivated. Seeing other ethnicities on display makes me feel like it's going to be a good day. Representation, qualification and demonstration makes me feel like my culture was considered in the conversation. Higher education led to my reformation.

Sasha Womack

I wrote this poem, *The Struggle*, to share how the intersection of history, racism, religion, poverty, intergenerational trauma, crime and incarceration have influenced and impacted my journey. It took the exposure to college courses to awaken my consciousness to these societal forces that have influenced me so deeply, and to spark my critical thinking and find those connections. Within the prison, the biggest barriers I have faced to accessing college were the mostly white students and white instructors, and I could only think "maybe that's not for me." It took being specifically invited in for me to feel at all comfortable accessing my education, which then helped me to develop critical consciousness. This poem would otherwise not be possible.

The Struggle

Children born in ghettos,
generations of poverty.
Is it fate or biblical prophecy?

In memory of bones burned to brittle ashes
For the slave who didn't make it through the middle passage
I have a vision, a dream, a scheme.
To destroy hatred and everything that lies in between
a human and a human, but I'm just assuming.
That as you and me continue to lose our sanity,
We'll recognize God as all of humanity.
I'm a detainee held in the county of Marion
with tall Arians, Vikings, and barbarians.
Devils in a nest got the devil in their flesh.
The whole earth is in a state of perpetual unrest.
He with no soul is an intellectual at best.
I am exceptional, I confess
the goddess is miraculous
per-fection, con-ception is immaculate.
My life's goals were caged up with psychos
surrounded by concrete and artificial light bulbs.
This life of mine is something like a life of crime
I was twice confined so I had to fight to climb.
From miserable jails, prison cells
despite my crimes knew I was a good woman, knew I had a righteous mind
God I gotta be destined for more than poverty.
To die in the streets or end up as state property
I always knew something great was flowing through my arteries.
The soul of this martyr bleeds and spills in these hardened streets.
I wonder if I should feel some type of way
world threw my life away
guess that was the price to pay.
But I was just a kid looking for the right-a-way
committed some sins, took three people's life away.
What can I say, I was doomed from the womb

to see my soul consumed in a tomb.
Black Christ held in the arms of black Isis.
Black crisis… Black vices.
Forgive us God but this is what black life is
I feel love when I see blacks strike fists.
Little did they know they were born Black and righteous.
Lost souls I watched white men spit at them.
This is why a slave could never become a citizen.
Born into a world where she's not quite fitting in
can't escape the pain and the despair she's been living in
sell drugs, sell women, gangbang
get it, rob, cheat, lie,
kill all for the dividends.
Can't decipher the language the laws are written in
so this crook gets the whole book thrown at him.
He can't fathom that the bomb has already split from the atom.
The gavel Falls
now he shuffles from cell to cell
But all is well
cuz all she's ever known is hell.

Kiesha Johnson

I am a Black woman and I was in prison from 2003 until 2021, when the Governor granted me clemency. There are many systemic problems that do not allow Black women to seek education in prison. Education can be uplifting but it can be a struggle; many Black people in prison feel there are too many barriers to overcome, and just give up trying.

I entered prison with an eighth-grade level education. Working toward my GED, my white tutors thought I was being lazy, or angry. I was angry, but not for the reason

they thought. I was angry because I could not do the 7 times tables. I had been given the short end of the stick throughout my education. I finally took a stand and explained to them what I felt. I explained how it felt like they were seeing me; they labeled as a "thug", "lazy", and "wasting time". It was not that at all; they were wrong. It was a poverty identity ascribed to me. Growing up I had spent most of my days trying to stay above water instead of focusing on school. The lack of education was not what I wanted, but circumstances kept me out of the loop. I had been identified as a thug, and I got pushed out of programs because of my language. I grew up in the streets, and I spoke the language of the streets, but I was not lazy! This poverty identity keeps many from moving up. Another Black lady in my unit understood the struggle and taught me things I did not know, and helped me with what I could not comprehend.

It is hard to achieve education if you are not up to the system's standards educationally, mentally, or financially. It is not that we are not smart, it is that we do not have people meeting us where we are. This affects many Black women inside the prison. I think the racism is unintentional but the design of the programs and education benefits the white population more than any other population. In prison, Black words do not have any power; your voice is on mute and paused. The majority speaks, and Blacks are hushed and punished. If you are not friends with the inmate boss or leader, you can fall right back to the lowest levels of prison life. There has to be a change in the code of ethics in this prison and all others, and a focus to create a better fit for African Americans and their education needs. We must find the solutions to this problem or history will continue to repeat itself. Is this what people want? For more success stories,

you must meet Black women where they are. I hope what I have written opens eyes and ears.

Deborah Arthur

I am white, cisgender, heterosexual, and free. I recognize the privilege that those identities afford me. In and through my teaching, as in all aspects of my life, I strive to repair harm and to contribute meaningfully to a more just and equitable world. I have a B.A in Religion, an M.A. in Black Studies, and a Juris Doctor. I was a criminal defense and juvenile law attorney for ten years, before arriving in academia.

As a professor, I do not necessarily have answers, but I do have access. I work to leverage my privilege and access to empower students. In 2018, a formerly incarcerated student in the Masters in Social Work (MSW) program at Portland State University and I took the lead together in developing our higher education in prison program, because it was unacceptable that those incarcerated at CCCF did not have access to higher education opportunities. It has been a long haul pushing this boulder uphill, meaning working with the various systems and institutions involved to make this a reality, and we are just about at a solid place. I am very excited about the return of Pell for incarcerated students, and the possibilities that may hold. One key goal I work toward is for a person with direct lived experience in the criminal legal system to take over full leadership and the direction of this program. My MSW colleague has moved on to another position outside of PSU.

In our original cohort of students in 2019, 15% identified as Black, Indigenous, and other Students of Color. In our second cohort, this percentage doubled. Our program is working hard to increase access for Students of Color, yet we have much

more to do. Some things we are doing well include providing rigorous, culturally relevant content that is scaffolded and part of a degree pathway. Our curriculum is filled with Black, and Indigenous authors, artists, and activists. We seek to decenter whiteness within the curriculum. We never let finances serve as a barrier. We were successful in having the PSU approve a reduced differential tuition of $100 flat fee per course for students who are incarcerated; we recognize that this amount can still be prohibitive, and we have a scholarship fund that has allowed us to cover all requested tuition assistance. We serve all students regardless of length of sentence. We do work hard to "meet students where they are" and we have individualized our approach to teaching and learning as much as possible to help each student grow and experience success. One glaring area for growth: we absolutely need to diversify our leadership and our faculty, to better reflect the diversity of the population at CCCF (Taylor et al., 2021).

Discussion

From these reflections we can gain insights into racial justice strategies for education at Coffee Creek and prison education in general. The themes presented mirror current scholarship regarding race and higher education in prison. Lack of representation equates to a feeling of powerlessness, and to an understanding that Black and Indigenous women are not welcomed into educational spaces. As Rinita makes clear in her poem: "lack of representation causes lack of motivation." Black and Indigenous students are understandably reluctant to enter spaces dominated by whiteness, which higher education most often is. This requires, then, that these students expend extra courage, resilience and persistence to keep pushing forward, within a setting that is already demeaning and oppressive, in a way that is not required

of white students in that same setting. Without alleviating that added burden, many Students of Color understandably will not take on that extra load. As Kiesha states, “many Black people in prison feel there are too many barriers to overcome, and just give up trying.”

Having those with shared identities in teaching and leadership roles is also critical to educational equity and access (Taylor et al., 2021). As Tanuia mentions, she felt certain that her instructors would be white. As she points out, there is absolutely a need for “more instructors from diverse backgrounds.” Sasha echoes this idea, sharing that in seeing all the white students and faculty, she simply felt that “maybe [education] was not for [her]”. Further, offering high quality, culturally relevant pedagogy, in which Black and Indigenous students seem themselves reflected, is also essential (Taylor et al., 2021). This is demonstrated as Lanelle writes about the power she felt in being able to explore Indigenous sacred foods in her public health course. This topic, so relevant to her own life, ignited a spark for learning.

We also see that success happens in the context of relationships (Novek, 2019). Having trusted staff, faculty, advocates and mentors is paramount. Tanuia mentions the importance of trust and the feeling of co-creating opportunity, but that simply does not happen enough. Building authentic relationships around learning requires rejecting an “us/them” dichotomy (Bryan, 2019, p. 160). To accomplish this, faculty in prison education programs must be willing to examine, and re-examine, their role in this oppressive system (Bryan, 2019, p. 160). Further, non-incarcerated academics who run and/or teach in prison education programs must understand that “it is not about [them]” (Malakki, 2019, p. 18). They have to understand that, unless they have experienced

incarceration, there are things that they simply cannot understand about the experience of incarcerated students (Ginsburg, 2019). It is their job to "come and be with us as we struggle to reach our best us" (Malakki, 2019, p. 19). To do so with any effectiveness requires that program leadership and educators consistently challenge the heady "triumphant transformational narrative" that often permeates prison education (Ginsburg, 2019, p. 66), and that they do their own work of dismantling and questioning "the piece of the oppressor that lives in all of us" (Love, 2019, p. 122).

Conclusion

It is our hope that these personal and creative contributions in some small way advance the ability for Black and Indigenous women in prison to have the opportunity to thrive through inclusive, accessible and welcoming higher education. Let us not simply replicate systems of oppression; let us look at the higher education in prison movement as an "opportunity to overcome racial inequity on a massive scale and set an example both for higher education communities and for society as a whole" (Taylor et al., 2021).

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