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Toward What Freedom?
Youth Literacies and Knowledges in a Carceral State

By

ADAM D. MUSSER
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Education

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2021

Abstract

Toward What Freedom?
Youth Literacies and Knowledges in a Carceral State

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Davis

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The struggle for freedom is not new, but it may be as urgent as ever. The consistent murders of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people by police in the United States remind us that nowhere is freedom equally available. Moreover, the shared, if again unequal, effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic reveal how dangerous a purely individual, personal sense of freedom can be. But what does freedom mean? This is the question I asked young people in youth prisons. To my knowledge, this study offers the first scholarly analysis of freedom as conceived by young people experiencing incarceration.

We know of the damage and destruction wrought by the incarceration of our children (Annamma, 2016; Meiners, 2007; Winn, 2011). What we need to know more of is how they envision the freedom they desire. In centering definitions of freedom articulated by young people experiencing incarceration, I argue that educators in all settings can encourage an understanding of freedom that recognizes a collective responsibility to our shared humanity.

This study contributes to discussions at the intersections of teacher education, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy by clarifying what it is that young people envision when they think and write about freedom. Teacher education must confront the role schooling plays in the maintenance and (re)production of normalized violence against children, youth, and their communities. This includes how we teach about freedom. When Black people are killed on the streets and in their homes by the police, who is free? When choosing not to wear a face covering in a global pandemic caused by a highly contagious respiratory virus is a question of personal freedom, what does freedom even mean? I write from the theoretical position that the full humanity of every student must become and remain the primary focus of education. How is education – at every level and for every subject – oriented toward freedom that allows us to recognize and honor all humanity?

Through the theoretical lenses of critical literacy and critical social theory, I positioned young writers experiencing incarceration as producers of transformative critical knowledge, a concept I defined as knowledge that is intended to generate more justice within social systems and/or human relationships. This knowledge is *critical* because it is oriented toward justice and it is sensitive to the relations of power that make freedom (and humanity) available to some and deny it to others. This knowledge is *transformative* because it is intended to transform our relationships to each other and the social systems which govern our lives.

Questions of knowledge, power, and freedom lie at the heart of critical literacy practice and theory. Critical literacy research in schools has shown that young people's literacy practices can expand narrow notions of learning and intellectual activity (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Lee, 2001; San Pedro, 2015), while research in out-of-school spaces documents how young people from nondominant communities extend traditional conceptions of learning and language through their expansive literacy practices (Gutiérrez, 2008; Paris, 2011; Winn, 2011). Recent research with young people in youth prisons reveals that youth resist the effects of their criminalization in artistic ways (Annamma, 2016) and find the opportunity to historicize their pasts and design their futures through writing (Christankis & Mora, 2018). In these contexts, research documents the inadequacy of dominant notions of teaching and learning by elevating the power of young people's knowledge production and their own authentic meaning making.

Using ethnographic research methods, I asked what writing afforded young people experiencing incarceration and what they meant when they wrote about freedom. As an ethnographic participant in youth prison writing workshops for two years, I collected data from different places, people, and perspectives. Methods included participant observation in youth prison writing workshops, textual analysis of more than 6,000 writing samples, and open-ended interviews with young people in youth prisons and the adults who facilitate youth prison writing workshops.

Data analysis included three rounds of qualitative coding in which I grounded codes and generated categories in multiple sources of data to develop themes across young people's conceptions of freedom. Five themes of freedom emerged from my analysis. Young writers experiencing incarceration defined freedom: (1) in terms of the human relationships that mattered in their lives; (2) in relation to the physical spaces of the world that were available to them; (3) within a critique of social systems; (4) as the ability to make sustainable life choices; (5) in a process of historicized self-awareness. Findings show that young writers experiencing incarceration use writing as a tool for personal and social change and that freedom is a physical, social, internal, historicized, humanizing practice.

The findings of this study have implications for how we teach and talk about freedom. Schools have traditionally failed to teach about freedom as a social, collective, and interdependent practice. As both COVID-19 and The Movement for Black Lives make clear, we depend on each other's understanding and practice of freedom. Our shared, if unequal, experiences of COVID-19 and the continued power of white supremacy to perpetuate violence across all intersections of life, also experienced unequally, demonstrate just how urgent educating for freedom is.

Achieving this kind of education requires both refusal and imagination. We must refuse a return to what was normal, and we must imagine a new one (Laura, 2018; Roy, 2020). This study offers one way of refusing and imagining. In this study, I compiled a body of knowledge on freedom that emerged from writings by young people experiencing incarceration and I showed that their literacy practices afford expansive possibilities for collective understandings of what freedom is and can be. I argued that in order to build human relationships and social systems around an authentic practice of freedom, we must include the knowledges of young people experiencing incarceration in the ongoing struggle.

Dedication

To every young person wanting to be free.
And to all of those whose writing shows the way.

For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.

- Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb"

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The title of my dissertation echoes one of the most important books I have read about the field of education, *Toward what Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*. In it, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2018) write that education must show "the ways that seemingly inconceivable futures are not inconceivable" (p. 16). I hope my work does this in its own small way. In any case, I have so many people to thank. All errors (in the following pages) and omissions (on this one) are mine alone.

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To all the young people experiencing incarceration, to those who write toward freedom and those who just want to be free – without your brilliance, nothing on the following pages would exist. But that is not enough. I know that is not enough. I see you. I hear you. I am gathering people to listen to you. We are trying to end this catastrophe. We will stay trying.

Chapter One: Introduction

Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

- Arundhati Roy (2020)

In April 2020, when the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 was approaching one million cases worldwide, novelist Arundhati Roy wrote that nothing would be worse than returning to normal. Grieving the loss of so much human life caused by COVID-19 and the sociopolitical conditions that led to the world's most vulnerable being made even more vulnerable, Roy asked us to see the pandemic as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (2020, p. 191). Recognizing the pandemic as a portal, Roy wrote, would leave us with a choice:

> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through it lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy, 2020, p. 191)

Roy asked us to imagine a new world and then fight for it. But how? Where do we start?

This study offers one way of beginning. Positioning young people experiencing incarceration as producers of knowledge on freedom, I argue that to imagine a world built on an authentic practice of freedom we must include the knowledges of young people experiencing incarceration. In this study, I compile a body of knowledge on freedom that emerges from writings by young writers experiencing incarceration and I show that their literacy practices afford expansive possibilities for collective understandings of what freedom is and can be.

As I write these words, one year after Roy's, worldwide cases of COVID-19 have surpassed 130 million, and nearly three million deaths have been attributed to the disease (*The New York Times*, 2021b). According to the coronavirus database maintained by *The New York Times* (2021a), more than 31 million people have been infected in the U.S. and more than 500,000 people have died.[1] With just four percent of the world's population, the U.S. has nearly one-quarter of its COVID-19 infections and more than 20% of its deaths.

As well as being the global leader in COVID-19 infections and related deaths, the U.S. remains the global leader in incarceration. With four percent of the world's population, the U.S. is home to roughly 20% of all people experiencing incarceration worldwide (World Prison Brief, 2018). Indeed, the staggering rate of incarceration in the U.S. likely contributed to the staggering spread of COVID-19. Almost always overcrowded and insufficiently sanitary, prisons and jails were obvious hot spots for the spread of COVID-19. Researchers at the Prison Policy Initiative concluded that mass incarceration was a factor in the spread of COVID-19 both inside jails and prisons and in their surrounding communities (Hooks & Sawyer, 2020). Mass incarceration and COVID-19 are deadly phenomena that make each other deadlier. The wreckage they bestow is not coincidental. Normal got us here. We cannot return to normal.

Meanwhile, rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths were not shared equally across communities in the U.S. Because of racialized disparities in wealth, income, housing, safe water, health care, and other social determinants of health, the effects of COVID-19 are like so many other phenomena in this country (Tai et al., 2021; Zelner et al., 2021): Black, Brown, and Indigenous people are more likely to get sick and to die than white people. Individuals and families with more wealth are healthier than those with less. Mortality rates from COVID-19

[1] It is all but certain that at the time of writing these statistics undercount the full scope of the pandemic.

were higher among those deemed essential workers, who were more likely to come from minoritized communities, and whose unequal experience with COVID-19 can be traced to "a historical legacy of structural inequities" (Rogers et al., 2020, p. 312). Normal got us here. We cannot return to normal.

What has recently become normal is similarly terrifying. In the midst of this global pandemic, it is common for people not to wear a face covering as an indication of their personal political freedoms. Protests to local government mask mandates took place across the country. Many defended their decision not to wear a mask by pointing to an American tradition of resisting governmental tyranny. On July 03, the day before the country's annual celebration of its independence, a woman in Boise, Idaho, argued against her mayor's citywide mask mandate by calling upon her own understanding of freedom:

> I'm afraid where this country is headed if we just all roll over and abide by control that goes against our constitutional rights. Independent and free – that's what this nation is founded under, and I'm just fighting for that freedom. (Biefeldt, 2020)

This understanding of freedom is flawed. Freedom does not mean one is free to do anything at all without consequence. We have laws against violent behaviors that violate the freedoms of others (e.g., murder; sexual assault), and we also limit personal freedom in relatively mundane ways (e.g., speed limits and stop signs; noise ordinances and zoning restrictions).

Freedom is not merely an individual, personal choice. Freedom includes responsibility. What we are missing – beyond generosity and compassion – is a collective sense of freedom-as-practice that recognizes our responsibilities to each other. What we have failed to do, and must do urgently, is teach and talk about freedom as a social, collective, and interdependent practice. We must learn, as Angela Davis (2016) reminds us, to acknowledge our "interrelatedness" to one

another. We depend on each other. Thus, we depend on each other's understandings and practices of freedom.

Young People Experiencing Incarceration

On an average day in 2018, more than 37,000 young people were held in youth prisons across the United States (OJJDP, 2021). While this number has been decreasing since the year 2000, when more than 108,000 young people were incarcerated, it is more than the total number of high school students in Seattle and Boston, and it is three times greater than all the high school students in Washington, D.C. (Boston Public Schools, 2019; Seattle Public Schools, 2020; District of Columbia Public Schools, 2021). The young people who are locked up in the U.S. are Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, white, and multi-racial. Most are between 15 and 18 years of age, though 13% are 14 or younger. Some were incarcerated for days; others have been locked up for years.

They wake up every morning in locked cells on beds they call "slabs." They put on the same loose-fitting, state-issued sweatshirts every day and slide their feet into the same threadbare socks and sorry sandals. They brush their teeth in prison. They eat and drink and bathe in prison. They are told when to do all these things, and for how long. Visits with their families often take place on separate sides of security glass. Their phones calls are limited and recorded. Every evening, a pearl-drop of toothpaste is squeezed onto their toothbrushes by staff. They go to sleep in prison knowing the next day will be a lot like the last was.

And yet, the young people we have locked up are never only incarcerated bodies under state surveillance. They are also the subjects of their experiences who resist in myriad ways – effectively and ineffectively, productively and problematically (Tuck & Yang, 2013) – the social

conditions of their incarceration. They dream in prison. They read, write, and rhyme in prison. Many earn high school and college credits toward degrees, and some received state-certified high school diplomas from continuation schools located inside youth prisons. Some call themselves writers. Others live day by day, day to day, just waiting and wanting to be free. But what does it mean for them to be free?

The goal of this study is to contribute to the work of imagining (and building) another world. To do this, I center the literacy practices of young people experiencing incarceration. They, too, offer a critique against what has become normal. They, too, are ready to imagine another world. In their talk and text, young writers experiencing incarceration demanded their own freedom alongside calls for everybody's freedom. They echoed notions of collective freedom that recognize no one is truly free until we all are. I argue that young writers experiencing incarceration offer necessary perspectives on freedom that are too often lacking in larger sociocultural projects on education and freedom.

In the rest of this chapter, I provide a brief history of how I came to this work through the nonprofit arts organization, Writing is Our Right[2], before offering a note on language used in this study, contextualizing the current sociopolitical moment, and outlining the research questions I asked and answered. Then, I describe the theoretical frameworks that informed these research questions and my processes of data collection and analysis. Following my discussion of theory, I present the concept of *transformative critical knowledge*, describing how it emerged from this research and how it affirms the method of asking young writers experiencing incarceration what it means to be free. Finally, I conclude by examining my own positionality and epistemological stance as an educational researcher theorizing with young people experiencing incarceration.

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[2] Writing is Our Right is a pseudonym, as are the names of all participants and locations in this study. Written in italics, *Writing is Our Right* references the magazine published under the organization's name.

Writing is Our Right

I was first introduced to Writing is Our Right (WOR) when I was a teaching assistant in the School of Education at a large, public university where I pursued my doctoral degree. Because of my research interests in educational justice and youth literacy practices, as well as my own experience as a classroom teacher in high schools and prisons, I followed up with Dante Israel, the Executive Director of Writing is Our Right after their visit to class. I asked Dante how I could leverage my skills as a former teacher and status as a current graduate student in service of the WOR mission. A few months later I was volunteering as one of dozens of WOR writing workshop facilitators in youth prisons across the country.

Over the course of the next two years, I would write with young people experiencing incarceration for one hour a week at two different California youth prisons. I wanted to understand the practices and systems of literacy in these young people's lives, but I was not immediately sure how to do so in ways that honored them as people and as writers. I sought to avoid exploiting their vulnerability or relying on their prolonged incarceration. In Chapter Three, I further describe the extent to which obtaining consent to interview a young person experiencing incarceration in the State of California is an intricate process. More than once, even after obtaining multiple layers of permission needed to schedule an interview, the young person who wanted to talk to me about writing and freedom was released before we could sit and speak. Always, I rejoiced for them and wondered what first meal they were enjoying "on the outs." Always, too, I wondered whether the research I was conducting required some young people to be incarcerated.

The research in this study depends on vulnerabilized young people confined in youth prisons. I tried hard not to exploit that vulnerability. It would be better, by far, for me to write an

entirely different dissertation because we did not live in a society that incarcerates young people. It would be better, by far, if the research questions in this study were irrelevant because we had built a society that found it impossible to criminalize young people. Until we no longer insist that some youth deserve to live in concrete cells, I argue that educational researchers should include young people experiencing incarceration in their explorations of literacies, freedom, and social transformation. That is what I do here. I position young writers experiencing incarceration as knowledge holders on the topic of freedom, and I position their work as transformative critical knowledge for educators who teach about freedom, across the domains of literature, history, arts, and the sciences.

A Note on Language

Throughout this study, I use the terms "young people experiencing incarceration" (YPEI) and "young writers experiencing incarceration" (YWEI) to resist the finality of the label "incarcerated youth." All of us are more than one modifier or label, and young people temporarily experiencing incarceration are much more than what can be conveyed by the powerful two-word phrase: "incarcerated youth." "Young writers experiencing incarceration" is not a concise label, and that is part of the point. Language matters (Winn, 2018). It especially matters in the context of this study when language is used to dehumanize by othering young people who have been criminalized and are temporarily experiencing incarceration. I use YPEI and YWEI throughout this study because these labels more accurately point to the fuller humanity of all young people currently and temporarily experiencing incarceration.

For similar reasons, I name any facility that locks young people in cells a "youth prison." I understand the distinction between prisons and jails – prisons are most often spaces in which

people are locked away after being convicted of a crime; jails are most often spaces in which people are locked away while awaiting trial or being held on bail. I acknowledge, as well, that the State of California prefers the language of “camps” and “detention facilities” when youth are involved. In fact, at least one reviewer who requested revisions during the process of obtaining approval by my university’s Institutional Review Board specified that I would need to “adjust [my] language” because “juvenile detention facilities are not considered prisons.” I maintain that such language games belie the realities of these spaces. When you are locked behind bars, in a cell, you are imprisoned. Thus, for the purposes of this study, any such space in which youth are imprisoned is deemed a “youth prison.”

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) offers perspective regarding the semantics of naming: “Where there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem, and when you can’t see a problem, you pretty much can’t solve it.” I suppose that if we are unwilling to call the spaces where young people are locked behind bars “youth prisons,” we don’t have a youth prison problem. But we do.

The Current Sociopolitical Moment

The United States has yet to fully reckon with the fact that it depends on ideologies of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism that continue to organize our lives today (Baldwin, 1963; Coates, 2014; Dumas, 2016; Grande, 2015; Sharpe, 2016; Wynter, 2003). Founded on racist ideas about which human beings deserved to be free, the U.S. remains chained to a history of enslavement and colonization that perpetuates present-day unfreedom for millions of people, especially those experiencing incarceration.

The disproportionate torment of COVID-19 in the United States is just one consequence of our society's failure to understand (and to practice) what freedom means and what freedom requires. In the first week of 2021, we saw one of the starkest images of how freedom in the U.S. is incomplete, contradictory, and paradoxical. After hundreds of insurrectionists occupied the U.S. Capitol on January 06, attempted to overturn the democratic process, destroyed government property, threatened the lives of members of Congress and the Vice President, and killed one police officer, most were free to walk out of the building and fly home. Not even six months had passed since police in riot gear met protestors on the streets as they demanded justice for the extrajudicial killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others. In light of the events of the past few months (and of the past four hundred years), we must ask ourselves who gets to be free and what freedom means in this country. While broader implications of this study will be explored in the final chapter, here I briefly consider how we have borne witness to three deadly phenomena in the past year – the COVID-19 pandemic; persistent anti-Blackness; and rising anti-Asian violence. Each reveals the deadly realities of unfreedom for so many people living in the U.S.

First, the coronavirus pandemic attacked the U.S. with a predictably American sense of racial discrimination. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, age-adjusted hospitalization rates related to COVID-19 were four to five times higher for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations than for white populations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). These disparities reflect contemporary and historical inequality across a spectrum of social determinants of health for Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other people of color and their communities. What does it mean to be free in the face of a virus that is far more deadly depending on sociopolitical factors? Who, in fact, can be free in these conditions?

Second, anti-Blackness was again thrust into the national consciousness with the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. The history of Black people dying at the hands of police and white vigilantes in the U.S. extends as far back as the 1700s, when slave patrols established in the South set the precedent for the logic of modern policing. Recently, extrajudicial murders caught on camera raised our national consciousness regarding both the systemic denial of Black humanity by police and white supremacists, and the laws and legal norms that sustain them. What does it mean to be free in a country in which police officers murder Black people and are themselves protected by the law? What does freedom even mean in these conditions?

Third, incidents of anti-Asian violence rose significantly in 2020 and 2021, inflamed by hateful rhetoric of the President of the United States around the origins of the coronavirus. The American Educational Research Association noted an increase in "racism and violence against Asian, Pacific Islander, and Asian American students and colleagues at U.S. schools and higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Levine & Harper, 2021), while the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism reported an increase of nearly 150% in anti-Asian hate crimes in the country's largest 16 cities in a year in which overall hate crime dropped by 7% (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2020). This violence included the murder of six women of Asian descent in Atlanta on March 17, 2021. Of course, anti-Asian violence in the U.S. is not new, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II marking two of the most extraordinary (and official) examples of this country's anti-Asian prejudice. However, the murders of Daoyou Feng, Suncha Kim, Hyun Jung Grant (Kim), Soon Chung Park, Xiaojie "Emily" Tan, and Yong Ae Yue highlight an

increasing sense of terror among Asian American communities in the U.S. at this moment. What does it mean to be free under these conditions?

These three phenomena – a global pandemic, systemic anti-Blackness, and increasing anti-Asian violence – illustrate the gravity of what freedom is, means, and requires. Our lives in the U.S. are not nearly as free as the American myth suggests, though some of us (and here I include myself) are reliably freer than others. I am convinced that we need to think and teach about freedom differently if we ever want to be free. To establish a starting point for how we might think and teach about freedom differently, I asked experts on the topic – young writers experiencing incarceration – what freedom means to them.

Research Questions

In this study, I explore the ways young writers experiencing incarceration conceptualize freedom and how their understandings of freedom can inform the work of those who learn with young people in every type of educational setting. I take up young writers' definition of freedom so we can center their knowledge in the long project of ending youth incarceration and supporting their freedom dreams. As an ethnographic participant-researcher in youth prison writing workshops, I asked the following questions:

1. What are the salient characteristics of the Writing is Our Right program?
2. When afforded time and space in structured writing workshops, what do young people experiencing incarceration write about?
3. How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?

Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, I outline the two theories I used to frame, analyze, and understand the literacy practices of young people experiencing incarceration. The first, critical literacy, helps me to consider the literacy practices of young people experiencing incarceration as worthy of research and respect. The second, critical social theory, allows me to position young writers experiencing incarceration as producers of knowledge about freedom that is essential to the social transformation required for all of us to be free. Before attending to these two critical theories, I briefly acknowledge the work that theory does in our lives.

Why Theory?

Theories are incomplete but essential tools that help us explain and understand reality. Popkewitz (2013) writes that "theories order what is seen, thought about, and acted on" (p. 13). Theory sets limits by informing how we perceive the world and our place in it, what we consider possible and impossible. The kinds of questions we ask prescribe the range of possible answers we receive. And the kinds of questions we ask are limited, informed, and made possible by the theories at work in our perception of the world, whether these theories have names or we are even aware of them.

Critical theories are especially concerned with relations of power and justice. Critical theories attempt to explain and, in many cases, resist the systems and structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression. Love (2019) writes that theory explains "to us how the world works, who the world denies, and how structures uphold oppression" (p. 146). hooks (1994) argues that theory can be a pathway to healing, liberation, and revolution when we "direct our theorizing towards this end" (p. 61). Both Love and hooks show that theory can be put to work in ways that

offer humanizing alternatives to oppressive social conditions. Indeed, hooks and West (1991) argue that theory is, in fact, a weapon in the struggle for justice. Together, they write that theory "is an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides certain kinds of understandings, certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively" against oppression and toward greater justice in our social systems and human relationships (1991, pp. 34–35).

One clarifying example of how theory generates a new kind of understanding is critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) names racism as "an integral, permanent, and indestructible component" of U.S. society (Bell, 1992, p. ix), and, thus, becomes "an indispensable weapon" in the struggle against racism because it enables us to see the problem of racism differently and act more effectively (hooks & West, 1991, p. 34). When we understand racism to be woven into the fabric of our social systems and not merely the intentional actions of hateful individuals, the definition of anti-racism is transformed. CRT offers an alternative to how we ought to think about addressing the comprehensive effects racism has on all of our lives. Responsibilities and strategies shift. Different kinds of questions are asked; new methods are proposed. We see the problem through a new lens. This is the power and work of theory.

Theory of Change

Theories of change are essential to our understanding of research and the work research does or does not accomplish. On this question, Tuck (2009) warns against "damage-centered research" that pathologizes oppressed and exploited communities. Patel (2016) builds on this argument, arguing that so much of educational research depends on disenfranchised and vulnerabilized communities on which researchers are meant to apply interventions, publish

findings, and compete for limited funding. Following Tuck and Patel, I embrace a humanizing research framework (Paris & Winn, 2014) and a radical theory of change that starts with the desire of young writers experiencing incarceration. I began my research by reading their writing and asking what it was that they, as writers and thinkers, desired. I found the answer to that question in one word: freedom. The research continued as I asked young writers, *What do you mean when you say you want to be free?* and as I thought, alongside young writers experiencing incarceration, *What would it take for you to be free?*

The theory of change at work in this study positions young people whom our society has incarcerated as necessary critics in defining and expanding the notion of freedom. My research does not locate the need for change within young people living in prison or within their families and communities. Rather, this study acknowledges the desire of these young writers, and of all young people, to be allowed to live lives of liberation, justice, and joy. The need for transformative change is located outside the young people in youth prisons, and even outside youth prisons themselves. The theory of change at work in this study places the obligation for change on the rest of us, and specifically on teachers and teacher education programs. We must change how we think and teach about freedom in order to begin the social transformation necessary to realize the freedom we all deserve.

Critical Literacy

Describing the relationship between literacy and freedom, Giroux (1987) emphasizes the role of critical literacy in the pursuit of freedom, writing that the practice of critical literacy:

> Means developing the theoretical and practical conditions through which human beings can locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as

> agents in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life and freedom. Literacy in these terms is not the equivalent of emancipation, it is in a more limited but essential way the precondition for engaging in struggles around both relations of meaning and relations of power. To be literate is not to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history, and future. (pp. 10–11)

Here, Giroux crystallizes the concept of critical literacy in this study. While practicing literacy is not the same as being free, it is necessary to the practice of freedom. Following Giroux, I frame the practice of critical literacy as "the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life and freedom." As I read the work of young writers experiencing incarceration, I became interested in how these young people practiced freedom, how they thought about freedom, and what freedom meant to them. I asked, *What does their work offer our understandings of how to practice literacy, how to practice freedom, and how each practice activates the other?*

Critical literacy is enacted when human beings recognize their interactions with the word and the world as potentially powerful and historically significant. Critical literacy involves acts of curiosity, inquiry, praxis, failure, and discovery – all toward a commitment for sustaining more humane social conditions (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Greene, 1986; McLaren, 2015; Morrell, 2008). To practice critical literacy is both to understand that oppression is a historical process which can be and has been resisted and also to position oneself as an active presence in the unfolding of history (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Critical literacy has roots in sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory describes a cycle of human development and cultural change (Cole, 1998; Nasir & Hand, 2006; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Analyzing the dynamic processes of learning and development in children, Vygotsky (1978) proposed an understanding of human development that involves cultural

mediation, the act of employing signs and tools to mediate relationships and interactions between subjects and objects. Sociocultural theorists argue that it is a mistake to think of culture as a noun, an object, a thing-out-there that humans use. Rather, culture is a verb, a doing, a process that is always shaping us as we shape it. Human beings participate in and shape cultural practices. These cultural practices shape and re-shape human beings, who then participate anew in the cultural practices of our communities. Cole (1998) calls this the "mutually constituting" effect of human development (p. 166), while Roth and Lee (2007) describe "persons continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts" (p. 189). Critical literacy involves understanding that our social contexts have changed and can change.

The world as it is does not have to be this way. Critical literacy theorists acknowledge the power of situated literacies to inform social thought and action. Building on the foundational ideas of critical literacy, Gutiérrez (2008) theorizes a "sociocritical literacy" in which "everyday and institutional literacies are reframed into powerful literacies oriented toward critical social thought" (p. 149). Gutiérrez and colleagues (2010) write of "syncretic literacy" that leverages daily and school-based forms of knowledge and literacy. Elsewhere, Gutiérrez (2016) insists that everyday knowledge is fundamental to learning and argues that real learning always involves the reorganization of everyday and formal knowledges.

As long as dominant social systems continue to dehumanize us (Freire, 1970; Wynter, 2003), we must ask, *Whose histories are voiced and whose futures are imagined? Whose knowledges are taught and whose languages are learned? Who is (and who is not) free?* Research in this tradition begins by "asking 'whose literacies' are dominant and whose are marginalized" (Street, 2003, p. 77). This study builds on the theoretical and empirical

foundations of critical literacy research by elevating the knowledges of those who are marginalized, silenced, and ignored: young writers experiencing incarceration.

Critical Social Theory

Critical social theory is "a multidisciplinary framework with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 11). Resting on the premise that knowledge can be used to expand human freedom, critical social theory is concerned with the daily realities of oppression on people's lives and the power they have to transform oppressive systems. Collins (1998) writes that critical social theories are "bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing a group of people differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice" (p. xiv). In this study, the group of people "differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice" are young writers experiencing incarceration. The "central question" facing this group is, *How to be free?*

In his critical examination of social theory, justice, and freedom, Hames-Garcia (2004) argues that those who are or have been incarcerated possess a grounded knowledge of freedom and unfreedom crucial to the epistemological shifts required for social transformation:

> The experience of unfreedom by prisoners (and slaves) can give rise to concrete notions of freedom's possibilities that are more enabling and expansive than those that have preoccupied, indeed dominated, the Western philosophical tradition. (p. xxxvi)

What can we learn about freedom, its possibilities, and how to teach and talk about it from young writers experiencing incarceration? What do they know that historians and philosophers do not

know? What do they know about freedom that teachers and teacher educators cannot know? The aim of this study is to begin answering these questions.

Moreover, there is a long intellectual and political tradition of recognizing that the leaders and thinkers of freedom movements must include the very people who have been rendered unfree by systems of oppression. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective declared that everybody would be free if Black women were free, because the freedom of Black women "would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Black feminist thought teaches that the sociopolitical, economic, and autonomous bodily freedoms that have been denied to Black women on these lands since the enslavement of Africans and their descendants requires the radical restructuring of our social structures – and that Black women must be among the thinkers and leaders of this transformation (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000).

In more recent work within the same tradition, Love (2019) writes that freedom is "impossible without women and queer leaders being the thinkers and doers of abolitionist movements" (p. 11), and Davis (2016) argues that those experiencing incarceration must be invited and included in abolition work because "without their participation and without acknowledging them as equals, we are bound to fail" (p. 26). Hames-Garcia (2004) argues that it is "at least as reasonable to turn to prisoners for a theory of justice and freedom as it is to turn to lawyers, judges, and professional philosophers," (p. xlvi). Building on these foundations of critical social theory, I argue that we must know what freedom means *to* young people experiencing incarceration if we want to work toward freedom *for* young people experiencing incarceration and all others rendered unfree by our current sociopolitical systems.

Transformative Critical Knowledge

My reading of critical literacy and critical social theory recognizes the work of young writers experiencing incarceration as *transformative critical knowledge*. I define transformative critical knowledge (TCK) as a body of knowledge that can generate more justice within social systems and human relationships and is intended to reorder power dynamics and rearrange relationships of power. It is *critical* because of its correlation with justice. I borrow this definition of critical from Collins (1998), who writes that "what makes critical social theory 'critical' is its commitment to justice" (p. xiv). TCK is *transformative* because it is knowledge that is intended to reorder power dynamics and rearrange relationships. Critical knowledge names and interrogates the relationships of power that produce systems of oppression. Transformative critical knowledge is knowledge that is meant to be used to humanize relationships and to transform unjust social structures.

The work of most young writers who are locked up remains largely unseen and unheard. What they are writing and what those writings can teach us ought to be reason enough to explore their work. For those of us working toward a world in which no young person is locked up and the criminalization of young people is inconceivable, the work of young writers experiencing incarceration must be included in broader sociopolitical projects of abolition.

Crucially, one does not come to possess TCK about freedom immediately upon experiencing incarceration. This is not an argument for the enlightenment that occurs during the dehumanization of imprisonment. Hames-Garcia (2004) argues that those who are or have been incarcerated possess a grounded knowledge of freedom and unfreedom that is necessary for the epistemological shifts required for social transformation. But he adds that:

Prisoners do not gain critical knowledge of society through the simple fact of being

imprisoned. Instead, through active struggle against injustice and struggle for freedom and humanity, they are thrust into a location that affords them the opportunity to assess and evaluate the meanings and possibilities of ethical concepts like justice and freedom. (p. xliv)

In their literacy practices, and specifically in their explicit attention to what freedom means, YWEI "struggle[d] for freedom and humanity." This study does not position every YPEI as a source of TCK on freedom, although I would argue that every young person experiencing incarceration has the potential to generate TCK about freedom. Rather, in this study, I center the literacy practices of YWEI who chose to participate in a structured writing workshop and who chose to write about what freedom means to them. The "struggle for freedom and humanity" engaged in by YWEI is manifest in their talk and text about freedom that is the center of this study. Perhaps we do not yet understand what it means for all young people to be free – what would this require of us, individually, and what would this require of us collectively. This is precisely why we need to ask YPEI what freedom is and what it means for their lives.

Positionality

I am a cisgender heterosexual white man who experiences none of the intersectional oppressions related to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, country of origin, citizenship status, and preferred language practices that permeate social relationships in the U.S. In spaces of formal education and schooling, I am always made to feel at home. No one questions the validity of my experiences, thoughts, or stories. No one asks where I am from as a way of interrogating whether I belong. No one asks me to speak for my community or my race. When approached by

police, I never fear for my life, and I have never grieved a brother, sister, son, or daughter killed by the cops.

These privileges are a result of white supremacy, the dominant organizing principle of this nation. Part of who I am, these privileges inform how I learn and teach, as well as how I interact with others, conduct research, ask interview questions, and analyze texts. They affect how I am treated by staff in youth prisons. They also influence how YPEI see me, another white volunteer in a long line of white people visiting them in prison.

As a teacher in multiple spaces and classrooms for more than ten years, I often embraced what I now know to be colonizing forms of pedagogy and epistemology as neutral and natural. Myths of neutrality pervade the system of schooling and the structure of knowledge production in the U.S., where "oppressive power relations often appear natural and neutral rather than socially constructed, political, and historical in origin" (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 450). In fact, educational research has shown that all knowledge and all research is "ontological and situated" (Patel, 2016, p. 5). I have had to learn to honor the reality that all kinds of knowledge, all ways of knowing, and all methods of teaching and research are situated, ontologically and epistemologically, within relationships between people, power, and places. I have had to unlearn ideologies about language and literacy that seemed neutral and natural to me.

For two years after college, I was a language and literacy teacher in the Belize Central Prison. I brought the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* with me on the first day and set about teaching canonical European poetry to young men aged 12 to 20 who were locked up in the youth section of Belize's only prison. I am ashamed to acknowledge that I taught iambic pentameter in that setting. Why didn't we read Belizean poetry? Or Caribbean revolutionary history? Or *Amandala*,

the twice-weekly newspaper that highlighted corruption and crime that was all-too prevalent (or at least believed to be so) in my students' homes, communities, and nation?

I went to Belize with good intentions. But good intentions alone are insufficient for the work of justice. Gayatri Spivak notes the difference between "people who are trying to do really nasty things" and "people who are trying to do decent things out of an unexamined ideology" (as cited in Daza & Tuck, 2014, p. 309). For much of my early career as an educator, my own good intentions were rooted in unexamined ideology. Tuck and Yang (2014) remind us that social science research is not always "ethical, meaningful, or useful for the individual or community being researched" (p. 223) and that even well-meaning research can be harmful. I conducted no research in Belize but I did contribute to a long history of colonization by privileging European epistemologies, literature, and knowledge.

As a graduate student and educational researcher, I have become aware that schooling, formal education, and academic research can be tools of oppression (Grande, 2015; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003). In my ignorance and privilege as a white educator of primarily Black and Brown youth, I have engaged in unintentional oppression in classrooms in Belize, Cleveland, and Seattle. It is important for me to acknowledge this, and to be honest about my own learning and un-learning as I describe the process and product of doing research with YPEI. In this study, I intend to do educational research that is both aware of and resistant to the colonizing force of dominant educational ideologies around languages, literacies, and histories. Given this intention, I now describe the epistemological stance and theory of change at the core of my research.

Epistemological Stance

The fundamental epistemological stance of my research is this: Young writers experiencing incarceration are the experts of their lived experiences. What they know about schooling, policing, and incarceration counts as knowledge. What they know about freedom is knowledge. How they know and how they have come to know these things count, as well. Further, their positionalities enable them to be social critics of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018) in ways that I cannot be. Their knowledges, ideas, and dreams of freedom are essential to work that aims for the transformation of our social order into a more humanizing reality. I am not interested in studying young people experiencing incarceration to demonstrate that I do justice-oriented research with vulnerabilized communities. Rather, I study freedom *with* young people experiencing incarceration to demonstrate that their knowledge is essential to freedom and justice movements everywhere.

The knowledge of young writers experiencing incarceration is rarely perceived as authoritative knowledge. Most knowledge recognized as authoritative is produced in systems of higher education. This kind of knowledge usually privileges classical Western and modern European ways of knowing and being, while erasing Black and Indigenous epistemological and ontological traditions (Grande, 2015; Collins, 2000; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003).

The epistemologies at the foundation of dominant social science methodologies are derived from theories about human beings' participation in and organization of the social orders they inhabit. Individualism, a primary organizing principle of Western epistemology from religion to economics, informs dominant beliefs about what science is, how research works, and how researchers work within it (Patel, 2016; Wynter, 2003). Dominant epistemological traditions in the Westernized Global North center the primacy of the individual within society at the

exclusion of non-competitive communal relationships with other people and places. It follows that the dominant conceptions of freedom within this paradigm are individual, not collective, and that we continue to teach about freedom in ways that hold individual rights paramount. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, many in the U.S. were both overwhelmed and depressed by logics of freedom that defended an individual's right to not wear a mask and ignored the collective desire to limit the spread of a deadly virus.

Black and Indigenous epistemology, as well as Latinx- and Black-feminist theory, show another way (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2016; Grande, 2015; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Patel, 2016; Huber, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003). Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that social scientists must be concerned "with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (p. 20). Tuck and Yang (2014) echo Smith's claim that research is "one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (1999, p. 1), by arguing that research is also a dirty word for many other "communities of overstudied Others" (p. 223). Wynter (2003) reminds us that while we cannot dismiss the dominance of Westernized epistemological systems, we can refuse to recognize their dominance as natural, neutral, or superior.

Central to these knowledges and theories, the meaning of freedom does not stop at individual rights. Freedom is conceived as collective, communal, and interdependent. It is incomplete. It is "a constant struggle" (Davis, 2016). None of us is free until all of us are. As this study shows, I find evidence of these conceptions of freedom in the writing of YPEI, and I argue we should think about this body of knowledge as transformative critical knowledge.

The current sociopolitical climate permits the notion of criminalizable youth and supports, at great economic and ethical expense, the institution of youth prisons. Yet not all

societies do this, and the U.S. has not always done this. The organization of our social life can and does change (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1999). It is the possibility for social transformation that motivates this research and informs this study's theory of change. In this study, I respond to the call issued by Tuck and Yang (2018) "to highlight the ways that seemingly inconceivable futures are *not* inconceivable" (p. 16, italics added). A future in which the U.S. does not conceive of children as criminals is not inconceivable. Educational research must confront the epistemological conditions that make the present sociopolitical climate possible and must offer material and epistemological possibilities for social transformation that reveal and nourish a different sociopolitical future. This is where my research starts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The way I see it, you're probably freest from the ages one to four
Around the age of five you're shipped away for your body to be stored
They promise education, but really they give you tests and scores
And they predictin' prison populations by who scoring the lowest …

- Run the Jewels (2020)

You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free.

- James Baldwin (1963)

In this chapter, I review literature on literacy and freedom. First, I examine the complicated and often contradictory notion of freedom. What does it mean to be free? What has it meant historically, and how does its history inform present understandings and practices of freedom? Next, I frame both literacy and freedom as practices, not achievements, and consider the relationship between them. How, when, and why is the practice of literacy essential to the practice of freedom? How can we transform currently dominant understandings of individual, personal freedom to notions of freedom that are collective, interdependent, and inclusive? Then, I consider what we know about the relationship between schools and prisons. Schools are where society expects young people to learn literacy and prisons are where I find young people practicing literacy in this study. Why, in some cases, are prisons doing the work of schools and schools the work of prisons? Finally, I present scholarship on what we know about the literacy practices of young people experiencing incarceration to show why we must contend with the specific research questions of this study. Throughout this brief section, I hope to make clear that every conception of freedom starts with the same question, *Whose?*

On Freedom

In the context of this study, I define freedom as the pursuit of full humanity for all people. This relationship between freedom and humanization in education is not new. Freire (1998), Greene (1988), and hooks (1994) were explicit about it. Most recently, Love (2019) describes the goal of abolitionist teaching as the "freedom to create your reality, where uplifting humanity is at the center of all decisions" (p. 89). Admittedly, in the present moment, a world in which we honor the humanity of every person is a utopian vision. This world may never be fully achieved. Freedom, as defined in this study, may never be fully achieved. But this, by itself, is no tragedy. It merely inspires the ongoing practice of and struggle for freedom.

Our conceptions of freedom inform how we work for it, what we do with it, and how we think about transforming social systems that include it for some and preclude it for others. Freedom, it turns out, must always be pursued and practiced. Freedom is not something we achieve, like finishing a race, but something that we practice every day, like training for the race. As long as the humanity of some people is denied, nobody is truly free. There will always be more race training to do. In advancing a conception of freedom as practice that is collective, ongoing, and incomplete, I position young writers experiencing incarceration as necessary theorists in our pursuit of freedom and, thus, the humanity of all people.

The Paradox and Practice of Freedom

In her meditations on race and literature, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison illuminates how whiteness relies on Blackness for its meaning, theorizing that Blackness was an absent presence throughout the first two centuries of American literature. It was everywhere and helped define everything, Morrison notes, yet it was absent in

the words and characters of the nation's most celebrated writers. Reading closely from the American literary canon as it was then constructed, Morrison (1992) argued that Blackness is the means through which the white self knows it is "not enslaved, but free, not repulsive but desirable, not helpless but licensed and powerful, not history-less but historical, not damned but innocent, not a blind accident of evolution but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (p. 52). Morrison's argument helped me see the absent presence of freedom in the literary work of young writers experiencing incarceration, an idea I take up more deliberately in Chapter Five. White people, Morrison argued, knew they were free because they were not enslaved Black people. Whiteness depended on Blackness. Freedom depended on unfreedom.

Morrison's revelation on Blackness|whiteness was informed,[3] at least in part, by Orlando Patterson's sociohistorical theory of freedom. Patterson (1987) suggested that freedom only existed as a consequence of slavery. In an essay on freedom, slavery, and the U.S. Constitution, Patterson traced the contours of freedom throughout the history of Western thought and found that freedom did not exist in places without slavery. In times and places without enslavement, freedom was an epistemological redundancy. No one thought of themselves as free because no one was unfree. Freedom, Patterson showed, required unfreedom. "The idea and value of freedom," Patterson writes, "was the direct product of the institution of slavery" (p. 559). Here is the central paradox of dominant notions of freedom today. It only exists where unfreedom does.

Throughout his examination of freedom, including in the rhetoric on both sides of the U.S. Civil War, Patterson asked, What does freedom even mean if it can mean the freedom to enslave others? What does freedom mean if the Northern Union believed it was fighting for the freedom to abolish slavery while, simultaneously, the Southern Confederacy believed it was

[3] Morrison (1992) cites Patterson (1987) in the section of her book on the absent presence of Blackness.

fighting for the freedom to maintain a plantation economy that denied freedom (and humanity) to Black people? The most helpful way to think about freedom, it turns out, is to recognize that freedom is "inherently paradoxical" (Patterson, 1987, p. 547).

The paradoxes of freedom extend to what Hames-Garcia (2004) calls its incompleteness. Drawing on Black liberation theory (Collins, 1998; Davis, 1998), Hames-Garcia argues that the struggle for freedom is always ongoing and, therefore, incomplete. Critical to the conception of freedom as incomplete is the recognition that we understand freedom not as possession but as practice. Hames-Garcia (2004) writes:

> Freedom is something not to be possessed but rather to be enacted and practiced through struggle for the freedom of others. This is a position much indebted to a tradition of theorizing freedom-in-struggle on the part of black slaves, former slaves, and their descendants in the United States. (p. XLIV)

Writing in the Introduction to the 2018 re-issue of Maxine Greene's (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Fine (2018) says that "freedom for self alone was shouting in the wind; freedom with others, especially the most disenfranchised, moved toward justice" (p. ix). Kelley (2002) echoes this sentiment, remembering that for him and those around him growing up in Black Harlem, "free was a verb, an act, a wish, a militant demand" (p. 14).

What we have to understand when we frame freedom as practice is that we do not practice freedom alone. In her philosophical mediations on freedom and education, Greene (1988) implored educators to ask "What does it mean to think forward into a future? To dream? To reach beyond?" (p. 3). We do not think into the future and dream, alone, for ourselves. Our experience of freedom is intertwined and dependent. It is collective. Collective freedom comes out of Black liberation theory deeply entangled with histories of enslavement. One of the more

dehumanizing aspects of slavery was its intentional destruction of families and kin relationships. Hames-Garcia (2004) illustrates this, arguing that because:

> Separation from others was a central experience for blacks under slavery, the struggle for freedom has been in large part a struggle for the freedom to have connections to others. While, on the one hand, freedom from bondage does mean autonomy and freedom from the power of slaveholders, on the other hand emancipation came to mean the possibility of entering into and maintaining binding and meaningful interpersonal relations. (p. XLII)

As long as we consider freedom to be an individual achievement, we cannot say where one person's freedom begins and another's ends. The sociopolitical catastrophe of mask-wearing in the United States during the coronavirus pandemic is evidence of this kind of freedom's paradox. If freedom is purely personal, then everybody is free to choose to wear a face-covering or not. The paradox of freedom, in this sense, depends on whether we accept dominant constructions of freedom as personal and individual.

When we see freedom as a collective, interdependent, and ongoing practice to humanize all of us, there is no freedom paradox in the rhetoric of the Civil War or the coronavirus. Freedom does not mean the freedom to enslave. Freedom does not mean the freedom to refuse life-saving public health recommendations. In their talk and text, young writers experiencing incarceration articulated calls for their own freedom that included demands for the freedom of their friends, homies, and, indeed, "everybody." In these calls, they echoed the centuries-long tradition of understanding that individual freedom that does not include the freedom of others is an incomplete freedom. As the great women's and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1971)

said, “nobody’s free until everybody’s free[4].” This study aims to add the knowledges of young people experiencing incarceration to the tradition of freedom thinkers who envision a more just society for all.

Practicing Literacy, Practicing Freedom

My understanding of literacy is informed by sociocultural theory that maintains literacy is always entangled with relationships of power. Literacy can be used to maintain dominant ideologies of knowledge as well as to resist those same hegemonic ideologies (Gee, 1991; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1993, 2003). Framing literacy as a social practice rather than a neutral cognitive achievement, Street (1993) theorized an ideological model of literacy in which literacies are always socioculturally situated. The multiple literacies practiced by YPEI are informed by their carceral condition. What can we learn from them? What must we learn from them?

Of course, literacy has not always been considered a historical–political act necessary for social transformation. Whereas theorists of the autonomous model of literacy (Goody & Watt, 1963; Olson, 1977) posit that literacy created history and transformed human consciousness, thereby generating modern civilization and democratic governance, theorists in New Literacy Studies show how literacy is a situated, contextual, ideological practice. In this conception of literacy-as-practice or of literacy as a range of varied and variable literacies, we learn that there are no generalizable consequences of literacy that are independent from schooling (Scribner & Cole, 1981); that literacy practices are embedded in cultural practices and mediated through

[4] I acknowledge that I am significantly freer than my co-participant writers who wake up in youth prisons every day, and that the daily power and privileges granted to me as a cishetero white man have real, material effects both on my freedom and on the freedom of others. The argument here is not that we are all equally unfree, but that none of us will ever be fully free until all of us are fully free.

families, communities, and schools (Heath, 1983); and that literacy is always associated with historicized access to power and privilege (Prendergast, 2000). Learners in the third grade navigate gender, race, and sexuality in their literacy practices (Dyson, 1997). High school scholars choose which Englishes to use in different spaces to emphasize literate flexibility and historical consciousness (Fisher, 2007). University student–citizens practice a "sociocritical literacy" to critique hegemonic notions of knowledge construction and meaning-making (Gutiérrez, 2008).

Literacy is always about power. It is also, always, attached to the human body that performs and practices it. As Player and colleagues (2020) remind us, our bodies are always and everywhere "racialized, gendered, and sexed" and often dehumanized by white upper-middle class norms that perpetuate whiteness as literacy's standard (p. 145). Graff (1991) discredits the notion of literacy's power to overcome social inequality, but our belief in a literacy myth persists. What we believe about literacy's potential to grant access, facilitate social mobility, and diminish the wealth gap empowers every skill and technology we call a literacy practice. To name a skill/technology a "literacy" imbues that skill/technology with political clout and cultural weight. Government funding, private investment, and international support for literacy campaigns around the world demonstrate the ongoing influence of literacy's rhetorical power. When literacy is denied, it can be used as a weapon of dehumanization and social control, as it was during the centuries of American chattel slavery (Cornelius, 1991; Williams, 2005) and is now when standardized test scores determine student and school failure (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Literacy can also be used as a tool toward liberation and social transformation. Freire (1970) wrote that "to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes

possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" (p. 29). As I outlined above, the collective pursuit of our full humanity is how I understand freedom, and here I align my research with those who position critical literacy as essential to this pursuit, as it was when enslaved people risked their lives learning to read and write (Cornelius, 1991; Williams, 2005) and is now when young people inspire and imagine new social realities with their words (Fisher, 2007; Watson, 2016; Winn, 2019).

A historical perspective that includes the literacies practiced by non-dominant groups underscores literacy's complex relationship with sociopolitical power. In her study of the antebellum South, Cornelius (1991) documents the brave history of African Americans' literacy practices toward the liberation of their bodies and minds. In the struggle for recognition of their whole humanity and full participation in this country's promised rights and privileges, African Americans have long championed the enfranchising power of literacy. But literacy as practiced by Black students and students from other non-dominant communities is often unrecognized or punished by educational authorities, usually teachers, in schools. In research on the academic and cultural performance of Black students who engage in African American Vernacular English in their English classrooms, Lee (2001) writes that her students "have a form of tacit knowledge that is applicable to the analysis of canonical literary texts" (p. 123). Documenting how Black students bring to their English classrooms "a rich array of knowledge that is useful" in literary analysis, Lee emphasized that Black students' English literacy was a form of useful knowledge, not "a deficit to be overcome" (p. 101). Twenty years later, schools remain places that ignore, neglect, diminish, and penalize the literacy practices of Black students and other students from non-dominant communities (Baker Bell, 2020; Coles et al., 2021; de los Ríos et al., 2019; Martinez, 2017; Player et al., 2020).

Critical literacies are essential to understanding and deconstructing dominant discourses, as well as to resisting and transforming the structures of society that oppress and control (Morrell, 2008). Expanding the notion of literacy beyond reading, writing, and schooling is essential to the foundations of critical literacy – and to this study. As I sat with, wrote with, and listened to young people experiencing incarceration, I acknowledged how they "live, carry, and create new knowledge" that is always informed by positions of "power, privilege, and oppression" (Player et al., 2020). This study offers young people's expertise on freedom as *transformative critical knowledge*. I define transformative critical knowledge (TCK) as knowledge that can generate more justice within social systems and human relationships and is intended to reorder power dynamics and rearrange relationships of power. I theorize that young writers experiencing incarceration possess TCK on freedom and unfreedom based in their experiences of the unfreedom caused by incarceration. I examine how this transformative critical knowledge can expand the visions and imaginaries of freedom that inform educational research, teaching, and learning that are centered in liberation, justice, and joy. Regrettably, such visions are mostly lacking in the two most dominant social structures in the lives of young people today: schools and prisons.

The School/Prison Nexus

The system of formal education developed in the U.S. was not designed to promote critical thinking, develop independent thought, or critique unjust social structures. Schooling was designed for teachers to transfer literacy in academic subjects to students (Graff, 1991). Writing against the myth that literacy bestows gifts of social equality and democratic institutions, Graff identifies schooling's purpose as the "controlled training of children (and sometimes adults) in

literacy" (p. 23). Graff's analysis suggests that post-Industrial Revolution societies needed workers who were moral, properly disciplined, punctual, and obedient. It was school's job to form such workers, and literacy was their tool. Writing more than 20 years after Graff and more than 150 years after the beginning of mass schooling in the U.S., Coates (2015) made clear that much of schooling's original design remains: "I was a curious boy. But the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance" (p. 24).

Literacy, including literacy instruction, has long been instrumental in the maintenance of social inequality. As Coates (2015) and others describe (Anyon, 1997; Kirkland, 2017; Lipman, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Sojoyner, 2016), schools can be violent and traumatic spaces for all kinds of young people. Students of color are punished in school, pushed out of school, and arrested at school at higher rates than white students. Students labeled with a disability also experience disproportionate rates of school punishment and juvenile detention. According to data compiled by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (2014):

- Black students are suspended three times more often than white students, and one in five Black boys experiences out-of-school suspension
- Black girls are suspended six times more often than white girls
- American Indian and Native-Alaskan girls are suspended nearly four times as often as white girls
- Students labeled with a disability are twice as likely to be suspended as students without a disability classification, while 19 percent of all Black girls labeled with a disability experience suspension
- Black students, who comprise 16 percent of total student enrollment, represent 31 percent of all school-related arrests

Longitudinal studies (Wallace Jr. et al, 2008), quantitative case studies (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011), qualitative case studies (Annamma, 2014), mixed methods studies (Shedd, 2015), and ethnographies (Rios, 2011; Winn, 2011) reinforce these findings.

Disproportionately high rates of suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrest often have their origin in the zero-tolerance policies of the 1990s. In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act. This legislation required all states receiving federal education funding to expel for one year and report to the criminal justice system any student in possession of a gun on school property. With this law, Congress intended “zero tolerance” for gun possession at school. Soon, states expanded this zero-tolerance policy for guns to a range of student behaviors, including fighting, vandalism, disobedience, and defiance (Mallett, 2016). As a result of zero-tolerance policies for nonviolent and non-gun-related student conduct, thousands of students have been suspended and expelled from their schools for behavior that would not have previously resulted in school pushout.

Moreover, the subjective nature of student behaviors leading to mandatory suspension or expulsion has resulted in subjective application of zero-tolerance policies that overwhelmingly target students of color and students labeled with a disability (Annamma, 2014; Meiners, 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2014). Researchers seeking to understand these disproportionalities have found that neither students’ socioeconomic status nor their classroom behavior explains the racialized rates of school punishment and pushout (Skiba et al., 2011). Moreover, while school punishment rates declined for other groups after 2000, the rates of school punishment for Black students “continued to rise” (Wallace Jr. et al., 2008, p. 58). The colonizing history of the U.S., in general (Alexander, 2010; Baptist, 2014; Coates, 2014; Du Bois, 1903; Grande, 2015), and schooling, in particular (Anyon, 1997; Du Bois, 1935; Lewis &

Diamond, 2015; Lipman, 2011; Sojoyner, 2016), continues to influence educational policies and practices that most severely exclude and punish students from Black, Brown, Indigenous, and non-dominant communities.

To understand the devastating impact of zero-tolerance policies on students of color, consider how often these policies criminalize innocent and even admirable student behavior. A report by the Civil Rights Project (2000) noted that a fifth-grade Black male was suspended from school for one year after he took two razor blades from a classmate who told him she was going to use them to cut students who were bullying her. When the school found the boy in possession of the blades he was suspended for the year, denied a due process hearing by the school district, and required to repeat fifth grade – even though he was only holding the razor blades because he had successfully prevented an attack on his classmates by another classmate. This fifth grader potentially saved other children from harm and trauma, and he was suspended. Now, consider the likelihood of this suspension ever being issued, much less enforced, if this fifth grade student had been white.

Some of the most shocking stories of children handcuffed by police and violently assaulted by adults in schools have appeared on evening newscasts and in daily newspapers, but the routine criminalization in schools of Black children, of Latinx children, of Indigenous children, and of children labeled with a disability has been normalized. We know that thinking about students as criminalizable depends on their race, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability status (Annamma, 2014; Meiners, 2007; Skiba, et al., 2011; Skiba, et al., 2002; Wallace Jr. et al., 2008; Winn, 2011). We know that being racialized as white affords students great privilege and protection within U.S. schools and that being Black or Brown or labeled with a disability means students are likelier to be punished and pushed out.

Problematizing the "School-to-Prison Pipeline"

Students who are suspended or expelled from school are more likely to be implicated in the juvenile justice system and to enter juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons (Annamma, 2014; Meiners, 2007; Rios, 2011; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Educational researchers, non-governmental organizations, and federal agencies consistently frame this relationship between schooling and incarceration as the school-to-prison pipeline (Redfield & Nance, 2016; Mallett, 2016; NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2005; U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2014; U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights, 2012; Wald & Losen, 2003). The framework of a school-to-prison pipeline is widely accepted in popular discourse as well, from the *Atlantic* and *Time* magazines to *The New York Times* and Associated Press. Recently, however, critical scholarship has troubled the school-to-pipeline framework as insufficient to the phenomenon's reality (Kirkland, 2017; Sojoyner, 2016; Wun, 2017).

Thinking of the relationship between schools and prisons as a pipeline funneling children from schools into jails fails to capture students' resistance and neglects the force of schools' own power to dehumanize and detain students – through curriculum, instruction, and punishment – whether or not young people experience school pushout and juvenile detention or youth incarceration (Sojoyner, 2016). Rather than a one-way pipeline, scholars encourage us to see the relationship between schools and prisons as a web-like nexus of punishment and control (Kirkland, 2017; Meiners, 2007; Sojoyner, 2016; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). They theorize schools as "part and parcel of a U.S. logic of punitive carcerality" (Wun, 2017), understandable through a lens of "enclosure" that implicates the entire structure of U.S. public schooling in the suppression of Black freedom (Sojoyner, 2013). They ask us to see vulnerabilized schools and

communities "as forms of imprisonment" themselves (Kirkland, 2017, p. 469) and they describe the current state of racialized oppression and hyperincarceration, of which the relationship between schools and prison is only one symptom, as the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2008).

Sojoyner (2016) writes of the energy spent trying to ensure that Black children never encounter the physical site of prison even as we fail to see how schools themselves operate as "enclosures" of Black youth and Black liberation. Similarly, Kirkland (2017) writes of young people who attend schools where the doors lock automatically so that no one may enter without permission and are chained from the inside so that no one may leave without authorization, where Black and Brown boys are unironically suspended for missing too many school days, where there are "no pipelines to prison" because it is "all prison" (p. 468).

One way of understanding the relationship between schools and prisons is to see each as a component of a totalizing system of social control. From this perspective, schools and prisons operate within a wider nexus to punish, push out, and detain young people. These are contemporary state institutions charged with manifesting centuries of racialized oppression (Sojoyner, 2013; Wun, 2017), tools-as-spaces within the carceral state that continue to maintain the logics of slavery and white supremacy (Hartman, 2008; Kirkland, 2017). When we understand schools and prisons in these ways – as complementary, state-sponsored institutions tasked with maintaining logics of hyperincarceration with or without prison bars – we are more likely to theorize and design work that addresses the comprehensive transformation of social structures and systems that abolition requires.

Of course, not all schools operate as informal prisons or perform the logics of hyperincarceration. The school-to-prison metaphor is problematic because it also fails to capture students' resistance to carceral logics in schools throughout the country. Camangian (2015)

writes that minoritized students from dispossessed communities in urban U.S. schools "often resist American schooling ideologies because its 'official' curricula silence the voices, sensibilities, and lived experiences of dispossessed youth of color throughout the country" (p. 2). Imani, a student in Camangian's English class, responds to the traditional curricula she encountered throughout her schooling in this way:

> Teachers don't think their students' personal struggles is important. That's the main problem already … What does that have to do with our history right now? It doesn't identify with my community … That's not right cuz we don't know about ourselves. (p. 9)

Leon, another student in Camangian's study, says that engaging in school-based learning for real-life and real-world purposes is "self-stimulating, you know, to be in a classroom and find out like basically what's happening in the world … I feel like I'm writing for a reason" (p. 18).

Scholarship with Indigenous youth at a rural high school in the southwest U.S. reveals a similar concern. Quijada (2011) finds that Indigenous youth "wished adults in school settings understood them as knowledge producers and active social agents" (p. 178). Quijada writes that the youth in her study "seek teachers who value the Indigenous epistemologies they each bring" to school (p. 178). These studies make clear that the function of epistemology in teaching and learning do not depend on setting. Both Camangian (2015) and Quijada (2011) document what most teachers of youth from dispossessed communities know or come to know: students recognize and resist dominant epistemologies that fail to account for the stories, truths, and knowledges of their histories.

Teachers learning with youth from historically dispossessed communities in urban or rural schools must be aware of the epistemologies centered and sidelined in their classrooms and

curricula. Quijada also notes the frequency of this gap in teacher education programs, writing that "time and again school administrators and some teachers did not seize the students' and parents' cultural assets to build a positive campus climate or strengthen family–community–school partnerships" (p. 175). The call, then, goes out to teacher education programs to prepare teaching candidates to embrace pedagogies that aim to teach students about themselves, toward liberation, justice, and joy.

I do not dismiss the work of teachers, school psychologists, nurses, teaching aids, social workers, and bus drivers who work in schools so that our children can experience joyful and curious learning. Indeed, I want to acknowledge the work of so many thousands of educators in schools around the country who have worked or are working tirelessly to resist and disrupt punitive policies and carceral logics. I highlight critical theories about the similarities between schools and prisons to urge those of us who want to stop young people from being locked in prison to look beyond schools and think more comprehensively and critically about the network of all our social systems. To resist the racialization of children in schools and the criminalization that too often accompanies children's racialization, we need research to critique and redesign the organization of all our social systems (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

This study asks questions about freedom to young writers experiencing incarceration because the experience of their incarceration and unfreedom drives their desire for freedom in ways that non-incarcerated others do not know. In fact, questions of what freedom is and what it means should be asked in all educational settings, and educational research should begin to build a foundation of freedom-knowledge produced by young people today. In the next section, I examine scholarship on the writing and literacy practices of young people experiencing

incarceration to show how young people resist their incarceration through multiple literacy practices and why a study exploring their definitions and dreams of freedom is necessary.

Incarcerated Practices of Literacy

While there is plenty of scholarship on writing and schooling within prisons (Appleman, 2013; Fine & Torre, 2006; Rodríguez, 2006; Vaught, 2017; Young et al., 2010), there is less published research on the literacy practices of YPEI that are not connected to school curricula. We know that the impact of mandatory prison education for young people is always complicated and often dreadful (Vaught, 2017). Young and colleagues (2010) find that studies in youth prisons often focus on rates of recidivism and not on learning, development, or even academic growth. To counter that trend, they ask questions to understand the nature of prison schooling and its affordances and constraints on learning. They find that for some students, the attention and intention of prison schooling is helpful, beneficial, and supportive. Of their study's limitations, the authors write that it would be productive to examine similar research questions "across a variety of youth prison settings" (p. 219). By conducting this study in two different youth prisons, my work seeks to address this limitation. In the rest of this section, I highlight three studies that explore young people's literacy practices unconnected to school and what writing in these contexts affords those experiencing incarceration. What these studies have in common is what I argue is necessary going forward for educational research and what Winn (2012) has already articulated: young people experiencing incarceration "have the right to name what they believe needs to change in the world around them in order to live the lives they desire" (p. 320). This idea stands at the center of my research.

Scholarship shows that young people experiencing incarceration are resisting the effects of criminalization in artistic ways, need a space and audience to share their knowledges, and find the opportunity to historicize their pasts and design their futures through writing. In a multi-sited ethnography, Winn (2011) finds that playwriting provides a "pedagogy and performance to transform experiences" for formerly incarcerated young girls and young girls experiencing incarceration, as well as for the adult researchers and artists involved in the voluntary creative arts playwriting program Girl Time (p. 19). Winn crystallizes the theory of change at work in my study: young people experiencing incarceration are bright, brilliant, and creative; they think critically about social systems affecting their lives; and they have knowledge we can learn from. Rejecting the idea of educators and programs giving voice to young people, Winn positions young people who have their own ideas, experiences, imaginations, and critiques as already-voiced. They do not need other people or programs to give them voice. What young people need is "space, an opportunity, and an engaged audience so they can share their voices" (Winn, 2011, p. 20). As I discuss later, my own ethnographic work supports these findings. What makes Writing is Our Right so powerful is the consistent space, the consistent opportunity, and the consistent audience it provides young writers.

In empirical work on the criminalization of girls of color who had been labeled with a disability, Annamma (2016) shows how educational mapping can afford new understandings of resistance to/within the carceral state. Annamma finds young people resisting the state's carceral logic, defined as the "commonsense notion of society" that maintains "safety and order through unquestioned social control (p. 2). Theorizing around the removal and incarceration of unwanted bodies (in Annamma's study, these bodies are Black, female, Queer, and labeled with a disability), Annamma positions the young women in her study as experts at navigating the

dangerous situations in their lives "with savvy and ingenuity" through writing, drawing, and talking about their work (p. 18). Criminalized, removed from their homes and communities, and incarcerated, the young people working with Annamma show that acts of resistance can be mediated through arts and literacies. As I read the work of young writers experiencing incarceration, and as I discuss in Chapter Five, I found hundreds of examples of savvy and ingenious resistance work on the pages of the *Writing is Our Right* magazine, often by young people trying to write a new future into being.

In their work on the published writing of young people who voluntarily participate in creative writing classes in Los Angeles County detention centers, Christianakis and Mora (2018) find that young writers experience a "critical examination" of self and re-write their pasts and presents while looking to create or design their possible futures (p. 55). These findings demonstrate one of the many affordances of writing for young people experiencing incarceration – writers use writing to bring their future lives into their present lives. When you are a young person locked up in the U.S., sometimes nothing is more important than the future. Especially when that future is defined by your freedom.

Every writer who participated in Writing is Our Right workshops desired freedom. I believe these young people, who have had so much taken away from them, have the right to name what freedom means to them and what they want freedom to look like in their worlds. In work outside of literacy and incarceration, Engeström (1999) writes that "the most important aspect of human activity is its creativity and its ability to exceed or transcend given constraints" (p. 27). Young people experiencing incarceration possess a critical creativity that often transcends the material and psychological constraints of their imprisonment. Their work is necessary for all of us.

Chapter Three: Methods

Want to know how many bricks are in my room? Three-hundred-and-ninety-five with the concrete slabs. I want my freedom back.

- Aaron

For two years I engaged in a multi-sited ethnographic study of youth prison writing workshops in Northern California as I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the salient characteristics of the Writing is Our Right program?
2. When afforded time and space in structured writing workshops, what do young people experiencing incarceration write about?
3. How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?

I had not formulated all three questions when I began this ethnographic research. As I came to understand how Writing is Our Right (WOR) operates and what it affords young people participating in its writing workshops, the second question became important to understanding why YPEI were writing and what they used writing for. I read thousands of pieces written in WOR workshops to understand this meaning-making activity and answer RQ2. In the course of my analysis to understand what YPEI were writing about, I discovered a singular answer. In some ways, they were always writing about freedom. Thus, the third RQ emerged, presenting a new methodological opportunity that I will discuss below.

In this chapter, I describe my methods of data collection and analysis. I begin with the selection of my research partner and research sites before describing the co-participants of this study. Then, I detail the types of data I collected along with my coding and analytical processes.

Finally, I describe how I resist damage-centered research and build on theories of desire-based research (Tuck, 2009). First, however, I describe my understanding of ethnographic research and how this impacted my approach to asking and answering my research questions.

Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research describes the patterns of ideas, beliefs, and practices of predetermined sets of people through detailed fieldwork, including participant-observation, interviews, and alternate sets of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the purposes of this study, I leveraged the methods of ethnography to understand why some YPEI participated in writing workshops and what their writing meant to them. Ethnographic methods "enable the researcher to explore what's significant and at stake for writers at specific sociohistorical moments" (Lillis, 2008, p. 367). As I discovered what was "significant and at stake" for YWEI, I explored how they defined freedom. My methods included participant-observation in and facilitation of writing workshops, close textual analysis of thousands of writing samples, and semi-structured, open-ended interviews with young writers and adults involved in the production of *Writing is Our Right*, a bi-weekly publication of writing and art by young people experiencing incarceration.

Madison (2011) describes ethnographic work as the coming-together of researcher positionality, dialogic meaning-making, and the "doing … of theory" (p. 15). I discussed my own positionality in Chapter 1 and expand on that later in this chapter as I assume the specific role of educational researcher. In the rest of this chapter, I describe the dialogic meaning-making that happened throughout data collection and analysis. First, however, I discuss two theories of ethnography and show how I attempted to do ethnographic theory as Madison (2011) articulates.

Multi-sited Sensibility in Ethnographic Research

An important critique of ethnographic research interrogates the boundedness of ethnography situated in just one location. Asking what happens when we conceive of learning as it happens across time and space and setting, Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2014) posit that any phenomenon should be described and understood "across a minimum of two activity systems" (p. 604). Because an ethnographic study of youth prison writing that is limited to one youth prison limits our understanding of the phenomenon of writing to what appears to happen in that specific space, ethnographic work of youth prison writing that attends to Vossoughi and Gutiérrez would require description and analysis of young people's movement across/through time and space, following participants from prison writing workshops to their court appointments, meetings with lawyers, family visits, travel home, and return to school.

I did not achieve the type of multi-sited ethnographic work Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2014) call for. It was not feasible to follow young writers experiencing incarceration across the various settings of their lives to better understand how meaning-making activities of the prison writing workshop "take hold" (p. 604).[5] And yet, it is not only multiple sites of data collection and analysis that define multi-sited ethnography, but multiple and new definitions of field work (Marcus, 2009), including the "willingness to imagine and pursue questions in unconventional ways" (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014, p. 606). By visiting two different youth prisons in two different sociocultural spaces, I was able to broaden my research within the arguments of Marcus and Vossoughi and Gutiérrez.

In this study, I define multi-sited as the collection and analysis of data in two distinct geographic and demographic spaces: Central County Youth Prison (CCYP) and Northern County

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[5] To my knowledge, such detailed research across activity systems for people experiencing incarceration would be prohibited by State Departments of Corrections and university Institutional Review Boards.

Youth Prison (NCYP). Each of these youth prisons detains different numbers of young people from different homes and life experiences, the contexts of which I detail below. I chose these sites to confirm and disconfirm findings that may have been found to be valid in the context of only one prison writing workshop, and I discuss the particular contexts of CCYP and NCYP later in this chapter.

Critical Bifocality in Ethnographic Research

Weis and Fine (2012) describe critical bifocality as the "dedicated theoretical and empirical attention to structures and lives" in research design and practice (p. 174). They write that educational research must attend to the contextualized effects of social structures on the meaning-making activities of individuals and communities. Research within a critical bifocality framework recognizes that macro-level systems and structures limit individual thought, action, response, and resistance. Critical bifocality does not suggest a singular focus on the structural organization of oppressive systems, nor does it recommend an isolated gaze upon individual response to oppression. The key to critical bifocality is "linking ethnographic data to relevant facets of overall structural context" so that research does not ignore the effects of the social, cultural, historic, and economic pressures on individual and communal meaning-making activity (p. 185). I understand my third research question – *How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?* – as the link between the ethnographic data of RQ1 and RQ2 and "the relevant facets of overall structural context" faced by young people experiencing incarceration.

Selecting the Research Partner

I first heard about Writing is Our Right when I was a graduate student in a school of education at a public research university in Northern California. The Founder and Executive Director of Writing is Our Right visited an undergraduate class for which I was a Teaching Assistant as we discussed issues of educational equity, justice, and the school/prison nexus. Shortly after that visit, I contacted WOR about becoming a volunteer facilitator for the organization's writing workshops. I offered ten years of experience as an educator in classrooms and youth prisons, as well as the resources I could access as a graduate student at a large, public research university. I attended WOR orientations in the summer of 2017, followed by an orientation at Central County Youth Prison that included fingerprinting, an FBI background check, and the printing of my Probation Department photo identification badge. I sat in my first writing circle on September 27, 2017, and subsequently participated in more than 100 writing workshops with YPEI in Central County Youth Prison and Northern County Youth Prison, both located in Northern California.

Throughout this time, I attempted to honor the perspectives and positionalities of the young people participating in WOR writing workshops. I was both a listener and a writer. I led workshops by myself and I co-facilitated with two or three other volunteers. I showed up, consistently, for two years. In these ways I developed relationships with the young people experiencing incarceration and the staff and volunteers of Writing is Our Right that made ethnographic research theoretically possible and ethically permissible.

Selecting the Research Sites

I selected two different youth prisons as primary sites for my research into the literacy practices of young people experiencing incarceration. Methodologically, each presented usefully distinct contexts for answering my research questions. In their geographic and demographic contexts, the Central County Youth Prison and Northern County Youth Prison could hardly be more different (see Table 3.1). I anticipated different populations in the two spaces, and this proved correct. Most young people in CCYP were Latinx or white and had grown up in the suburbs or exurbs of a major metropolitan area; most young people in NCYP were Black and had grown up in the diverse neighborhoods of a major metropolitan city. What I had not anticipated and could not have known before my own ethnographic research, was the distinct social atmospheres of WOR workshops in CCYP and NCYP.

Table 3.1 – Central County & Northern County Youth Prison Contexts (2018)

Site	Location	Max Capacity	Avg Daily Population	Avg Stay (days)
Central County	Rural	90	6	24
Northern County	Urban	426	124	29

Central County Youth Prison

Located roughly 10 miles from a large public research university, CCYP was renovated in 2005 and has a maximum capacity of 90 young people. It is divided into three units, each of which has two classrooms; a common room with tables, chairs, and couches; bathrooms and shower stalls; and space for medical attention. I began facilitating writing workshops at CCYP in

September 2017 and facilitated over 100 writing workshops in that setting. Often, there were fewer than 10 young people detained there at any time, and our writing workshops were always small, ranging from 1 to 12 participants. In CCYP, young men and young women participated in the same workshops.

Northern County Youth Prison

Located 10 miles from the metropolitan city center of a mid-sized city and roughly 25 miles from a large public research university, NCYP was built in 1963 and has a maximum capacity of more than 400 young people. A large, labyrinthine complex, it is attached to the county's juvenile court on the city's southeast side. It is divided into 17 units, each of which has two classroom spaces, a common area with tables and chairs, bathroom and shower stalls, and space for medical attention. I began facilitating writing workshops at NCYP in September 2018 and facilitated more than 50 writing workshops after that time.

While over 100 young people were incarcerated in NCYP on a daily basis, WOR held workshops for far fewer, meeting in only 4 of its 17 units. Staff at both WOR and NCYP thought that a consistent presence would be best, so we held WOR workshops in the same four units every other week rather than cycling through the entire facility. Unlike at CCYP, young women experiencing incarceration were detained in a separate unit, and WOR had not yet arranged to facilitate writing workshops with young women at NCYP while I was facilitating.

Workshop Differences in CCYP and NCYP

Writing is Our Right workshops at the Central County Youth Prison took place during evening free time. This meant that no one was compelled to attend, and young people could

choose to play Xbox, make phone calls, or play cards instead of participating in the writing workshop. The young people attending WOR at CCYP were choosing writing over other entertainment options. Thus, WOR workshops at CCYP were almost always lighter in mood, with young people actively choosing to attend.

WOR workshops at NCYP were also held in the evening but, as part of NCYP procedures, were considered part of programming. This meant that, like CCYP, no one was compelled to attend, but, unlike CCYP, there was only one other option – to stay in your cell. Very few young people at NCYP ever chose to stay in their cells. As a result, the dynamics of NCYP writing workshops were heavier, more stressful. In WOR workshops at NCYP, young people more often came to the workshop asking why they had to be there, angry at guards or peers for what had happened earlier that day, and generally more ready to resist what they considered a mandatory program taking away the little free time they were ever granted. Surely, how one thinks about freedom in a writing workshop depends on whether one feels that their participation in the workshop is a matter of choice or coercion.

Research Co-participants

Rather than differentiate between researchers and research participants, I choose the term "co-participants" to describe everyone who participated in this study, including myself. The term "co-participants" more accurately describes the relationship young writers and I had to the knowledge production present on these pages. Green (2014) writes that humanizing research "is a collaborative process to be engaged in by both the researcher and participants," and that is how I position my research (p. 156). When sitting in WOR writing workshops, I was a co-participant with every other person who agreed to participate in this study. As I write these pages now, far

away from the prison classrooms in which we wrote together for *Writing is Our Right*, I depend on their talk and text. We remain co-participants in the exploration of their literacy practices. There are five sets of co-participants in this study, including myself (see Table 3.2), and I detail their relationship to and participation in this research below.

Table 3.2 – Study Co-participants

Participants	Number	Interviews
Young Writers Published in *WOR* Magazine	3,000+	no
Focal Writers	5	yes
WOR Staff	2	yes
Prison Staff	2	yes
Educational Researcher	1	no

Young People Participating in Writing is Our Right Workshops

The young people participating in Writing is Our Right are the center of this study. Their writing and thinking inspired my research questions. This study relies on the young people who chose to participate in the Writing is Our Right program and agreed to talk to me about their writing and their understandings of freedom. I do not claim that the writing samples I collected and analyzed are representative of all YPEI throughout the U.S., or Northern California, or even the specific youth prisons in which these pieces were first written and read. Moreover, much of the writing collected and analyzed here was produced by young people I have never met. WOR workshops occur in dozens of youth prisons throughout the country. While my ethnographic work was centered in just two youth prisons, my data collection of writing samples included all

writing by YPEI published in *Writing is Our Right* magazine. This was a product of intentional design.

Populations at youth prisons are always fluid, indeterminate, and dependent on multiple variables beyond the control of any researcher. The process of scheduling an interview and obtaining parental consent took weeks. In this time, a young person might be released, and it was and remains my position that a young person being released from youth prison is always good.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the social transformation of a world that does not incarcerate its children. I never wanted to be in the position of relying on young people to be incarcerated so that I could collect data. I never wanted the young people who were locked up to be there when I came back in a week or two. But how could I ever interview anyone if I never saw them again? If I had limited my data collection and analysis to work by writers I came to know through ethnographic research, I would only have been able to rely on a few youth perspectives. For example, there were multiple young people who agreed to be involved in interviews who could not obtain parental consent or were released or transferred before I returned for our scheduled interview.

Therefore, I relied primarily on the WOR magazine for writing sample data. The inclusion of writing sample data from all writers published in *WOR* was a consequence of methodological design intended to include as many young writers' writing and conceptions of freedom as I could possibly collect. As I detail below, I was able to conduct five interviews with "focal writers," but I was never able to rely and did not want to rely on certain young people remaining locked up so that they could participate in this research. The only source of data I was certain would always be there was the *WOR* magazine.

Focal Writers

For the purposes of this study, I defined “focal writer” as a young person with at least three appearances in WOR writing workshops who wanted to talk with me about their writing outside of WOR workshops and expressed interest in participating in this research study. On several occasions, a young person who indicated they wanted to sit down for an interview could not obtain parental consent or would be released before we could schedule an interview. This happened with three young women who initially expressed interest in participating. Because all participants under 18 years of age had to obtain parental consent in order for me to conduct an interview, and because obtaining parental consent (in the form of signing a hard copy of the consent form) from a young person incarcerated in a youth prison is often inconvenient and occasionally impossible, four of the five focal writers are 18 years old. Because they were 18, Oscar, Carlos, Miles, and Jack were permitted (by IRB protocol and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) to sign consent forms for themselves. Elijah was the only writer under 18 who met the qualifications of this study’s definition of focal writer and was able to obtain parental consent before being released. In Elijah’s case, his mother signed the consent form during their weekly visit together. I discuss the logistical challenges of obtaining parental consent for a young person experiencing incarceration in greater detail below. Here, I introduce this study’s five focal writers who agreed to talk with me about writing and freedom.

Oscar. Oscar was a consistent, quiet presence in WOR workshops. Like me, he was a father to a one-year-old girl. Unlike me, he only saw her once a week when his family would visit the Central County Youth Prison. On some nights, his writing took the form of a letter to his little girl, which he would send to her mama to read aloud and store safely for the future when his daughter could read his letters on her own. Oscar was a serious writer in WOR, distancing

himself from the usual chatter and playful (and sometimes not-so-playful) insults of the workshop space. He was a prolific writer, always submitting a piece for the next issue of the magazine, but as he told me in our interview, he did not write much outside of WOR. He appreciated the workshop space to share his piece with others and to talk about what he was trying to say in his writing. When I interviewed him, Oscar had been waiting for three months to be transferred to a prison for adults. The weight of everyday uncertainty and the future unknown was heavy on him, and he told me that he was anxious about a lot of it but mostly what the change would mean for his family. It was easy for them to visit him here at CCYP, but the location of the adult prison where he would be transferred was more difficult for them to access.

Carlos. Carlos was also stressed about the uncertainty of where he would be next week. We spoke on a Tuesday and he had a court appointment in three days. Carlos had been locked up at the CCYP for more than a year and said he didn't know what would happen at court on Friday. The judge might send him back here; the judge might send him home; the judge might send him to an adult prison. Carlos displayed a nonchalance about this uncertainty that might only come from having endured months of unresolved court appointments. Carlos had received his high school diploma from the continuation school that operated inside the youth prison. He had graduated "inside," and he told me he felt a sense of accomplishment about that. He was now taking online classes in audio engineering – mixing and mastering tracks – and hoped that skill, along with his prodigious rhymes, would lead to a future career as a musical artist, specifically as a rapper. He emphasized that he only started rapping a year ago and it was programs like WOR that built his confidence to be ready to rap in front of anybody at any time. Carlos told me he did not write before being incarcerated because schoolwork was not something "you enjoy," and that "time [inside this youth prison] made me a writer." When I asked Carlos about any relationship

between writing and freedom, he was emphatic: writing did not make him feel free. “Not at all,” he said, shaking his head.

Miles. Miles was eager to talk to me, and it soon became clear that he considered his writing a vocation, a craft, his calling. We met in a visitor’s room at the Northern County Youth Prison and he brought four pieces for us to review and critique together. Miles told me that he writes for “myself, my family, and life” and that writing helps him “grow spiritually, like music.” Like Carlos, Miles wrote lyrics that were meant to be performed more than read on a page. He considered himself a “lyrical artist” and he was not shy about spitting rhymes in any setting. In our WOR workshops, he often had the most impressive, multi-syllabic rhymes, and sometimes the seriousness with which he intoned his words had other guys laughing at him. Miles’s writing was philosophical if not always clear, and others in the workshop would joke at his seriousness, challenging him on rhymes that didn’t make sense to them. Our interview took the shape of a writer who was proud of his work asking for praise and critique. Even as I tried to get through the interview script, I was sensitive to the fact that this one-on-one time with his writing was special for Miles. I asked Miles about his dreams for himself and he said he wanted to be “living on a beach looking at the sky, breathing fresh air, spending the rest of time with my family.” Before we ended, he asked if we could do it again – “it” being me come to the youth prison and schedule an “interview” where he would bring more writing for us to dissect. I was happy Miles wanted to continue thinking about writing with me and agreed to schedule a follow-up with his program coordinator. Less than two weeks later, I received an e-mail from the Program Coordinator apologizing that Miles would not be available to speak with me again, since he had just celebrated his 19th birthday and was being transferred to an adult prison the next day.

Jack. At the start of every interview with a focal writer, I asked if they had any questions for me and then if they could say in their own words what this study was about. Jack asked, "What is a dissertation exactly?" and as I started to explain the process of my Ph.D. and that my dissertation was an ethnographic study, he interrupted me, "No, no. I know a Ph.D. I go to college. I know what autoethnography is." Jack was taking sociology through online college courses offered at the NCYP and did not need me to explain ethnography to him; he just wanted to understand what a dissertation was. Recently, Jack had received his first visit from his dad, whose own life was disrupted by drugs and jail, and Jack had shown him an issue of *Writing is Our Right* in which one of his pieces had been selected as a Piece of the Week. He told me he knew his dad was proud of him, and his writings in WOR were one reason why. I asked Jack if he thought of himself as a writer. He pointed to the issue of *Writing is Our Right* on the table and smiled, "Now that I'm published." Jack distinguished between reading and writing when he thought of freedom. Writing was about encouraging others and being published in *WOR* inspired him to continue to write uplifting messages that would encourage people like him who were locked up. It was reading, for Jack, that made him feel free, that allowed him to escape the mundane reality of his cell. Jack had turned 18 in the youth prison and he told me that this was never a part of his plan. "If you had told me earlier this year, when I was 17 and a half, that I would turn 18 in the detention facility, I would have looked at you like you're crazy."

Elijah. Elijah was frustrated when he sat down to talk with me. He had just been to court that morning, his tenth court appearance since being locked up six months ago. I asked him what had happened and he told me it was the same as every other time. He is in court "for about a minute" and then "they decide to push it back a month." His next court date was set for the end of next month. Elijah was 15 when we talked, and he had expressed the most interest in

participating in this study, a notion supported by the fact that he was the only focal writer under 18 who obtained parental consent to participate. Elijah's mother visited him regularly, and our interview was interrupted by a visit by her that he was expecting since she had also been present at his court appointment that morning. Elijah told me that he had recently read a quote that meant a lot to him and I asked if he would share it with me. He did, both by repeating it and by writing it down for me to take with me: "Experience is a hard teacher. It gives the test first, then the lesson afterwards." Elijah explained that he felt his current life situation was a reflection of the wisdom in this quote. Elijah felt that he had failed one of life's tests and now was locked up in this youth prison, learning the lessons. Elijah told me that his dreams for the future included going to college and playing basketball. He acknowledged that if he didn't make it playing ball he wanted to study the law. He told me, "I want to become a lawyer, so I can help kids who've gone through what I've gone through. I can counsel them, but I can also defend them, because I got experience in this."

Writing is Our Right Volunteers and Staff

Writing is Our Right relies on the work of dozens of volunteers to facilitate weekly writing workshops. I wanted to know how these adults made sense of their participation in youth prison writing workshops, what informs their own ideas of freedom, and whether their conceptions of freedom were influenced or changed by the young writers they encountered in their work. To explore these perspectives, I interviewed the organization's Executive Director and one WOR volunteer workshop facilitator.

José was Lead Volunteer for Writing is Our Right at the Central County Youth Prison. I sat in almost 50 writing workshops with José. As a young man, José was incarcerated for seven

years in the Southern Youth Prison – and during that time he participated in WOR writing workshops. As a current WOR volunteer and a formerly incarcerated person who participated in WOR, José possessed a unique perspective on the role, impact, and meaning of Writing is Our Right in the lives of YPEI. I was interested in how José positioned himself as an adult volunteer in the writing circles in which he sat and wrote ten years ago. I also wanted to know to how José understood freedom and the role of writing and WOR in his pursuit of freedom. I interviewed José at a table in his backyard for more than one hour.

Dante is Executive Director and Founder of Writing is Our Right. He facilitates writing workshops in several youth prisons in California and occasionally travels to WOR's out-of-state workshops. As Founder, Dante has unique knowledge of the organization's purpose, growth, and change. I wanted to understand the history and context of WOR, as well as to know how Dante understood freedom and its role in the short- and long-term goals of this work. I interviewed Dante on the phone while he was driving to a youth prison workshop for just under one hour.

Staff of the Northern and Central County Probation Departments

Both the Northern and Central County Probation Departments have contracts with Writing is Our Right, and both departments have determined that the work of Writing is Our Right complies with institutional guidelines and regulations. I was interested in why these institutions allow the work of Writing is Our Right, as well as what the institutional goals are for the young people who participate in WOR writing workshops. I wanted to know the personal motivations of adults working in these youth prisons and to understand how they understood their professional roles and responsibilities in the lives of YPEI. I interviewed Maria, Program Coordinator of the Central County Youth Prison, for 43 minutes in her office. I interviewed

Jennifer, Program Coordinator of the Northern County Youth Prison, for 43 minutes in her office, as well.

Educational Researcher

I am a white, cisgender male who benefits in both subtle and explicit ways from a social system built on white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and settler colonialism. I have learned that the historical and philosophical foundations of schooling were meant to privilege me and my ways of being and knowing, while dehumanizing Black and Brown and Indigenous and Queer ways of being and knowing. Every classroom and learning space I have ever been in seems to have been designed for me. No one questions the validity of my experiences, my thoughts, or my stories. No one asks where I am from as a way of interrogating whether I belong. In the world of formal education and schooling, I am always made to feel at home.

I now know that schooling, formal education, and academic research can be tools of intentional and unintentional oppression (Grande, 2015; Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999; Wynter, 2003). In my ignorance and privilege, I have been an educator engaged in unintentional oppression in classrooms and learning spaces for more than ten years. It is important for me to acknowledge this, and to be honest about my own learning and un-learning as I engage in this research with young people experiencing incarceration in Northern California. It is my intention to do educational research that is both aware of and resistant to the dehumanizing force of unexamined educational ideologies around languages, literacies, and histories.

As an educational researcher, I am committed to humanizing research methodologies that center the brilliance of young people as they navigate and resist dominant, oppressive social systems. In this research, I center the writing of YPEI. I diversify the conversations around

prison abolition and the politics of liberation by including the creative–intellectual work of young people whom our systems have rendered most unfree. They have something to teach us about the kind of freedom we say we are fighting for, and any movement oriented toward freedom and justice must include their dreams and desires.

Data Collection

The multi-sitedness of my ethnographic study meant weekly writing workshops at two different youth prisons, one in Northern County and one in Central County. These writing workshops are facilitated by Writing is Our Right, a non-profit arts organization that publishes a magazine of writing and art by young people experiencing incarceration throughout California and several other states. I detail the history and purpose of Writing is Our Right in Chapter Four.

Aligned with ethnographic theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Madison, 2011), I collected data from different places, people, and perspectives. In youth prison writing workshops, I wrote participant-observation fields notes to document the meaning-making activity of participants. I conducted open-ended interviews with nine individuals (five youth and four adults) to better understand the goal-oriented activity of the writing workshops and young writers' conceptions of freedom. For nine months, I collected every issue of *Writing is Our Right* (published bi-weekly) and read every piece composed by a young person in a youth prison. Using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti.[6], I read and coded more than 6,000 pieces of writing to determine what young people in prison writing workshops were writing about.[7] Table 3.3 presents the different types of data I collected in this study. In the following sections, I

[6] I discuss the tools used for data collection and organization below.
[7] Between September 2019 and April 2019, I read and coded 6,028 individual writing samples published in *Writing is Our Right*.

describe the field notes, interviews, and writing samples that make up the data I analyzed to answer my research questions.

Table 3.3 – Data Collected

Site	Workshop Hours	Field Notes	Interviews	Writing Samples
Central	100+	2017-2019	Youth = 2 Admin = 1	81
Northern	50+	2018-2019	Youth = 3 Admin = 1	265
Writing is Our Right	n/a	n/a	Staff = 1 Volunteer = 1	6,028

Participant Observation Field Notes

As a writing workshop facilitator for Writing is Our Right, I was a participant-observer in writing workshops in two youth prisons for more than two years (September 2017 – December 2019). DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) outline the foundational activities of participant observation, including living in the social setting of the research context, using local languages, participating in activities with people in context, treating daily conversations as data, paying attention to free time activity, and writing field notes.

My participant observation in prison writing workshops did not include all of these. I could not, for instance, live in any of the youth jails I was visiting. And because of the time constraints on our presence as volunteers in these spaces, there was little time for me to hang out with young people outside of our writing circles. In fact, all time is structured and surveilled in these settings and there is little free time available to the young people therein at all. One might reasonably suggest that there is no such thing as "free time" in a youth prison. However, I used

the language of young people experiencing incarceration in my analysis; participated with writers in the context of the writing circle; wrote robust field notes; and analyzed text, talk, documents, and interview data. Participant observation activities thus improved the quality of my data collection and analysis and provided important ethnographic data I could only collect by being in the writing workshops (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

From my participation and observation in these spaces, I wrote ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al., 2011) developed from jottings during my time in the workshop and voice memos I recorded afterwards. Following DeWalt and DeWalt (2011), I substantiated my field notes with other ethnographic data sources, including individual interviews, institutional documents, and writing samples published in *Writing is Our Right* magazine.

Interviews

I conducted intensive, open-ended (Charmaz, 2006) interviews with five young writers who participated frequently in WOR writing workshops and four adults involved in WOR workshops and *WOR* magazine publication. Two of these adults were program coordinators at each youth prison who did not regularly participate in workshops. The other two adults were WOR's Executive Director and Founder and a fellow volunteer workshop facilitator. Tables 3.4 and 3.5 present background information for the interviews. (Appendices A, B, C, and D present interview protocol.)

When I interviewed young writers about their writing and their ideas of freedom, I would begin and end by asking asked them to ask me questions. They often asked why I was doing this. I told them that I believed they were experts on an important problem in the world, and that it was my goal to share their expert knowledge on what freedom really is all about.

Table 3.4 – Interviews, Adult Co-participants

Name	Location	Length	Recorded	Date (2019)
Maria, CC Program Coordinator	CC Youth Prison	43:48	yes	Aug 13
José, WOR Volunteer	Jose's home	1:13:10	yes	Nov 02
Dante, WOR Executive Director	Phone call	44:01	yes	Nov 06
Jennifer, NC Program Coordinator	NC Youth Prison	43:11	yes	Dec 02

Table 3.5 – Interviews, Focal Writers

Name	Location	Length	Recorded	Date (2019)
Oscar	CC Youth Prison	55:00	no	June 18
Carlos	CC Youth Prison	30:00	no	July 09
Miles	NC Youth Prison	53:00	no	Aug 14
Jack	NC Youth Prison	42:00	no	Dec 12
Elijah	NC Youth Prison	50:00	no	Dec 12

One limitation of research with YPEI is the high rate of turnover within a youth prison. Court dates are fluid, as are the decisions of judges, attorneys, and probation officers. It often took at least four weeks, and, in at least one case, more than a year, to develop any kind of relationship with young people from which I could pursue interviews. Furthermore, I could never be sure that a young person who agreed to an interview would be present in the institution when I arrived for our scheduled interview.

In one instance, I began the process of obtaining consent from the parents/guardians of two writers who had agreed to participate in the research. Before the week was out, both had been released. In another case, a writer expressed interest in participating in the research and we waited for her mother's weekly visit to read and sign the consent form. In the first week, mom did not come for the visit. In the second week, mom came but the writer was now uncertain about participating. When I came back for a writing workshop in the third week, the writer asked me about the research and expressed renewed interest but warned me she was soon being released to a group home. In the fourth week, before consent forms could be signed and an interview could be scheduled, this young writer was sent to an out-of-state group home.

Writing Samples

Data from 6,028 writing samples and more than 100 hours of participant-observation suggested that young writers experiencing incarceration wanted one thing above all – to be free. Freedom saturated their writing, whether they wrote about family, being locked up, love, or change. The methodological question I confronted was how to ask young people what they meant when they said they wanted to be free. I could ask the writers in the two workshops I facilitated, but my role in that space was to facilitate the workshops for WOR. This meant

presenting the writing prompts WOR provided for us every week and encouraging youth writing on the suggested topics. Furthermore, the population of young people in youth prisons is inconsistent, as I described above, and, in addition to the related obstacles that tended to make relationship building and scheduling a challenge, the process of obtaining consent for human subject research involving incarcerated youth – a doubly-vulnerable group according to IRB – could take months.

I needed to be able to ask young writers what they meant when they said they wanted to be free but kept finding that effort thwarted when other writing topics took precedence and young people with who had agreed to an interview had either been released, transferred, or could not obtain parental consent. So, in collaboration with WOR, I authored four writing prompts on freedom that would be presented in 15 writing workshops across California in June 2019. (These writing prompts are presented in Appendix E).

The writing produced in workshops using these prompts appeared in a 2019 summer issue of *Writing is Our Right*. Of the 406 pieces composed by young writers in that issue, I identified 150 that directly addressed freedom.[8] These 150 pieces comprised the writing sample data I analyzed to answer my third research question – *How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?* Below, I present two examples of writing samples from the September 2019 issue of *WOR*. The first piece qualified for inclusion in the 150-piece data set on freedom; the second did not.

I realize that I have been arguing that young writers experiencing incarceration are always writing about freedom, that freedom is an absent presence (Morrison, 1992) even when it is not explicit. However, to answer my third research question – *How do young people define*

[8] Addressing freedom directly in this case meant using one or more of the following words: “freedom,” “free,” “liberty,” or “liberation.”

freedom and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work? – I relied on writing samples that explicitly addressed freedom as a concept, practice, dream, or desire. In the first piece, "Freedom to Do," the concept of freedom is indexed throughout. We see "freedom" in the title and in the first line of the poem. The second piece, "Tap In," was not part of the 150-sample data set because it does not explicitly address freedom and therefore did not fit into the final analysis of what freedom means to young writers experiencing incarceration.

Writing Sample 3.1

Freedom to Do (Sean)

When I think of freedom, I think of me being able to do the things I want without having a forceful authority over me. I think of me living without someone always telling me what I have to do, with my family doing the things I like to do.

Writing Sample 3.2

Tap In (Manuel)

What's up wit' it!? I want to give a shout out to Jack from Writing is Our Right. He always hella cool. If y'all know him, show him some love and respect. Keep y'all heads up. Always be respectful. Stay positive, change y'all lives. This shhh ain't worth it, foreal.

Tools for Data Collection and Organization

Interviews with young people experiencing incarceration are not subject to recording devices of any kind. I took voluminous notes during these interviews, and I provided all interview participants with pen and paper to take their own notes about what they remembered, found important, and had questions about. Before ending the interview, I reviewed my notes and invited the participant to clarify or question any point of our conversation. Following all

interviews, I recorded a voice memo on my phone using the Otter.ai app in which I read both sets of notes aloud and commented on them. Otter.ai transferred this audio file into a text document and I cleaned it up before uploading it as a PDF to ATLAS.ti for my own coding and analysis. All interviews with adults were transcribed simultaneously using the Otter.ai app, uploaded onto the ATLAS.ti software on my laptop, and downloaded onto a secure, external hard drive.

Smartphone. My smartphone, a Google Pixel 3, runs on the Android operating system. It was a part of all interviews, even though it remained locked in my car outside the two youth prisons in which I interviewed Oscar, Carlos, Miles, Jack, and Elijah. During interviews with these five writers, I took notes and asked the writers to take notes as well. They were free to keep their notes or, if they did not want them, return them to me to be included in the recording of the interview. Immediately upon reaching my car, I turned on my phone, opened the Otter.ai app, and read verbatim from the notes I collected during the interview.

When interviewing Maria, José, Dante, and Jennifer, I had the Otter.ai app running, which recorded and transcribed the interview. Once the interview was over, I saved the transcript in a word processing file, cleaned it up for clarity, saved it as a PDF in the ATLAS.ti software on my laptop, and downloaded it onto my secure, external hard drive.

Otter.ai. Otter.ai is mobile app technology supported by artificial intelligence that records and transcribes conversations in real time. I downloaded the free version onto my smartphone and used it during all interviews with adults after obtaining their consent. The artificial technology in the app can be "trained" to recognize a particular human voice along with sensitive words or jargon and continues to improve its transcription accuracy the more it is used. Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 present images of the Otter.ai app in action during data collection.

Figure 3.1 – Otter.ai Home Screen on Smartphone

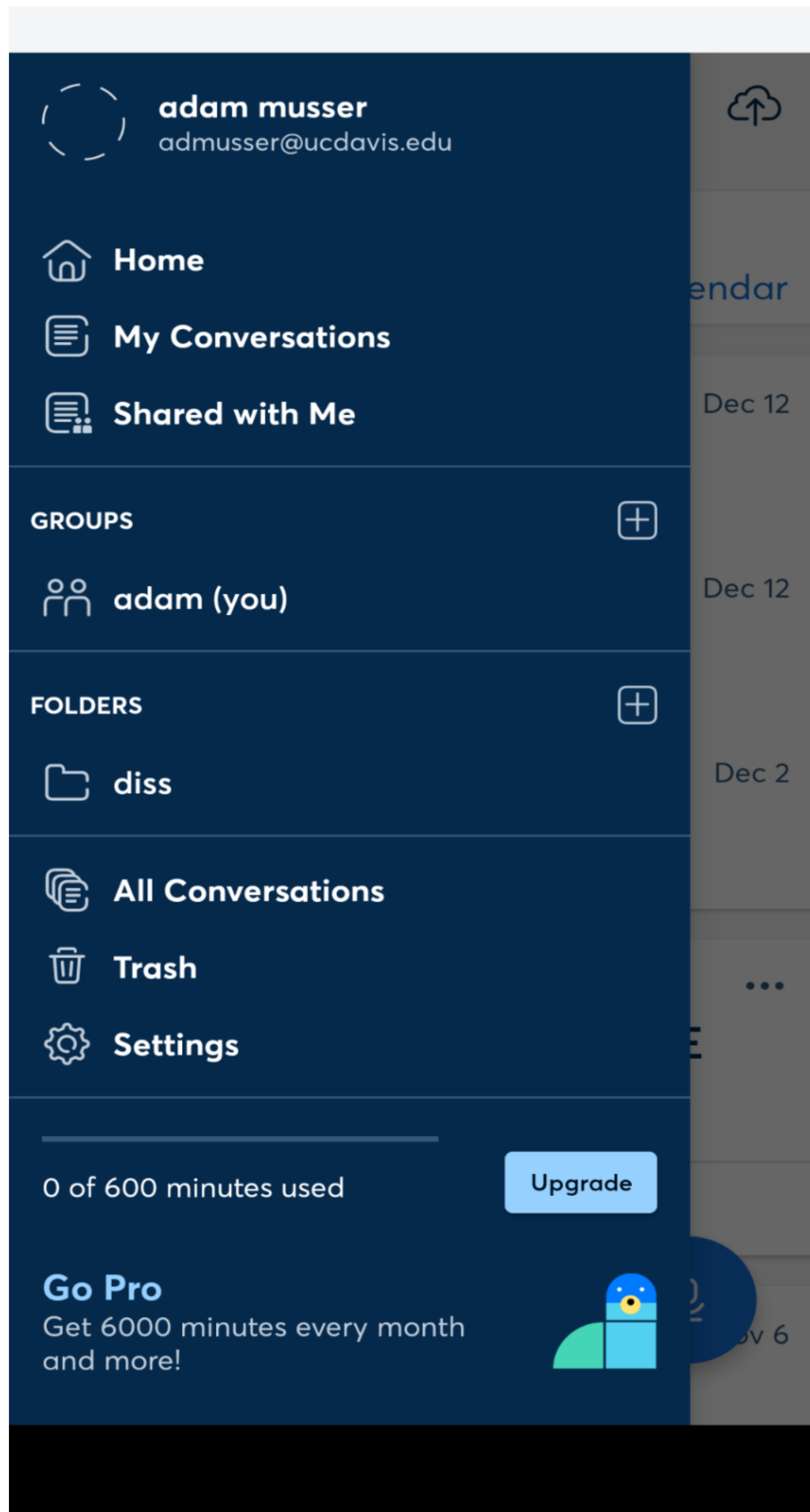


Figure 3.2 – Interview Transcript at 4:06 minutes

Speaker 1 4:06

They knew my work in the community, so they didn't ask me for a budget they didn't ask me for our curriculum, they just said when do you want to start. And I said, let's start in the media running some kind of class. Checking class, writing class conversation wise I don't know what we want to call it, but let's start in January. So they gave me the green light in December of 1995, January, 1996 I go into San Francisco juvenile hall. And, you know, come in with cookies and pizza hanging out with the young people doing surveys bringing in a question of the week, attempting to get young people to think outside the box or just to humble themselves and to think about where they are in their life. Lo and behold, it kind of takes off. And I think was really taking off and what we know works out, is be consistent in young people's lives and they don't have a lot of consistency in relationship. So that really pays off so the writing isn't as big as that hit it I think it was going to be doing some writing.

0:00 44:01

1x

ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti is a type of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software. I chose ATLAS.ti because I found it easier to learn and more intuitive than other QDA products which I trialed briefly before making a decision on which QDA software to use. ATLAS.ti offered a specialized version for Mac and a student license ($99 for two years). It also worked better with PDF files than any other QDA I trialed, which was essential since I was collecting every issue of *Writing is Our Right* for analysis from Dante, the Executive Director of WOR, in PDF.

I used ATLAS.ti to organize my data collection and analysis. All field notes, interview transcripts, analytic memos, and journalism (about youth incarceration, generally, and CCYP and NCYP, specifically) were uploaded to different folders in my ATLAS.ti project. I uploaded every issue of *Writing is Our Right* that I read and analyzed to answer Research Question 2: *When afforded the time and space in a structured writing workshop, what do young people experiencing incarceration write about?* and Research Question 3: *How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?*

Figure 3.3 presents a screenshot of one writing sample on page 19 of an issue of Writing is Our Right. The seven codes in the right margin are linked to this particular writing sample, allowing me to find this piece of writing whenever I searched any of the codes linked to it[9]. Figure 3.4 presents a screenshot of an overview of this study. The column on the left is the organizing space, showing Document Groups (5) and Code Groups (16) that I had open at the time. The center column displays the page of Writing is Our Right under analysis, with linked codes on the right-hand side. A pop-up window, Code Group Manager is open at the bottom-right of the screenshot.

[9] I describe the process of coding and analysis in greater detail in the next section of this chapter.

Figure 3.3 – “The History of Freedom” with Codes

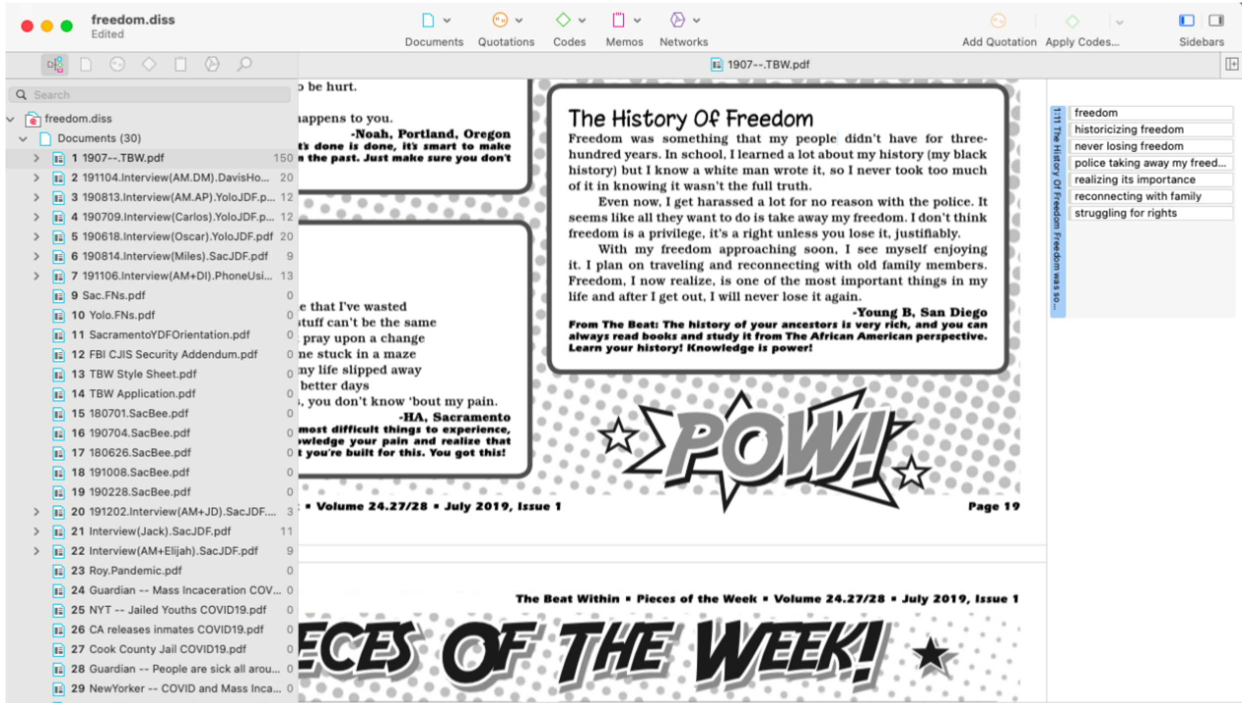
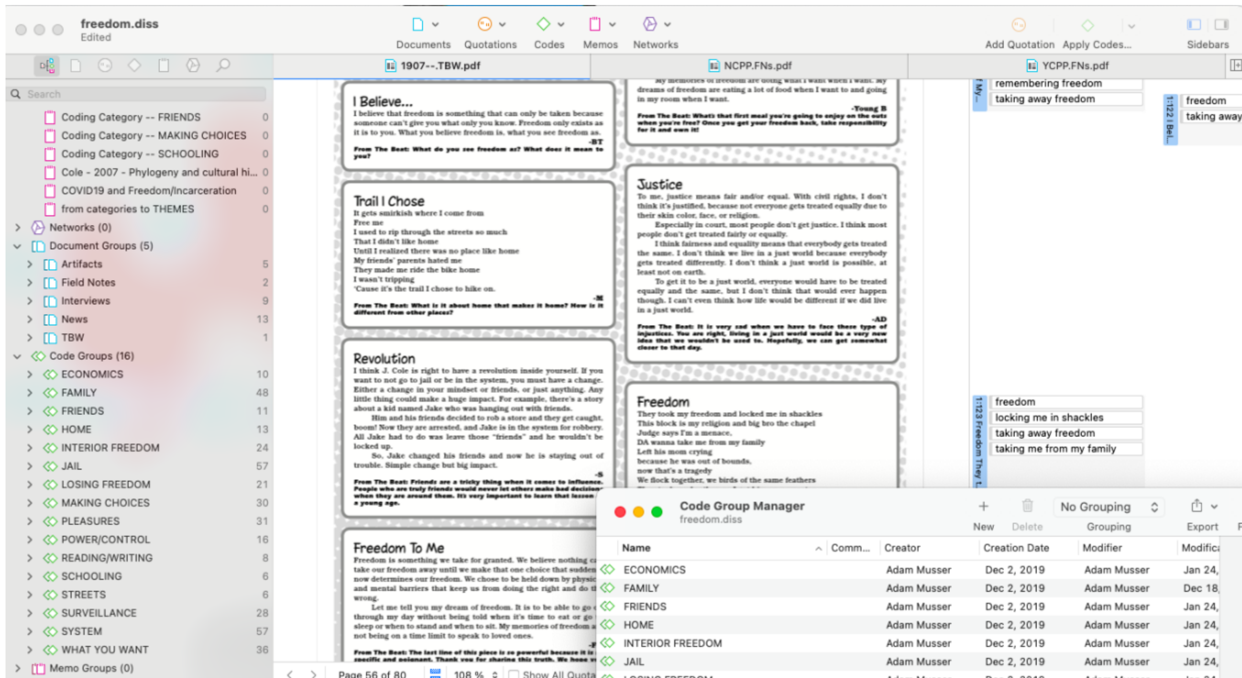


Figure 3.4 – Overview of ATLAS.ti Project



Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the method of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a research method for developing theory "grounded" in the data rather than using data to support previous theories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the purposes of my study, in which I wanted to understand the culture and meaning-making practices of youth prison writing workshops and how young people experiencing incarceration defined freedom, grounding my analysis in the data themselves was most appropriate. According to Corbin & Strauss (1990), grounded theory is a rigorous method with "specific procedures for data collection and analysis" (p. 6). Here, I use the method of grounded theory outlined by Charmaz (1995, 2006), who relies substantially on grounded theory's founding methodologists (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz (1995) describes a grounded theory of research that consists of collecting and generating data, making sense of the data with codes generated from the data themselves, analytic memo-writing, and reviewing relevant literature on themes developed from the research analysis.

Throughout the periods of data collection and ongoing data analysis, I wrote analytical memos (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009) to document and analyze the coding process and my coding choices, the process of data collection and the refinement of my research questions, the emergence of patterns and disconfirming data, and the struggles and messiness of qualitative data research, in general, and within youth prisons, specifically. Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.6 present screenshots from ATLAS.ti of two analytical memos I wrote during the process of moving from codes to categories (Figure 3.6) and my specific thoughts on what would and would not be included in the category, "Making Choices."

Figure 3.5 – Analytical Memo on Categorizing In Vivo Codes

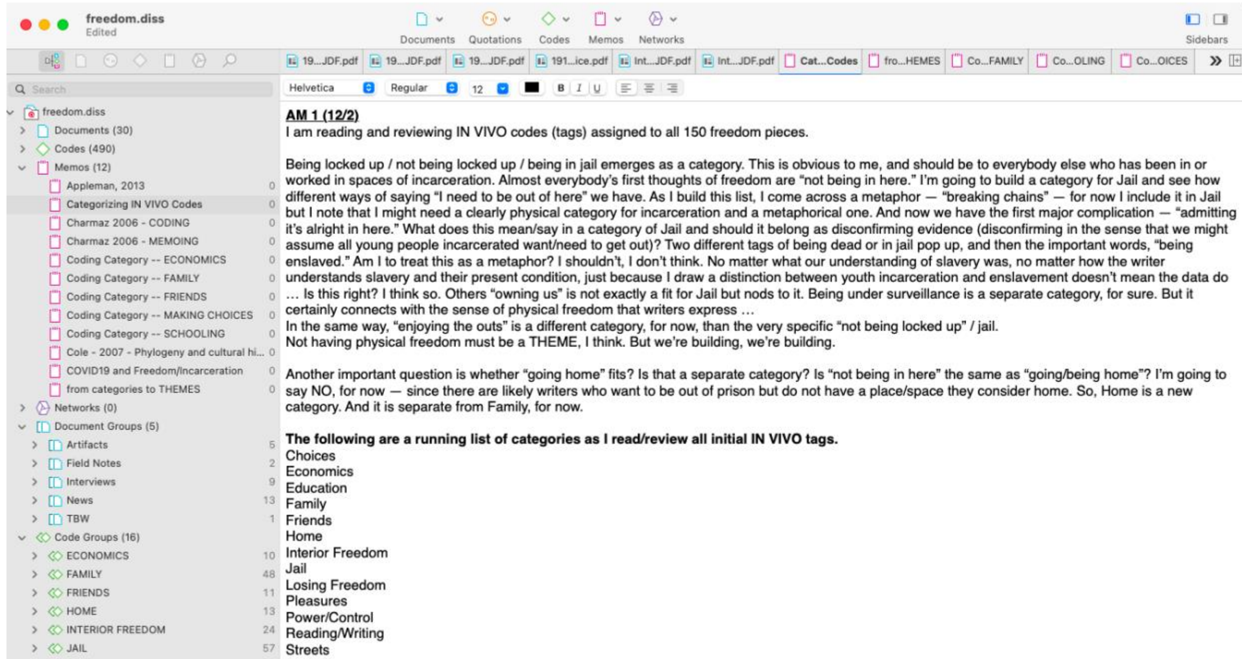
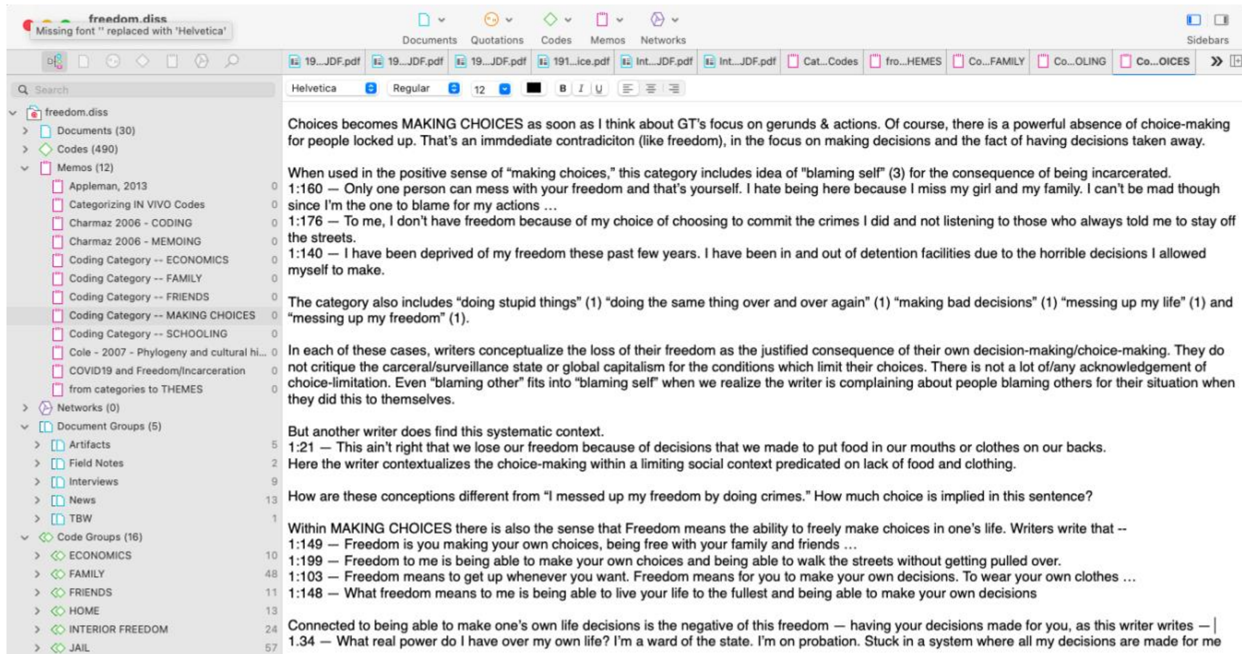


Figure 3.6 – Analytical Memo on Category "Making Choices"



Answering the Research Questions

As described above, the research questions of this study evolved during my ethnographic participation in Writing is Our Right workshops. What began as research into the culture and meaning-making practices of one youth prison writing workshop developed into research on freedom as articulated in the talk and text of young people experiencing incarceration. In this section, I clarify the analysis that I performed to answer each research question.

What are the Salient Characteristics of the Writing is Our Right program?

For two years, I participated in youth prison writing workshops organized by the nonprofit arts organization Writing is Our Right. Almost all of my participation in these spaces assumed the role of a writing workshop facilitator. In this sense, I was far more participant than observer. Indeed, I would not have been granted access or invited into the space if I were only to observe as ethnographic researcher. Neither the youth prisons, nor Writing is Our Right – and certainly not the young people experiencing incarceration – would have allowed me to conduct research if I had wanted to sit in the back of a room observing, taking notes, counting, and failing to participate as a writer in the space. This research was only possible because of my role as a consistent workshop facilitator who facilitated by writing and sharing and building community in ways similar to other participants.

Data analyzed to answer RQ1 included participant-observation field notes from more than 100 writing workshops in CCYP and NCYP and nine semi-structured interviews with young writers and the adults responsible for making WOR possible in the Northern and Central County Youth Prisons, as well as the writing produced in WOR writing workshops and published in *Writing is Our Right*. Because the process of obtaining consent for interviews took

several months (including initial IRB approval of this study[10]), I had already developed analytical codes and categories from writing sample data (see Table 3.6) that informed my analysis of the interview and fieldnote data.

Smagorinsky (2008) argues that "codes need to be developed in a dialectic relation among the data, theoretical framework, and whatever else a researcher brings to the analytic process" (p. 406). I analyzed the data collected and generated (Charmaz, 2006) in this study through the frameworks of critical literacy and critical social theory. This meant I was particularly attentive to issues of power relationships in the social structures and individual actions of young writers' lives. These power relationships were represented in how young writers described being kicked out of school, as part of a dialogic conversation in a one-on-one interview about the meaning of family as it relates to practicing freedom, or in an interaction in a writing workshop between an officer and young person about the young person's future, and in many other ways.

When Affording Time and Space in Structured Writing Workshops, What do Young People Experiencing Incarceration Write About?

Data analyzed to answer RQ2 included 6,028 writing samples published in *Writing is Our Right* between September 2018 – April 2019 alongside interviews with five focal writers and two adult members of Writing is Our Right. In the first round of coding, I employed "in vivo" tags (Saldaña, 2009), which preserve participants' meaning in their own words, an important and humanizing move for early data analysis when the data are writing samples from young people

[10] While I required IRB approval for the parts of this research that involved human subjects (interviews and ethnographic field notes), I did not require IRB approval to conduct content analysis of the writings published in WOR. For this reason, I was able to begin data collection and analysis on RQ2 much earlier than RQ1.

choosing their words intentionally and creatively. Charmaz (2006) argues that in vivo coding “helps us preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (p. 55). I positioned the authors of the writing samples as critical and creative theorists, so I chose to generate the first round of codes in their own words. Figures 3.7 (“I Still Believe”) and 3.8 (“Loneliness”) present writing samples with my initial in vivo codes.

Figure 3.7 – Writing Sample “I Still Believe” with In Vivo Codes

I Still Believe

I have been through so many trials and tribulations in my life. I have also made many poor choices that have landed me in situations like this precise one, but I still believe that I can make a positive change in my life.

I believe that school will take me a long way. I believe I will make it big in my life.

Lastly, I believe that there will be many ups and downs throughout my journey in life, but I will get through them and be happy and successful.

From The Beat: School will take you a long way, but school can only do so much for you. The rest is all on you. There will always be ups and downs. Just don't let the downs get you down so far that any ups cannot bring you up.

9:38 I Still Believe I have been through so ma...

be happy
poor choices
positive change
school
trials and tribulations

As I read “I Still Believe,” I coded line by line using the words the writer used to capture the meaning and topic of this piece. In the first line, I coded “trials and tribulations.” Then, “poor choices,” followed by “positive change.” These three in vivo codes – “trials and tribulations,” poor choices,” and “positive change” – capture the meaning of the first stanza in the writer’s own

words. In the second stanza, I coded "school." I thought about coding "make it big" but decided that "make it big" was implied by the code "be happy," my final code. I also thought about "ups and downs" in the third stanza but argued to myself that "ups and downs" fit into the first code I had generated, "trials and tribulations."

Figure 3.8 – Writing Sample "Loneliness" with In Vivo Codes

Loneliness

Sometimes, well, all the time, I feel lonely in jail because I'm not with my family, especially when I get to my room and I have nobody to talk to.

But, I like my alone time because it get to learn things I've never learned before. I read and think a lot. When I think, it's about the times I was out and I did wrong. I made a bad choice and I learned that making a choice can land you in jail or in grave.

From The Beat: Sounds like you've made the most of a bad situation. We encourage you to do whatever you can to keep reading and thinking when you get out.

15:82 Loneliness Sometimes, well, all...

- bad choice
- I learned
- in jail or in grave
- jail
- lonely
- my family
- read
- think a lot

Coding line by line for "Loneliness," I generated eight in vivo codes. First, "lonely" and "jail" from Line 1. From Line 2, I coded "my family." I thought about "my room" but realized it would be confused (in the overall set of codes) with the writer's bedroom at home and did not represent the cell-room the writer intended here. I thought about "alone time" in Line 3 but decided "lonely" from Line 1 was sufficient. In Line 5, I coded "read" and "think a lot." Then, "bad choice" in Line 6, which I chose over "I did wrong" because I knew from my coding and analysis up to this point that "choices" was a prevalent writing topic for YWEI. Finally, I coded

"I learned" and "in jail or in a grave." The two examples in Figures 3.7 and 3.8 are representative of the initial coding work I performed for the 6,028 writing samples I collected from *Writing is Our Right*.

As I read their work, I asked *What do young writers experiencing incarceration write about?* They write about being locked up. They write about love. They write about their families. They write, especially, about their moms. They write about change, both personal and social. They write about prison and school. They write about home. They write about freedom. They write about life on the streets. And they write about freedom. Table 3.6 presents the ten subjects most frequently addressed by YWEI.

Table 3.6: 10 Most Frequent In Vivo Codes (6,028 Writing Samples)

Code	Frequency	% of Total Sample
love	983	16.16
locked up[11]	845	14.02
family[12]	780	12.94
mom[13]	742	12.31
change	569	9.44
prison[14]	567	9.40
school	476	7.90
home	458	7.58
freedom	360	5.97
streets	303	5.03

[11] Includes "incarcerated."
[12] Includes "families," excludes "mom."
[13] Includes variants ("mama," "mami," "mamma," "momma," "moms," "mother").
[14] Includes "jail" and "juvenile hall."

In a second round of coding, I employed focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009) to identify categories within and across these ten topics. Coding from each of the ten most popular subjects revealed these five distinct categories: critiquing social systems; desiring love and relationships; examining interior life; wanting (to) change; exploring (im)possibilities. Each of these categories contains a unique collection of the initial codes, but codes often feature in more than one category. Table 3.7 lists the five categories with the initial codes they fit.

Table 3.7: Five Coding Categories

Categories, with Qualifying Codes				
critiquing social systems	**desiring love/ relationships**	**examining interior life**	**wanting (to) change**	**exploring (im)possibilities**
locked up	love	locked up	locked up	love
change	locked up	change	change	locked up
prison	family	prison	prison	family
school	mom	freedom	school	change
freedom	home		freedom	home
streets	streets		streets	freedom

The categories emerged from the codes, but writing remains discursive. One writer can write about change as they critique social systems while another writes about change as they examine their own interior life. One writer writes about the streets as a critique of how they grew up and another about the streets as the only place providing love and human relationships in their life. This is how "change" appears in three categories: *critiquing social systems*, *examining interior life,* and *wanting (to) change*. "Locked up" appears in all five. "Family" belongs to both *desiring love/relationships* and *exploring (im)possibilities*. I present findings to Research Question 2, including these categories, in Chapter 5.

How do Young Writers Experiencing Incarceration Define Freedom, and How do Notions of Freedom Emerge in Their Work?

An explicit mention of freedom occurred in almost 6% of writing samples (see Table 3.6). However, it was during the period of coding and analysis to answer Research Question 2 that I realized young people experiencing incarceration were always writing about freedom. Freedom was an absent presence (Morrison, 1992) in every writing sample I read[15]. Here was an example of theory informing data analysis. My next analytical move was to focus on freedom, and for that I needed a new, smaller set of data. Data analyzed to answer RQ3 included 150 writing samples on freedom and interviews with five focal writers. This is when I collaborated with Writing is Our Right to author four writing prompts on freedom and collect an issue of *Writing is Our Right* in which YPEI wrote most directly about freedom.

A summer issue of Writing is Our Right (2019) explored the theme of freedom and included the 150 writing samples that comprised the data set to answer Research Question 3: *How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?* I analyzed data in three rounds, grounding my codes and categories in the data to develop themes across these young people's similar-but-different conceptions of freedom (Charmaz, 2006).

Since every writing sample in this data set was explicitly about freedom, and because my theoretical frameworks positioned freedom as a practice, I used gerunds (Charmaz, 2011) to capture the process and activity of freedom as conceived by YWEI while employing in vivo codes to preserve writers' meaning in the initial coding round. Figure 3.9 presents a writing sample from the data set of writing on freedom in which I employed in vivo codes using gerunds.

[15] I discuss Morrison's theory of absent presence more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

Figure 3.9 – “Freedom Freedom” with Gerund In Vivo Codes

Freedom, Freedom

The word freedom to me means doing what you want when you want. The first thing I think of when I think of freedom is all my people: my sister, my girl, my mom, my brother.

I think of being with everyone I know enjoying life. Freedom for me is happiness but happiness isn't always found in freedom. The freedom of choice can lead to some bad ones that can leave you dead, locked up, or broke.

From The Beat: We love how you connect your freedom to others' freedom, how you think of your family and loved ones when you think of your freedom. Hope you soon get to be with everyone you love.

1:13 Freedom, Freedom The word freedom to...

- being with everyone
- choosing to be free
- doing what you want to do
- enjoying life
- freedom
- not being dead, locked up, ...
- thinking of my people

The coding portrayed in Figure 3.9 is representative of the initial round of coding for all 150 writing samples in the data set of writings on freedom. Table 3.8 presents the top ten codes from this data set.

In order to develop categories around the topic of freedom as conceptualized by YWEI, I employed “focused coding” in the second round of coding (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). Focused coding focuses on conceptual similarities between initial codes and is helpful in developing thematic categories from initial data and is especially “appropriate for studies employing grounded theory methodology” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 155). Saldaña explains that focused coding categories “are constructed emergently from the reorganization and categorization of participant data” (p. 158). While coding and categorizing, I wrote analytical memos grounded in the writing-sample data. As I moved from codes to categories, realizing what ideas fit together and which were clearly distinct, I developed 16 categories from the data set. Table 3.9 presents the 16 categories that emerged from initial codes.

Table 3.8 – Top Ten Initial Codes, 150 Writing Samples on Freedom

Code	Frequency	% Total Sample
Taking away freedom	28	18.67
Doing what you want to do	21	14.00
Being with family	18	12.00
Eating	15	10.00
Being locked up	13	9.44
Being mentally free	10	8.67
Hanging with homies	9	6.00
Blaming self	8	5.33
Losing freedom	8	5.33
Doing whatever	7	5.03

Table 3.9 – Coding Categories from 150 Writing Samples on Freedom

Economics	Interior freedom	Pleasures	Streets
Family	Jail	Power/control	Surveillance
Friends	Losing freedom	Reading/writing	System
Home	Making choices	Schooling	What you want

The final round of coding involved developing themes grounded in the data, represented by my codes and categories. I wrote analytical memos (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2009) as I raised codes to categories, and I continued to do that as I developed themes from these categories. The final round of coding elevated categories to themes. From the 16 coding categories emerged five themes that capture young writers' conceptualization of freedom. Young writers experiencing incarceration defined freedom in terms of human relationships, in relation to physical spaces, within a critique of social systems, as the ability to make and sustain life choices, and in a process of historicizing self-awareness. Figure 3.10 presents these themes. Table 3.10 presents the same five themes and the categories of data from which they emerged.

To close this chapter, I outline the methodological stance that defines my role as researcher of the literacy practices practiced by and transformative critical knowledge possessed by the young writers experiencing incarceration in this study.

Desire-Based Research

Desire-based research acknowledges the complexity in human individuals and their relationships, stories, and histories (Tuck, 2009). In place of the pathologizing that often occurs even in justice-oriented work, research crafted around participants' desire honors the expert knowledge of lived realities present in all individuals and communities. Desire disrupts the theoretical divide between reproduction and resistance. It is not the case that human beings either reproduce their social realities or resist them. An either/or binary when it comes to social reproduction and resistance theories is superficial and false. Rather, desire "is neither/both/and reproduction and resistance" and, as a design framework, encompasses the reality of those "who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate,

Figure 3.10 – Five Themes from 150 Writing Samples on Freedom

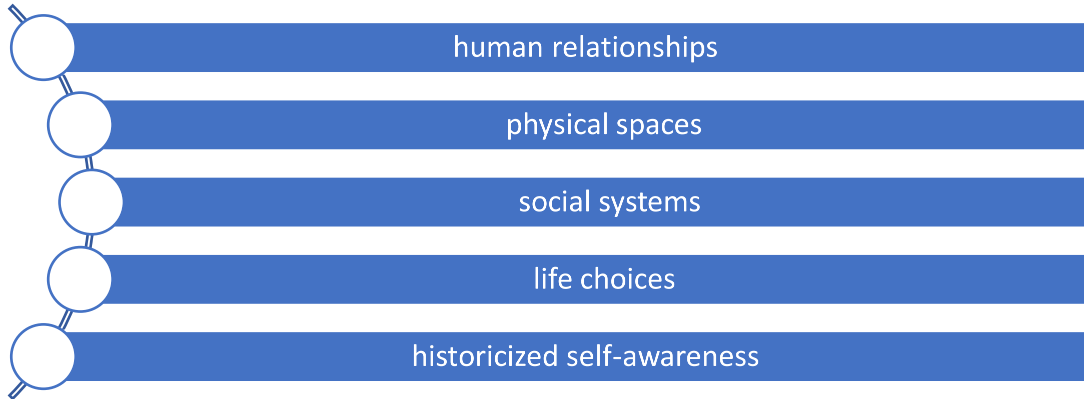


Table 3.10 – Themes on Freedom with Coding Categories

Theme	Categories
Freedom defined in terms of human relationships	Family Friends Streets
Freedom defined in relation to physical spaces	Home Streets Jail
Freedom defined within a critique of social systems	Schooling System Surveillance Economics Losing freedom Power/control
Freedom defined as the ability to make sustainable life choices	What you want Choices Pleasures Power/control
Freedom defined in a process of historicizing self-awareness	Interior freedom Power/control Reading/writing

throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures" (pp. 419-420). Desire-based research recognizes and celebrates complexity in human individuals, relationships, and agency. Desire, Tuck (2009) writes:

> Accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore. … Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. (p. 417)

Following Tuck's call for educational researchers to participate in desire-based research driven by co-participants' desires, I studied the work of young writers experiencing incarceration for one year. I detail the findings related to the question, *What are young writers experiencing incarceration writing about?* in Chapter Five. The answer, in so many words, is freedom. Freedom is what all YWEI desire. Motivated by the framework of desire-based research, I asked young writers experiencing incarceration to define what freedom means to them.

Social science research has often been complicit in colonization and dehumanization, and the effects of social science research have resulted in the dehumanization of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples (Patel, 2016; Smith, 1999; Tuck 2009; Wynter, 2003). Indeed, all research relies on socially constructed views of knowledge and knowing. How we organize knowledge, conceptualize problems, and think about what questions to ask is a consequence of the histories and interactions of our social systems and institutions, of where and when we are born, of how we are nurtured, schooled, and educated. Power relationships between individuals and communities determine the epistemological and ontological tools available to those doing any kind of research (Patel, 2016). It would be a mistake to ignore the power dynamics involved in my research. I am a highly educated, cisgender, heterosexual white man who benefits daily, both

implicitly and explicitly, from the structures of white supremacy and anti-Blackness that organize our social lives in the U.S. The only time I have ever spent in prison has been voluntary. I have always gone home as soon as I wanted to. It is important, then, to interrogate what it is that I brought to this research and why I ever thought it was appropriate for me to ask and answer these research questions.

I did not bring theoretical and philosophical questions about freedom to my work with young writers experiencing incarceration. Young people are generating theories about the world and their own social realities whether academic researchers are present to document those theories or not. After several months working in youth prison writing workshops, I found myself asking two basic questions: *What are young writers experiencing incarceration writing about? And what does writing afford them during this terrifyingly dehumanizing experience?* Over the course of the next year, I read more than 6,000 pieces of writing by YPEI and discovered that freedom was the focus and goal of their writing practice. Then, and throughout my research, I positioned young writers experiencing incarceration as important sources of knowledge on the practice of freedom. Finally, starting with their desire and expertise, I pursued the research questions that frame this study. In the next three chapters, I present findings on these questions.

Chapter Four: “A Project Oriented toward the Future”

There was never a time when the paper would judge you.

- Oscar

There is a colorful mural of birds and flowers on the exterior of the Central County Youth Prison. Bright yellows, oranges, blues, and greens flood this geometric composition. Straight lines shape the background and contrast the sense of movement surrounding one of the birds. Swooping upward, this bird seems to be taking off to join two others, already suspended in air, their beaks pointed up and out, tail feathers pinned back, wings spread wide. They are free. There are no cages.

The first time I saw this mural, in the summer of 2017, I was reminded of the title for Maya Angelou’s (1969) autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. What I did not remember is that Angelou borrowed this phrase from the famous Paul Lawrence Dunbar poem, “Sympathy,” published in 1893. Here is its final stanza:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore—

When he beats his bars and he would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his deep heart’s core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—

I know why the caged bird sings!

Why do some young people experiencing incarceration participate in writing workshops? What does writing mean for them? Why do they write, or sing, at all? These questions motivated the beginnings of my research and now offer a perspective on the culture and context of two youth prison writing workshops I participated in for two years.

Although I was always a researcher in these spaces, I could not have conducted research as an impartial observer. I would not have been allowed into these spaces, much less invited by the young people who included me in their process of writing and thinking about freedom, if I had not committed to the vulnerable participation of a writing workshops. The only reason I had access to WOR workshops in CCYP and NCYP was because I was a workshop facilitator and I showed up, week after week, to write with young people experiencing incarceration. Because this ethnographic research depended on my active participation in WOR writing workshops, I devote several pages here to describing my experience entering the space of the Central County Youth Prison and several more outlining the process of what it means to facilitate youth prison writing workshops for Writing is Our Right. After contextualizing the process of Writing is Our Right workshops and the production of the *Writing is Our Right Magazine*, I discuss what writing means to young writers experiencing incarceration and what their writing means to some of the adults who work with them.

Entering a Youth Prison (for a Writing Workshop)

Driving to the Central County Youth Prison and entering the building, something I had done more than one hundred times, was almost always the same. Sitting in my car in the parking lot, I would gather and count the pencils (16), grab from my bag a folder of clean composition paper and the box of *Writing is Our Right* magazines that had been mailed to me the prior day,

put my phone in the glove compartment, scoop up my ID badge from the same space, clip the badge onto the front of my shirt while closing the car door, walk across the lot toward the entrance, and lock the car.

Outside the entrance doors of the prison, I would press a security call button and glance up at a security camera. Sometimes I was buzzed in immediately; other times I responded to the question, "Can I help you?" by answering that I as a volunteer with Writing is Our Right. Once the door clicked open, I would walk into the visitor's lobby and wait for a guard to emerge from the secure side of the facility and escort me to one of the three "pods" where young people were detained.

We would pass through one security door into a bright, sterile hallway. Now standing between two locked doors on either end of a 12-foot corridor, I deposited my car keys in a locker and signed the Volunteer Log, providing my name and time of entry. After I signed in, the guard would wave a security wand across the front of my body as I raised my hands and spread my legs. I would turn around and the wand would pass over the back of my shoulders, torso, and legs. The guard would then check my bag, which contained the pencils, paper, writing prompts, magazines, and a researcher notebook. I double- and triple-checked the pencil-count as the guard asked if I knew how many pencils I had. It was essential that I knew the count and would leave with exactly as many pencils as I brought in, since unaccounted-for pencils were considered potential weapons in this space. Once the guard was satisfied that I knew my count, we both waited for the Security Office to buzz open the next security door, allowing us to enter and the guard to escort me to one of the three pods in this place.

On the other side of this security door, I would pick up a Security Panic Device from a two-way deposit box that connected this hallway with the Security Office. I never wanted one of

these walkie-talkies with red buttons that are supposed to alert Security in case of an emergency, and I never used it. But I as required to have this device with me at all times. These things are awkward and distracting, an unwelcome reminder that somebody thought we might be in danger as we wrote with young people inside.

We would walk down another hallway and make a left to C-Pod, where young people are detained by the county. When we arrived at another locked door, we waited again for Security to buzz it open. The guard escorting me would confirm via radio that I had been brought to C-Pod. I would not see him again that evening. When I entered the pod, I see several young people spread out at tables in groups of twos and threes and fours. Two might be playing Madden Football on X-Box, several others playing the board game Monopoly, and still others playing cards. One young person might be slouched in a chair against the wall, talking on the single pay phone. Two guards were stationed inside C-pod, and usually one of them would greet me. I walked in to the space, saying "Hi!" and "What's up?" and sending greetings with a nod of my chin to some of the young people I recognized from previous WOR workshops. Behind the security desk, a guard asked if we wanted a classroom tonight. We always did.

There were two classrooms in this space, and the doors to each were locked. At 6:35 p.m. these spaces are closed to make the constant surveillance of the young people here more convenient. But a guard would soon open the classroom for me, and I would walk in, dragging and re-arranging desks immediately. There were 10 computers lining two of the walls in the classroom; I had only ever seen them turned on during the school hours of the day. A bookshelf lined with textbooks stood against the wall in between the computers.

More than a dozen desks were arranged in three or four rows, and I quickly pushed and pulled them into a circular shape near the front of the room. The guard who unlocked the

classroom door would ask me to let him know when I was ready. After making space for writers to enter the room and sit down in my rearranged circle of desks, I was ready.

In the rest of this chapter, I explore the use and meaning of writing in the context of Central County Youth Prison, which I have just described, and Northern County Youth Prison, a much different space, located in a major metropolitan zone and nearly four times larger. Here, I describe the practice and purpose of Writing is Our Right, a nonprofit arts organization that facilitates writing workshops and publishes a bi-weekly magazine of writing by young people experiencing incarceration, from the perspective of young writers, WOR volunteers, and youth prison staff. Then, I represent what young people say about their participation in these workshops and the meaning writing has in their lives.

The Purpose and Practice of Writing is Our Right

As outlined in Chapter Three, Writing is Our Right started in a Northern California County youth prison following the death of legendary hip hop artist Tupac Shakur in 1996. The first issue of *Writing is Our Right* totaled six pages. Today, the magazine runs more than 80 pages and regularly includes between 300–400 individual pieces of writing from young people "on the inside." Writing is Our Right also offers community writing workshops "on the outs," in schools and libraries around its main office. The organization's mission statement reads:

> Writing is Our Right's mission is to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity to share their ideas and life experiences in a safe space that encourages literacy, self-expression, some critical thinking skills, and healthy, supportive relationships with adults and their community. Outside of the juvenile justice system, Writing is Our Right partners with community organizations and individuals to bring

resources to youth both inside and outside of detention. We are committed to being an effective bridge between youth who are locked up and the community that aims to support their progress towards a healthy, non-violent, and productive life.

The Magazine

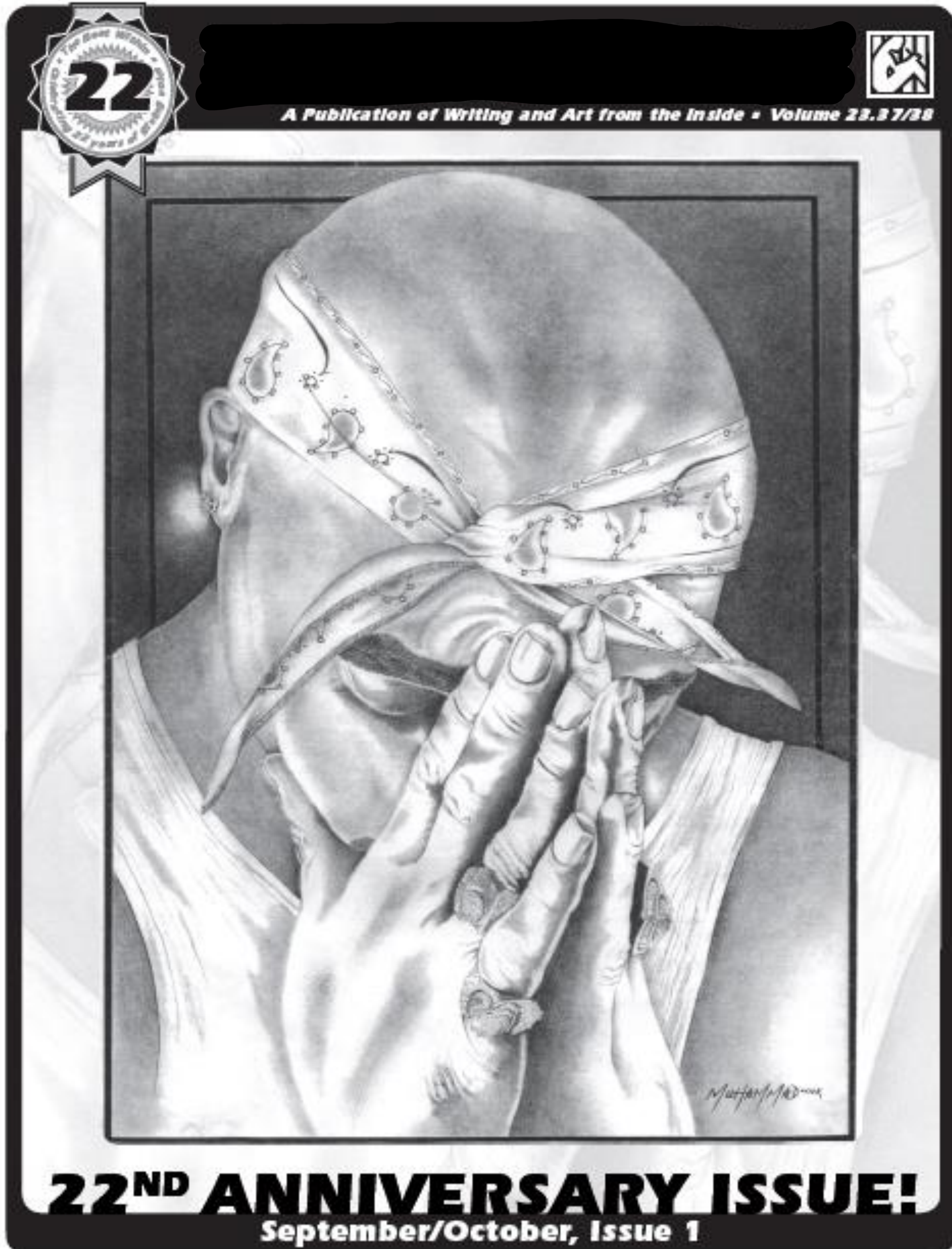
Writing is Our Right: Writings from the Inside is published every other week in black and white on 11x17 paper folded into an 8.5x11 magazine.[16] The magazine is available to the public, and libraries, colleges, and universities are among its regular subscribers. The primary audience of the magazine, however, is the population of young people who are incarcerated throughout California and participate in WOR writing workshops. An original art piece is always presented on the cover (see Figure 4.1).

The Table of Contents always includes the following:

- Features of the Week, representing submissions from WOR community workshops
- Pieces of the Week, writing by youth selected by the editor for this special section
- Art Gallery, which includes at least two pages of sketches and drawings by young people
- Weekly Writings, organized by geographical location of participating youth prisons
- Community Workshops, presenting work completed in schools, libraries, and community centers
- Writing on the Outs, which meets at a local library and offers writing space and workshops for young people in the community, including those who have previously experienced incarceration

[16] The fold must hold the magazine together since staples are prohibited in youth prisons.

Figure 4.1 – *Writing is Our Right* Cover (2018)



The Writing Workshops

The format of WOR writing workshops in youth prisons is fairly consistent. Once inside the classroom or common room on the secure side of the prison, facilitators welcome young people to the workshop and introduce themselves and the WOR program. Often, I would ask a writer who had previously participated to explain both the magazine and the workshop to anyone participating for the first time. After introductions and re-introductions, remembering names and asking for reminders, facilitators check in with young writers, asking about visits, court dates, and general updates on life both inside and out. Once settled in and set up, facilitators pass out half sheets of paper on which are printed the four writing prompts for the week. Responses to these prompts, provided by WOR, comprise the majority of writing for each issue of the magazine.

The first half of the workshop lasts between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on how long it takes for staff to allow young writers to enter the workshop space and how long set up takes. In the workshop, each prompt is read aloud and discussed, with levels of energy and engagement varying around the room. Some writers have already obtained a pencil and piece of paper and are writing the piece they came in ready to share. Others, not knowing what to write about, look to the writing prompts for inspiration. Writers are encouraged to address at least one of the prompts in any way they choose – a short paragraph, a poem, a letter, or some lyrics. Writers may also ignore the prompts and write about anything at all, with some wanting to introduce the world to a new piece they have been working on and others writing a letter to their girl, little brother, mom, or grandma. Facilitators pass out paper and, depending on the institution, pass out their own pencils or request writing instruments from the staff. Once everybody has checked in, received paper and pencil, and discussed the writing prompts, everyone writes.

In the second half of the workshop, facilitators attempt to maintain a writing space for everybody, moving around the room to address questions and provide encouragement. This typically involves chatter, annoyance, frustration, jokes, friendly and not-so-friendly insults, interruptions from prison staff, and laughter. The atmosphere is not unlike a high school study hall or detention room. Writers finish their pieces at various times, some eager to submit and be dismissed to make a phone call home, while others wait patiently for a facilitator's careful approval. Everybody appreciates some love and affirmation. Keeping an eye on the clock while attending to the various questions, demands, and interruptions of operating in space of constant surveillance, facilitators save ten minutes at the end for sharing pieces aloud. Some days nobody shares; others, almost everybody does. Before leaving, facilitators pass out the new issue of the magazine to everybody, including staff, and say thank you and goodbye with handshakes or fist bumps. I always left saying the same thing: "I hope we don't see you next time – but if you're here, I hope we do."

Facilitator Responsibilities

WOR staff and volunteers facilitate workshops with over 5,000 young people annually across youth prisons in California and in New Mexico, Hawaii, Oregon, Florida, and Washington, DC. The work of a WOR writing workshop volunteer is focused on making and maintaining a welcoming space for participating writers. Generally, this includes:

- inviting and encouraging all young people experiencing incarceration to participate
- introducing WOR and the workshop process to new participants while relying on the experience of regular writers to confirm details

- providing participants with writing materials (paper and writing prompts, and, in some institutions, pencils) and *Writing is Our Right* magazines
- leading conversation around prescribed writing prompts
- holding space and time for writing
- reviewing and discussing writing with those who request support
- inviting writers to share their work aloud when finished
- collecting all writing submitted to the magazine (occasionally, a writer will not want a piece published in the magazine)
- respecting all institution regulations and guidelines

The work of facilitators also continues at home or in the office. These fluttering pages of composition paper must be turned into a magazine. Once home, facilitators type up the handwritten pieces, write a short response to each, and email a Word.docx file to the WOR main office, where the next issue will be designed, formatted, and sent for printing.

Becoming a WOR facilitator and volunteer requires orientation and security clearance. Due to the ethically and legally sensitive nature of any work with YPEI, facilitators must attain clearance first from WOR and then from the specific institution (usually a County Probation Department) at which the volunteer will facilitate workshops. WOR offers a 90-minute training and orientation at its central office, and one early summer morning I drove down to meet the Volunteer Coordinator, learn how to facilitate a workshop, sign paperwork, review training materials focused mainly on editing and formatting submissions, and consent to a background check. Each of the two youth prisons I regularly visited offered mandatory trainings with irregular frequency, and both required fingerprints and background checks. In my case, the

security clearance process took two weeks at Central County Youth Prison and seven weeks at Northern County Youth Prison.

Writing in and Writing for Writing is Our Right

Writing is Our Right started in one California youth prison in 1996 and now runs writing workshops in dozens of youth prisons throughout California and a handful in other states. What started as a weekly, six-page magazine of youth writing and art has become an 80-page magazine published every other week. WOR aims to make a difference not only for YPEI but for the volunteers who facilitate writing workshops in youth prisons. Dante, the Founder and Executive Director of WOR, told me that one important goal of this work is for volunteers "to connect and learn from the young writers and artists."

Even more important to Dante, though, is the opportunity for reflection and growth that writing offers the young people participating in WOR workshops. As Dante told me, the personal self-reflection and self-affirmation that happens for a young writer is critical to the purpose of WOR:

> It makes me proud of making a connection with a young person and immediately connecting with a young person and helping a young person find their self-worth. It makes me happy that they're finding the confidence to see themselves do bigger and better things than what allegedly brought them into jail or brought them into the position that they find themselves. [Our work is] in helping a young person find their voice, encouraging them to realize that they matter as well.

Writing is Our Right centers the writing and art that happens inside youth prisons. But why writing? What is it about this specific literacy practice that engenders so much connection

and confidence for young people? When I asked Dante why writing is so powerful and important to this work, he responded:

> When you're writing, you document, and you're putting down on paper what you're telling, you're sharing your art form. It's going to go beyond just the conversation in the room with a handful of the audience that you're meeting. By writing you're able to take what a person is writing and bring it beyond wherever the classroom is, the walls of the criminal justice system. Right? And share it with the greater community that inspires and gives hope to other readers of the magazine to read it, and also helps people realize that they're not alone and the struggles and challenges that come with day-to-day life. And I hear, time and time again, how Writing is Our Right helps folks feel, like, it gives them a sense of family, a connection, a lifeline that they are not alone and that there's someone else that has it worse or equally as bad as them, which is sadly a sense of relief. It's nice to know you're not alone. And we all know, from our work inside, that incarceration is a super lonely place. And it helps if you have the tools, the ability to put your thoughts down on paper, and get them off your chest.

The loneliness of incarceration had been put on display for me just the day before at Central Youth Prison, where I facilitated a Writing is Our Right workshop with three young people, one of whom, Anthony, I had never met before. Anthony participated in the workshop, wrote a piece, and shared it out loud with the rest of us. Later, I asked Anthony why he had chosen to be a part of WOR when he could have chosen not to participate, like other young people who were hanging out in the common room. Anthony told me he did not know what WOR was, had never heard of it. He did not even know that he would be writing. But he was lonely and decided to check it out. Young people's desire for connection in prison, what Dante

calls “a sense of family … a lifeline” is evident in Anthony’s simple decision to be a part of WOR that day and, as I show below, is clear in Oscar’s decisions to participate in WOR as well.

My interactions with other writers during workshops offer further evidence that young people are writing for each other, to be and feel connected to someone else. One evening, after passing out the latest issue of the magazine, I asked Alonso, a frequent contributor to the magazine, where he likes to start reading. I expected him to point to his own pieces, which are always published and often selected for Pieces of the Week. In fact, I was asking this question as an opportunity to let Alonso know that I know his writing is always published in the magazine, that I noticed him and his work. I meant for this to be an opportunity for me to praise him and affirm his writing, to begin to develop a relationship around his written words. But Alonso did not turn to his own pieces. Rather, he pointed to a poem by a writer in a different county. Alonso told me he looks for this writer in every magazine, that he loves reading his pieces, that they teach him a lot about writing and wordplay and how to handle the struggle of being locked up. This exchange with Alonso shows how reading others’ work in *Writing is Our Right* and writing for others are important aspects of many young people’s literacy practices during the experience of their incarceration.

For almost all writers, though, it is the reality of seeing their work published in a magazine that motivates their writing. Derrick was one of these writers. He valued being a recognized author of published work in *Writing is Our Right* magazine. One week, we did not have new issues of the magazine to pass out due to a mix-up about mailing addresses at the central office. When Derrick learned of our failure to bring the magazines that contained his writing, he challenged us to do a better job. Derrick did not write and submit his pieces for our benefit. If we were going to promise to publish his work and then show up without magazines

that contained his published work, we were failing. With the characteristic force of his direct personality, Derrick asked us to deliver a message to Dante, Founder and Director of Writing is Our Right, about the missing magazines. The message was funny, serious, and straight to the point: "Yo, what the fuck, Dante!"

As I wrote in my field notes that evening, there were not any consequences for us if we failed to, as Derrick said, "do our jobs." Derrick's life, on the other hand, had generally involved a lot of serious consequences. He was only a few weeks away from his 18th birthday, at which point he would "graduate" to a prison for men aged 18–25. Maria, the Program Coordinator at Central County Youth Prison, later told me a story about Derrick and the pride he had in his published writing. Derrick, who had the name of his home county tattooed across his forehead, often acted hard in our workshops, sometimes bullying others into silence with his quick and sharp retorts. He is the last person I would have expected to look for affirmation from prison staff. But one time, when one of his many pieces had been published in the magazine, he called out to the staff and asked them to check it out. Maria described the situation as follows:

> He was proud of it. And I was, like, "Wow." And so the staff looked at it, they read it, they're like, "Wow, it's really good. Like, you did this? Are you sure?" And it wasn't like he was trying to be tough. It was just more, like, "I'm sorry" and he was apologizing to his mother … And, so, every time I see the magazines, I'm like, "Wow! A lot of kids are talented." And I hope they see that. Some kids don't think of themselves as talented or being good at something, and they don't pursue it. So, I think that Writing is Our Right is a good way to kind of show, "Hey, someone is listening to you, someone is reading what you're writing, and they're interested."

When Derrick asked me to deliver his blunt message to Dante, and through that request delivered the same message to all of us at Writing is Our Right, he challenged our work and our commitments to the young people writing in WOR workshops. It raised questions about what was deemed important for whom in these writing workshops. It revealed to me just how significant it was for young writers to see their work in the magazine.

Many months later, when I was facilitating WOR workshops at both Central and Northern Youth Prisons, my arrival without the latest issue of the magazine revealed similar feelings from other young writers. When I tried to explain why I did not have magazines this time – there really had been an emergency with my co-facilitator, who had the magazines in her car and was not present that night – some writers in the group laughed at me. They scoffed at the whole notion of Writing is Our Right and challenged me to prove that the whole enterprise was not a scam. They were angry and disappointed. Some wanted to leave the workshop. One young man, AJ, proudly took the opportunity to share the short piece he was working on that day.

Writing Sample 4.1

Untitled (Jamar)

Man, I ain't fucking
with WOR no more

Change that Matters

At the end of every day, thousands of young people are locked up in youth prisons and WOR is trying to help them, in any small way, right now. There are, of course, the internal changes that can happen with reflection and writing practice, but there also positive external consequences of participation in WOR workshops. Changes that seem small within the structural

context of youth incarceration are not small for the individuals who might enjoy certain outcomes as a result of such change. One small change that Writing is Our Right achieved was the certification of WOR participation. I had heard from a few young writers that a Writing is Our Right Certificate of Completion would be useful to them. They told me that bringing a certificate to their court dates and showing it to the Judge or District Attorney could matter.

I followed up with Jennifer, the Deputy Probation Officer at Northern County Youth Prison. Jennifer organized all programming at NCYP, and I asked whether she knew what effect program participation had for young people when they went to court for trial or sentencing. She validated the young writers' requests for recognition of their participation in WOR programming and affirmed the sense that WOR participation mattered to individuals appearing before the court.

Adam	Can you explain to me why a certificate is useful? Or, if it even is?
Jennifer	Yes and yes. For our youth, I think it's something that they haven't obtained before. Probably, when they were going to school, they weren't getting perfect attendance. They weren't on the Honor Roll … they're achieving things that they've never achieved before and it feels good. And just like it is with wearing their Honor shirt and walking into court with their Honor shirt, they want to be able to say, "Look, I've been doing things with my life. And I've accomplished something." You know, "And here it is, here's something that says, I accomplished this." You know, it's one thing to just go in [to court] and say it. It's another to be able to show it.

One of the small, measurable changes this study achieved has been the creation of the Writing is Our Right Certificate of Participation, awarded quarterly to young people who

participate in WOR workshops. Dante sees the work of WOR as future oriented but also intimately connected with the lives of young people in youth prisons today. It is the power of writing's ability to make connections, both within oneself and socially, that continues to drive the work of the small staff and cohort of volunteers at Writing is Our Right.

Dante — If we can write a letter of support or get the writings into the hands of the judge or the district attorney, then we're making a small change that might make a difference for a kid that might be tried as an adult.

Adam — So, for that kid, for that one person, that change is a change to his whole world.

Dante — And that's all that matters to that one kid, my life. Right?

As immediate and individual as the focus of WOR can be for writers and volunteers, Dante wanted to be clear that this work is about the future. As much as the singular condition of each individual writer is at the center of WOR workshops, Dante explained that he considered the organization's goals to be future-oriented:

> This is a project oriented toward the future. Right? We're not closing prisons tomorrow, but we can create the situation in 20 or 30 years where people who are in charge have been introduced to the situations and the systems and they know it's an inhumane system. Right? And, I think, regardless of what happens, maybe we do close all these detention facilities in the coming years and things change, I think what we're doing, there's always going to be a place for us as long as we stay, you know, up with the time that people need to get their messages out, people need to know how to write, people need to know how to tell their story. We need to connect with our future to learn from them.

José, the Lead Volunteer for Writing is Our Right at the Central County Youth Prison, was also thinking about the future in this work. In our partnership together, we talked often about

the impact our work had and whether it had any at all. In José I had a partner who thought critically about prison abolition and prison reform in ways that opened my mind to the possibilities afforded and foreclosed by the work of Writing is Our Right. When we sat down for a more formal conversation, an interview as a part of my data collection, I asked him about his goals for the work he does with WOR.

Adam I want to know what your goals are for the work. So, they could be goals for yourself. They could be goals for the young people who are choosing to participate. They could be system-wide structural goals, right?

José I mean, I think in simple ways, it's to put Writing is Our Right out of a job. You know, I really do think that any organization or community person doing work with young people who are incarcerated, you got to put yourself out of a job … I hope they they're thinking about one day preparing to not have workshops in there, you know, as popular as they are, as much as people want to hear those stories from inside, because it is also sensationalizing. Oh my God, you know … everybody wants to feel good or bad or, you know, feel those stories. But that's not the point. As long as there are prisons or locked facilities, I want to offer something to them [the people locked inside], whether it be writing workshops, whether it be talking to them, whatever it looks like. Of course, I'm going to support them [those locked inside], but in that process, long term, I want to support those movements, those efforts toward making sure that no young person is incarcerated.

As both Dante and José show, the purpose and practice of Writing is Our Right aims for immediate individual change through the connections of writing for oneself and for others, and

future-oriented social change through the connection of people to the inhumane systems of incarceration. They may think differently about how WOR is changing the future, but both are committed to doing this work in the belief that Writing is Our Right can be a part of transformational social change.

The Meaning of Writing in Youth Prisons

The day I talked to Oscar he reported that he was feeling “anxious.” Oscar was 18 and had been scheduled for transfer to an adult prison for men between the ages of 18 and 25. Oscar had known about this transfer for three months and woke up every day wondering if today would be the day. Months ago, he had been waiting on paperwork to process. Now, he was waiting on open spots in the adult prison; a daily, changing reality, he told me. Oscar was anxious for two reasons. One, he did not know what to expect, what the daily life and routine would be in that new space. Two, he could tell that his family members were worried. He told me that when his family visits him every week at the CCYP, he notices that they are “nervous and anxious.” Oscar always tells them “I’m going to be fine,” but he knows that does not relieve their stress. He knows that when they leave him behind these bars, they will worry about him every night again for a week. Then they will come see him again.

Oscar was a consistent presence in Writing is Our Right workshops for almost one year. According to my field notes, he had become a regular participant in October 2018. I was able to sit down with him for an hour in June 2019, to talk about what writing meant to him. The night before our interview, we had facilitated WOR writing workshops and Oscar had joined us. At the end of the hour, sitting in our circle, we said goodbye to Oscar, not knowing if he would be at our next workshop. Within one week of our interview, Oscar had been transferred.

Oscar did not come to youth prison as a writer. He did not think of himself as a writer then or now. He told me that he "never wrote at all" before being detained and when I asked about school, Oscar said that he "didn't really write at school neither."

Adam Why do you write so much with us, for Writing is Our Right?

Oscar The first time when I was locked up, I felt like it [writing] couldn't hurt. I could try it. I tried writing and it felt so good and everything. I had a lot going on that day, I remember around that time, family stress in that day, I was able to let things out that I was holding inside.

Oscar echoes Dante's argument that some of writing's power is connected to the release of pain and trauma and stress, that the act of writing something to get it "off your chest" matters for young people experiencing incarceration.

In talking more with Oscar about his writing practice, I learned that Oscar articulated three reasons for why he writes in prison. First, as noted, he discovered that by writing he can "let things out." He can unburden himself. Writing is a practice of self-care for Oscar, who finds that it feels good to "express a lot of things at once on my own." Later, Oscar told me that writing is like working out, that writing "helps with the stress and the negative feelings and things that bring me down." He works out every morning, early, but he does not write every day. In fact, he only writes in WOR workshops. I asked him if this was about access to time or space for writing, or even to the materials one needs to write – a pencil or pen, some paper, or a notebook. No, he said, "it feels better writing in the group, we can talk about it."

This reminded me of Oscar's participation in WOR workshops. He was a quiet writer, not engaging in the banter and insults that took up so much space. He did not talk much, except to read a writing prompt aloud if we asked. He would nod his greetings to us, and sometimes

mumble a reply when we asked how he was doing. But he always shared his piece at the end of the workshop. Writing, for Oscar, was about unburdening himself and letting go, at least for a moment, of the stress in his life.

While Oscar appreciated the community of the workshop, he needed the time and space to write before sharing. Even though he always shared, he told me that writing "feels more comfortable than talking it out."

Adam	What is it about paper and pencil that feels more comfortable than talking it out?
Oscar	Never a time where the paper would judge you.
Adam	Wait, wait. What does that mean?
Oscar	There was never a time where the paper would judge you. You can write freely, whatever comes to your mind. I can express a lot of things at once on my own and I was feeling judged a lot in life because of my case, because other things, the way they see me, the way I dress, a lot of judging. The world makes it hard for people. I felt judged way before my case, it wasn't just my case, it happened a lot of times at school. One of the main reasons I didn't do good at school was people judging me.
Adam	Was it teachers, was it students?
Oscar	Yeah, all of that, it was everybody.

Long before being charged with a crime and sentenced by a court, Oscar learned in school that he would be judged. He felt judged because of the way students and teachers saw him, judged because of how he dressed. He says that a key reason he was not successful at school was because of all "the people judging me."

We tried hard in our WOR workshops to create an affirming space. We did not always succeed. There were fights; there was anger; we heard “Fuck you” and “Suck my dick” and “You a bitch” much more often than we wanted. But Oscar helped us create a more affirming space when he was present, and his willingness to share his pieces showed that he felt he could do so without being judged. And, in those vrare occasions when he did not share, he knew that what he had written would never be judged by the paper he wrote on.

Finally, Oscar told me that he wrote for others. Oscar had a one-year-old little girl who lived with her mom and came to visit sometimes. At that time, I also had a one-year-old little girl at home. I saw her every night. Nothing in this work affected me more than talking with Oscar about his little girl and imagining the horror of being locked up while my little girl grew up without me. Often, I did not know if Oscar wanted to talk about his daughter with me or not. I was always going home to my little girl at the end of WOR workshops. Oscar was always going back to his cell, alone. Oscar told me he had written letters to his daughter and given them to her mom to read aloud to their daughter. He said that he wanted his daughter to be able to read these letters on her own one day. I asked him what he tried to say in those letters. His reply was immediate: “To be a good girl. To take her education real far.”

Oscar wasn’t only writing for his daughter, though. After all, she wasn’t reading the WOR magazine that came out every two weeks with Oscar’s writing often selected for the Pieces of the Week section. Oscar told me he tries to “leave a message in my writings.” I asked him what message he tries to send. “Being locked up … that’s no way to live life. There’s too much out there in the world, missing out on.”

Oscar wanted to share with others that they are not the only ones going through hard times. He wanted to make his readers feel “like how I feel when I’m reading their stuff.” Earlier,

Oscar had told me that he likes to read what other young writers are writing in *WOR* because he can relate, it helps him remember "I'm not alone, I'm not the only one feeling like that. I'm stressing, but I'm not the only one stressing. This can help me make the best out of what my situation is."

The Effects of Writing by YPEI on Prison Staff

In later conversations with the programming coordinators at both institutions, I learned that, in their opinions, Writing is Our Right had a humanizing effect for staff as well as for young writer participants. Jennifer, the Program Coordinator at NCYP, told me that WOR offered young writers the freedom to write without judgment and a growing sense of pride in themselves:

> It gives them the freedom to say what they want to say without adult judgement. And the other value is that they can say that they are published writers. And, you know, it gives them a sense of pride. And I think that's something to really value, giving these kids something to feel proud of is pretty important.

Maria, the Program Coordinator at CCYP, revealed that young writers' talents also had a humanizing effect on prison staff, reminding them that the young writers in WOR were "kids ... and they do have feelings."

Maria They're very talented kids. And I feel like this is one way they can, other people can see how talented they are. I mean, other kids read it. The kids read it. But our staff can kind of also see how talented some of them are.

Adam You think Writing is Our Right has affected the mindset of some staff?

Maria I think it has … the magazine is just one of those things that the staff can see that

> the kids are, you know, they're kids, but they try, and they do have feelings, and they do express themselves in different ways. Maybe getting in fights is a way of him expressing himself. It's just, we just have to help him figure out a different way, a more positive way.

The many ways young writers express themselves are evident throughout the published pages of *Writing is Our Right*. What is less clear, until we examine what writing means for YPEI by asking them and those around them, are the potential personal, social, and systemic change such writing produces. For Oscar, writing was a balm, a healing practice and healing space, for the stress caused by his incarceration. For Alonso, writing was a communal practice that connected him with other writers and their work. For Dante and Jennifer and Maria, writing produced by YPEI had the potential to change the future – for individual writers who could prove to a judge that they used their time inside productively with a certificate from Writing is Our Right and might, therefore, be granted an earlier release, and for the system-wide agents of power (prison staff; attorneys; judges; future judges) who encountered the words of YPEI and might change their mind one day about doing work that sustains the inhumanity of youth incarceration.

As I would discover through my continued ethnographic participation in writing workshops and ongoing data analysis, there was one idea that connected all the writing produced by young people experiencing incarceration. In the next two chapters, I explain how everybody in a youth prison writing workshop is always writing for freedom and I explore what freedom means for these freedom writers.

Chapter Five: "I Kind of Had My Dream Switch Turned Off"

The thing I miss most about it in particular is being free in the world and hugging my mom.

- Stephon

The last time I felt good was in kindergarten.

- Samuel

In this chapter I present findings that address the second of three research questions in this study. *When afforded time and space in structured writing workshops, what do young people experiencing incarceration write about?* In the previous chapter I described why young people in youth prisons choose to write and what writing means and does for them. Here, I show what they write about when they put pencil to paper in Writing is Our Right writing workshops. Building on the logic of Toni Morrison's (1992) argument of an absent presence, I argue that young writers experiencing incarceration are always writing about freedom.

An Absent Presence

In her seminal work on the literary imagination, Morrison (1992) argues that the presence of Blackness informs the entire canon of U.S. literature, even though traditional literary criticism considers much of U.S. literature "free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States" (pp. 4–5). It was the logic behind Morrison's argument that helped me notice what is always present in the writing of young people experiencing incarceration: a desire for freedom. Whether writing about romantic love or missing home, the smiles of their siblings, being sorry for the situation they

have put their mom in, wanting to change their lives, desiring to go back to school, growing up on the streets, being locked in a cage, or repeatedly coming in and out of jail, these young writers are always, in a way, writing about freedom.

Morrison (1992) writes of her realization that Blackness was everywhere in U.S. literature as the feeling of looking at a fishbowl and seeing “the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world” (p. 17). That is how I now see every piece of writing by a young person experiencing incarceration – written within a structure of unfreedom that always includes a demand and desire for freedom. In the rest of this chapter, I examine how freedom inhabits all writing within five categories: critiquing social systems, desiring love and human relationships, examining their own interior lives, wanting (to) change, and exploring (im)possibilities.

Critiquing Social Systems

Young writers offer critique of many social systems present in their lives, but they are most critical of those that impact their daily lives: schools and prisons. Schools and prisons operate within a nexus to punish, push out, and detain young people (Meiners, 2007; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). They are contemporary state institutions charged with manifesting centuries of racialized oppression (Sojoyner, 2013; Wun, 2017). They are two spaces within the same carceral state, informal and formal prisons continuing to maintain the logics of slavery and white supremacy (Hartman, 2008; Kirkland, 2017). When we understand schools and prisons in these ways – as complementary, state-sponsored institutions tasked with maintaining carceral logics – we are more likely to theorize and design work that addresses comprehensive transformation of our social structures and systems.

Students who are suspended or expelled from school are more likely to be implicated in the juvenile justice system and to enter juvenile detention centers, jails, and prisons (Annamma, 2014; Meiners, 2007; Rios, 2011; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). As schools increasingly resemble detention centers – with surveillance technologies on campus, including metal detectors, security cameras, and police officers becoming more and more common – these sites increasingly manifest ideologies of control that criminalize student behavior and students themselves.

Many young writers experiencing incarceration are critical of schooling in general and their own experiences in schools, more specifically. Others, such as EJ, regard graduating from school as a positive and necessary step for the futures they desire but are tired of the constant struggle. "The System is Frustrating!" highlights EJ's view that graduation is a way of being "done with the system" and expresses their frustration that the probation system of violations is actively unhelpful for students trying finish their education.

Writing Sample 5.1

The System is Frustrating! (EJ)

I'm hella irritated. I'm in jail again. I just got out two weeks ago and I got violated for not checking in.

I hate being on GPS. I hate the system. I hate the GPS officer at the county. They don't support you. Every time I ask my PO for something she always says, "no." They just want us in jail. I feel like my lawyer isn't on my side. He always says negative things.

I wish I could be off probation, living my life. I really want to go back to school, graduate and be done with the system, not have officers come up to my school, embarrassing me in front of the whole school.

Sojoyner (2016) writes of the energy spent trying to ensure that Black children never encounter the physical site of prison even as we fail to see how schools themselves operate as "enclosures" of Black youth and Black liberation. Similarly, Kirkland (2017) writes of young people who attend schools where the doors lock automatically so that no one may enter without permission and are chained from the inside so that no one may leave without authorization, where Black and Brown boys are suspended for missing too many school days, where there are "no pipelines to prison" because it is "all prison" (p. 468). Here, EJ's frustration and anger aligns with these realities. Young people want to finish school, yet the system – through GPS monitoring, resistant probation officers and lawyers, and police arresting students at school – works to prevent young people's desired outcome. EJ's critique is not of school-as-structure, but of the system that school is one part of, a critique against all that prevents young people from graduating and moving forward in their lives.

The relationship between schools and prisons is less a pipeline and more a web-like nexus of punishment and control (Meiners, 2007; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Recent scholarship theorizes schools as "part and parcel of a U.S. logic of punitive carcerality" (Wun, 2017) and through a lens of "enclosure" that implicates the entire structure of U.S. public schooling in the suppression of Black freedom (Sojoyner, 2013). Scholars ask us to see vulnerabilized schools and communities "as forms of imprisonment" themselves (Kirkland, 2017, p. 469) and describe the current state of racialized oppression and hyperincarceration, of which the relationship between schools and prison is only one symptom, as the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2008).

Even when young writers are explicitly critical of how they have been treated in schools, their critiques of schooling include a desire to find schools that work for them. In "Schools Need to Start Adjusting," Walter, who has been frustrated with their own schooling experience, still

wants "to find a school that will suit me properly, and to graduate." In "New Beginnings," Charles wants "to go back to school" but has "been kicked out of all the schools."

Writing Sample 5.2

Schools Need to Start Adjusting (Walter)

I previously went to Martin Luther King High School and Central, but I got kicked out of both schools. I hate school. They need to teach us how to do taxes. Teachers always think that they are right, but they are usually wrong.

School doesn't work for me. Most schools don't teach things that help us in everyday life. I think that schools need to start adjusting to accommodate all learning difficulties. I wish to find a school that will suit me properly, and to graduate.

I also wish to go to college and possibly graduate school. I want to get a good job, I want to make lots of money.

Writing Sample 5.3

New Beginnings (Charles)

There were so many things I could have done different. I could have stayed at my cousin's house instead of going with him. He can be impulsive, very immature, but I can be worse. When I get out in two weeks I think maybe things will be a little different. I hope I will have a clear mind. I want to go back to school but I have been kicked out of all the schools and will probably have to go to an alternative school.

In "Modern Day Slavery," Fahima illuminates this connection, directly linking the hyperincarceration of their people today to the enslavement of their ancestors historically. Fahima's critique recalls Alexander's (2010) argument in *The New Jim Crow* that mass incarceration is the new caste system. Fahima historicizes the experience of riding a bus from Rosa Parks to the contemporary prison bus now filled young people. Fahima further critiques society's economic structures, which incentivize "building more jails, not for you, but for me" at

the expense of building more schools and covering school fees. Powerfully, Fahima ends this piece by arguing that letting parents be parents and families be families would end this modern-day system of slavery.

Writing Sample 5.4

Modern Day Slavery (Fahima)

I thought slavery was over way back yonder
Somebody lied to me
Because I just had chains in my hands and chains on my feet
But I don't say yes master
They still tell me when to eat and when to sleep
That's not OK, we in 2018, but nobody says keep the peace.
Rosa Parks said she was not sitting on the back of the bus
But now we fill up the bus from front to back, back to front
We're slaves, slaves of the system
The bus I talk about is white with blue letters on it.
Sometimes it's even a car with those same colors.
Why are we slaves? I thought I was free!
But they're building more jails, not for you, but for me.
And why give my kids a school fee
When you got money to lock up me and my brothers
Then throw away the key.
Why can't you use those funds to teach
My child not to be like me.
I have ACS caseworkers who I can't tell right from wrong without distress
Mommy and daddy used the belt on me and I think that was the best.
I never been in child services BCU or ACS check the database.
You see, if they let us be parents
Then slavery might come to an end
Instead of the children coming to jail losing their way to sin.

Not all young writers' critique of social systems focuses on schools and prisons, however. Maria speaks to the systems that most impact her life: immigration and international border crossing. In this piece, however, the importance of education remains clear. In "Wall," Maria gestures toward her future and the future she dreams of for her children. She resists the

slurs of the U.S. President and affirms her commitment to her own hard work and the work of her people. She will work for hours "in the fields / under the sun" to provide for her family and create a world in which she sees her children go to college. "Don't build the wall!" she demands. She closes by staking claim, in her writing, to the "better life that we deserve."

Writing Sample 5.5

Wall (Maria)

Why are you building a wall?
I just want to cross over for my kids
I need money and to live in a better place
For the future of my kids
Don't build the wall!
Fine, just let my kids go, so they can go to college
I'm not a rapist or a drug dealer
I'm just a hard worker
I'll work in the fields
Under the sun for hours
This is the story of every Mexican (every Latino)
Don't build the wall
Just let us live a better life that we deserve.

What Maria writes about, of course, is a sense of freedom. In line 2, "I just want to cross over for my kids," Maria is writing about a freedom that is both physical and political. Maria requires the freedom to cross the border and the freedom, once having crossed, to be recognized as a human being contributing to the complex sociopolitical economy of the U.S. Then, in lines 3 and 4, Maria references an economic freedom ("I need money") and a physical, sense-of-safety-freedom ("and to live in a better place / For the future of my kids").

Twice, Maria issues the command "Don't build the wall." The wall is a physical manifestation of the denial of the freedoms Maria desires for their family. Without the wall,

Maria's chances to express those freedoms are realistic, if difficult. With the wall preventing her crossing, those freedoms are entirely denied. Maria's "Wall" is, in every sense, a poem about freedom. In this poem, Maria demands and desires freedom without ever writing the word. This is Morrison's (1992) absent presence at work.

The absent presence of freedom also inhabits the work of EJ, Walter, Charles, and Fahima. In "The System is Frustrating!" EJ wants freedom from GPS monitors and systems of surveillance that prevent students from finishing school. Both Walter and Charles, in "Schools Need to Start Adjusting" and "New Beginnings," want freedom from school systems that are not working for them and freedom to find a school that does. Fahima's call for freedom in "Modern Day Slavery" is perhaps the clearest of these examples. Writing that "We're slaves, slaves of the system" and "I thought I was free!" Fahima underscores the logic of Morrison's absent presence, which I extend here: the work of young writers experiencing incarceration is always and everywhere about freedom. In the next chapter, I ask young writers what freedom means to them and I position their answers as transformative critical knowledge in the work for a world in which we no longer lock up young people away from their families, their homes, and the hugs of their parents or their children.

Desiring Love and Human Relationships

Wanting to be with the people they love – their moms and their dads; their brothers, sisters, aunties, and cousins; their babies – is a dominant theme in the writing of young people experiencing incarceration. This should not surprise us. Separation from the social world, and those in it, is one of prison's primary modes of punishment. When we historicize the role of prisons today, we understand hyperincarceration to be an organizing social structure of our

society. Alexander (2010) argues that mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow. Hartman (2008) theorizes that we are living in the "afterlife of slavery," which she defines as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (p. 6). Davis (1998) warns that we have moved "from the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison" (p. 75). When young writers write of wanting to be with their loved ones, they are not merely articulating the human desire to be with the people they miss and desire, they are issuing the collective call for freedom inherent in a freedom movement that extends across centuries and generations.

Among other horrors, the practice of slavery in the U.S. relied upon the intentional destruction of family and kin relationships. This necessarily informed what people wanted and meant when they fought for freedom. Hames-Garcia (2004) writes that since "separation from others was a central experience for blacks under slavery, the struggle for freedom has been in large part a struggle for the freedom to have connections to others" (p. xlii). And, further, that while "freedom from bondage does mean autonomy and freedom from the power of slaveholders, on the other hand emancipation came to mean the possibility of entering into and maintaining binding and meaningful interpersonal relations." (p. xlii).

Young writers experiencing incarceration who write about love and human relationships are expressing a desire for the freedom necessary to experience those outcomes. I present three poems below in which the authors desire love and human connection denied to them by the reality of their incarceration. In "Feelings," Antwon writes of the desire to see and be with his daughter. In "What I Miss," Stephon writes about missing his mom. And in "My First Bed and Missing My Dad," Jordan writes about the relationship of love and friendship he has with his father.

Antwon's daughter was born while he was incarcerated, and it took three months for daddy and daughter to meet. They have never hugged each other. Antwon acknowledges he has not "been a father," presumably because he has been locked up. Antwon wants to make sure his daughter knows that she is loved – "Just know that daddy loves you" – and in a closing rhyme he laments that "Just know that daddy loves you / the pictures in my folder are the closest that we come to." Here, Antwon echoes Hames-Garcia's (2004) analysis that freedom not only means freedom from surveillance and control of the prison system, but also "the possibility of entering into and maintaining binding and meaningful interpersonal relations" (p. XLII). In order to be free, Antwon first needs to "enter into" a relationship with his daughter, and then to be able, physically, emotionally, and economically, to "maintain" it.

Writing Sample 5.6

Feelings (Antwon)

I want to see my daughter
I haven't been a father
Ask me how I've been
I've been feeling really bothered
I wish that I can see her
It took me three months
Just to get to meet her
I know I haven't hugged you
Just know that daddy loves you
The pictures in my folder are the closest that we come to.

Stephon describes his relationship with his mom in terms of the absence that currently defines it. First, he tells us that "taking a ride with my mom" is what he misses most. Then, Stephon describes what he misses about "being free" and writes that what he misses most is "hugging my mom." Some young people experiencing incarceration are denied contact visits

with their family members, meaning their visits occur in two rooms separated by security glass. It is quite possible that Stephon has not hugged his mom in weeks, or even months. It is not surprising that Stephon misses the freedom of riding with his mom on the outside. One of prison's primary punishments is the denial of these social freedoms. But when Stephon articulates that hugging his mom is the thing he misses most, he gestures toward the historical separation of families through the institutions of slavery and mass incarceration that have organized life in the U.S. for centuries.

Writing Sample 5.7

What I Miss (Stephon)

I think the thing I miss most is taking a ride with my mom. The thing I miss most about it in particular is being free in the world and hugging my mom.

In "My First Bed and Missing My Dad," Jordan writes that the first time they slept on a bed in their life was in a youth prison. Young people experiencing incarceration call the beds they sleep on "slabs." They are blocks of concrete built up from the floor and wall. On top sits a flimsy mattress. No person deserves this "bed" to be the first bed they ever sleep on. Read one way, the prison bed is a reminder of what Jordan does not have at home. Read another, it is a reminder of what they do not have in prison – their father. "I'd rather have no bed at all and spend every moment with him than be in here," Jordan writes. This piece is not about beds but about the bond between child and father, one "that can never be broken." Jordan writes that they "would rather still sleep on the floor at my apartment with my father because I wouldn't want to leave him." It is their relationship with their father, and the love they share, that Jordan amplifies in this piece.

Writing Sample 5.8

My First Bed and Missing My Dad (Jordan)

Personally, I never had a bed, so I slept on the floor for most of my life until now. So, it's sad to say my first bed was in juvie. I wouldn't want that to be my first experience, but it was, but I would rather still sleep on the floor at my apartment with my father because I wouldn't want to leave him.

I'd rather have no bed at all and spend every moment with him than be in here. My dad's my world and I know I'm his. Me and him have a bond that can never be broken. I will never stop loving him till the day I die no matter what.

The love shared and desired in relationships between fathers, daughters, sons, and mothers generates hundreds of pieces of writing by YPEI. In some cases, they have never met, and in others they are lifelong friends. In every case, though, we should understand that the separation of families and the ache such absence brings is not new to life in this country but belongs to a terrible history of enslavement and incarceration that predates the founding of the United States and continues to define it.

Examining Their Own Interior Lives

A lot of writing by young people experiencing incarceration concerns social system inequities and the desire to be with the people they love, but in this brief section I present work that addresses an author's interior life of reflection. Time is the one thing in prison everyone has too much of. For Alfred, Yazmín, and Samuel, the authors of the three pieces presented here, writing provides an outlet for the thinking and remembering they do with all this time. Alfred tells us that prison has turned off his "dream switch." Yazmín explains why a mirror is the saddest thing she owns. Samuel writes that the last time he felt good was "in kindergarten." The young writers experiencing incarceration who write about their interior lives with such forceful

condemnation of the social conditions of their exterior lives are writing for freedom from these dehumanizing conditions. The metaphors here point to the reality of what incarceration does to the experience of childhood and youth.

In "Dreams," Alfred examines his sleeping state. He says that he has "no dreams" and questions whether this is "crazy." He writes that he sleeps "peacefully" and that nothing disturbs him as he sleeps. But he wishes he could dream. He tells his readers that it has not always been this way, that he used to dream, but within "a minute" of being in jail, his "dream switch turned off." Read literally, this seems like the lament of a young person forced to sleep alone in a concrete cell. His sleeping state has been so altered that he either does not dream or does not remember his dreaming. Read metaphorically, Alfred condemns the institution of youth incarceration for flipping the switch on his ability to dream of his future life. It is one thing to know that being locked up will alter the life trajectory of so many young people. It is quite another to know that the experience of being locked up can have such a finalizing consequence on one young person's ability to dream about their future life.

Writing Sample 5.9

Dreams (Alfred)

I have no dreams. Isn't that crazy?
I see nothing when I sleep.
I sleep peacefully, with nothing on my mind.
I wish I had dreams. I actually used to,
But after a minute of being in jail,
I kind of had my dream switch turned off.

Of the more than 6,000 pieces I read in *Writing is Our Right*, Yazmín's was one of the hardest. It is not the loss of childhood or the abuse Yazmín experienced that made it so.

Distressingly, there are hundreds of pieces by young writers experiencing incarceration that address these issues. It is Yazmín's self-critique that still crushes me. Yazmín writes that she has "failed" because the little girl she sees in the mirror is "still trapped," she's "scared, hurt, and in pain." Not only has Yazmín endured what no child should endure, but she has learned, somewhere and somehow, to blame herself, to consider her present situation a failure of her past self, to look in the mirror and be sorry for failing to save a little girl. Yazmín writes about freedom, and Yazmín needs to be free.

Writing Sample 5.10

The Saddest Thing I Own (Yazmín)

> I think the saddest thing I own would have to be a mirror. I say this because when I look in the mirror I see my reflection but not of me, now I see a young girl.
>
> What people don't know is I was forced to give up my childhood, forced to grow up. I was being abused from ages five to twelve, and on a daily basis.
>
> I remember I used to look at myself, cry in the mirror, if I were alone I would yell at the mirror. I always told myself I'd save that little girl I see.
>
> I spoke up about that abuse at the age of fourteen. After that I'd look in the mirror and promise to start asking for help for her.
>
> My mirror is the saddest thing I own because it reminds me that I have failed and that she is still trapped, she's scared, hurt, and in pain. And I'm sorry.

In "Time to Feel Better," Samuel shines a light on the destruction of childhood joy. The last time Samuel was "truly happy" was in kindergarten, when he "got to take naps" and have fun with his friends. Samuel presents an abolitionist argument in this piece. We know that he is not happy or having a good time in jail, but we also know that he was not happy or having a good time outside. In the second and final stanza, he writes that "nowadays I get yelled at by

teachers, I get yelled at by my mom and I get yelled at by the judges and the police." The argument for prison abolition is not to tear down all the prisons today but to create a world for which the logic of prisons does not exist (Davis, 2003; Laura, 2018). It is not only the institution of youth incarceration that has failed Samuel. So have schools, and the conditions that render his interactions with teachers and the police so similar. When a young person who has been to the eleventh grade admits that the last time they were happy was in kindergarten, we must listen, and we must change the conditions that make such a confession possible.

Writing Sample 5.11

Time to Feel Better (Samuel)

The last time I felt good was in kindergarten. I got to take naps and be with my friends. I had a really fun time. That was the last time I was truly happy. We got snacks and candy and my teacher was super nice. I used to collect snails and lady bugs.

Nowadays I get yelled at by teachers, I get yelled at by my mom and I get yelled at by the judges and the police. I don't know when the last time I really felt good about something after kindergarten and then from first grade until eleventh grade. My eyes seen it all.

Wanting (to) Change

Young writers experiencing incarceration are aware of the need for change in their lives. In her critical examination of urban playwriting by formerly incarcerated young girls, Winn (2012) argues that "incarcerated girls and incarcerated women have the right to name what they believe needs to change in the world around them in order to live the lives they desire" (p. 320). In this study, young writers experiencing incarceration write the change they want and need to see in the world. Some, like Daniel, the author of "Escape," explicitly identify political and

social change that is required for their lives to improve. Others, like Tony, the author of "On the Block Every Day (Not No Mo')" focus on the individual change they believe is necessary for the safety and happiness of their families and themselves.

In "Escape," Daniel writes of "wanting to change" every night. In fact, the desire for changing his life wakes him up at night. But Daniel implicitly acknowledges that his personal desire to change is not sufficient. The sociocultural context of his life, at this moment, means other people and systems and structures must also change. Daniel admits that he "will have to do the same thing," – presumably, some of the actions that led to his current incarceration – if he goes back to the same situation prior to his incarceration. Even if he wants to change and even if he does change, Daniel needs the systems and structures around him to change, too. In the final line, Daniel uses the language of fugitivity to emphasize the severity of his situation, recognizing that for change to happen in his life, he will have to "escape to a better life," just as so many enslaved peoples recognized and attempted to do.

Writing Sample 5.12

Escape (Daniel)

I have done a long dose of sitting in Juvenile Hall.
I awake every night wanting to change,
But knowing that if I go back to the same area,
I will have to do the same thing.
I have to escape to a better life.

In "On the Block Every Day (Not No Mo')," Tony writes of the individual changes they will make and their motivation to make them. In Tony's analysis, he is the person in control of his present and potential incarceration. Tony declares that they are going to "change my life and stop

going to jail." Previously they had been on the block "every day, all day, doing stupid stuff." In their calculation, removing themselves from the block and ending that behavior will result in the change they want to see and be. A newborn baby is their motivation, and Tony writes that when they get out, "it's goin to be just me and my baby moms – ain't no more posted on the block." Unlike Daniel, Tony sees the change they want in exclusively individual terms. So long as they stop certain behaviors, they stop going to jail. Critical scholars may find Tony's analysis less convincing than Daniel's, whose writing acknowledges the persistent force of the sociocultural contexts of young people's lives, but I do not elevate one over the other. For Tony, it may be as simple as they say it is. For Daniel, it surely is as complicated as he describes.

Writing Sample 5.13

On the Block Every Day (Not No Mo') (Tony)

> When I get out, I'm going to change my life and stop going to jail for my baby mom's and for my child that's on the way. At first, I was on the block every day, all day, doing stupid stuff. At the time, I thought it was cool and cute. Doing it now, that shhh isn't cool to me or cute to me because I keep going to jail with a baby on the way. So, when I get out, there's going to be a whole change with me and how I act. When I get out, it's going to be just me and my baby moms – ain't no more posted on the block.

In "Thoughts on Punishment," the anonymous author has a different view of change than either Daniel or Tony. Here, the writer offers a critique of the dominant theory of change at work in carceral logic. Fiercely independent and individual, Anonymous argues that people will not change "by being locked up." Of course, this is precisely the belief on which the system of mass incarceration depends. We lock up individuals because they have transgressed, and by locking them up we will convince them, or force them, to change. Anonymous is not convinced, writing,

"If someone is gonna make you change, it's gonna be yourself" and that the "punishment" of prison "doesn't accomplish anything but making the situation worse."

Writing Sample 5.14

Thoughts on Punishment (Anonymous)

> I don't believe in punishment. I don't think people will change by being locked up. If someone is gonna make you change, it's gonna be yourself because you're the only one that can change your lifestyle or how you be acting. Punishment doesn't accomplish anything but making the situation worse. I am my own person and that's about it.

Yang (2009) makes a similar argument around punishment and discipline in schools. Writing that "more discipline should result in more achievement" and that "removals ought to lead to academic excellence, rather than academic marginalization," Yang shows what all scholars and students of education know, from experience, that the opposite is the case. More exclusionary punishment in schools results in less academic achievement and greater involvement in the criminal justice system. Yang (2009) writes that:

> One commonsense argument about suspensions is that somehow they "correct" the "deviant" behavior of the student … If this were true, then more suspensions should lead to fewer pushouts and higher academic achievement – an outcome not reflected in the data at all." (p. 51)

Similarly, we should expect the same from the logic that governs mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. But we know that more incarceration does not lead to reformation and rehabilitation. The data around our carceral state are clear. More incarceration leads to lower outcomes in education and employment, as well as to drastically lower levels of physical,

emotional, and mental health. We live in a moment during which, both in schools and on the streets, young people are confronted by a system of punitive punishment that inflicts lasting damage. The current system does not care for young people who have transgressed, often addressing their transgressions in ways that compound the pain and trauma of their lives. For these reasons, it is as important as ever to consider what is possible, and even to explore what currently seems impossible. The lives of young people depend on our capacity to imagine and sustain an abolitionist future.

Exploring (Im)Possibilities

In the introduction to their remarkable collection, *Toward What Justice? Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, Tuck and Yang (2018) write that:

> It is our work, the work of our field, to highlight the ways that seemingly inconceivable futures are not inconceivable, as much as it is our corollary work to demonstrate that white supremacy and fascism have no future on these lands. The arc is always bending. What futures are possible for those whose futures are inconceivable? (p. 16)

In his own remarkable piece of writing, "Open the Gates," Michael writes of the future he wants to live – doing the work Tuck and Yang expect from the field of education. The work of dreaming and naming the futures that, as others write, "we know we need" (Anderson-Zavala et al., 2017).

Michael's critique of the world he presently lives stands in stark contrast to the world he desires. He wants to "be free in a place without violence … to walk down the street calmly without police harassment … to be free from the racist corrupt police." Is this really inconceivable? Anderson-Zavala and colleagues (2017) write that white supremacy and settler

colonialism are “old ideas,” but that we are in a “new context” (p. 151). Michael’s context is to confront police harassment when he is on the street and feel as if he is wasting his life when he is incarcerated. We might agree that white is the organizing principles of the U.S., a country founded on two holocausts – the enslavement of Africans and their descendants and the genocide of Indigenous peoples on these lands – but this must not prevent us from confronting Michael’s context alongside him and committing ourselves as practitioners of education to realizing the future he demands.

Writing Sample 5.15

Open the Gates (Michael)

I just want to be free in a place without violence
I just want to be free from the Juvenile Detention Center
Feeling like I am wasting my life in here.
I want to be free in a place where I can walk down the street
Calmly without police harassment.
I want to be free from the racist corrupt police
Telling lies to get answers.

It is not only the future that YPEI look toward with expectation and desire. In “Back,” Eric writes about the happy childhood innocence of his life. It is not the future Eric imagines when he thinks about change, but the past. Grieving his cousin’s death and his brother’s incarceration, Eric is “ready for a change.” He wants to “go back to the days / the days when I used to run around and play / and not worry about a thing.” Now, wasting his time in prison, remembering his cousin, worrying about his brother, Eric desires the change in his life to be a form of time travel to the past, in which he is happy, worry-free, and spending (not wasting) his time at play. Eric does not hopefully imagine a future but tragically recalls the past. Whether he

cannot or will not describe the future life he wants to live and the change he is ready for, both possibilities point to how the sociopolitical context of Eric's life, including his present incarceration, limit his ability or willingness to think of the future. He writes that he is haunted by his cousin at night. He writes that he asked for this. All he wishes is to go back in time.

Writing Sample 5.16

Back (Eric)

I wish I could go back to the days
The days when I used to run around and play
And not worry about a thing
Like my cousin being dead and my brother being locked away
All my time is going to waste
And I'm sitting here in pain
Because they took my cousin's life
And the last thing I said to him was
"Don't let me sleep in peace"
I'll never see him again and things won't be the same
I'm ready for a change.

Memories both haunt and inspire Eric, as they do for Clinton in his piece, "Earliest Memories." For Clinton, basketball is the escape he had from a home that included domestic violence. Playing basketball made everything ok, if only for a moment. "My problems were gone … everything was good in the world." It is Clinton's final sentence that recalls both the promise and the work we must expect from the field of education. "No more drugs, no more gangs, no more hate, just me and the goal." Like Michael's poem, "Open the Gates," Clinton's dream may seem impossible. Who can imagine a world without drugs and hate? Doing so requires some measure of denial about the human condition, not to mention the current state of our

sociopolitical context. White supremacist rhetoric. Xenophobic violence. Police brutality. Is this the future Michael, Eric, and Clinton must look forward to? Is this the world we have made?

Writing Sample 5.17

Earliest Memories (Clinton)

> Sometimes I like to pretend that shooting hoops in my backyard is my earliest memory. In this memory I shoot hoops for hours, days, then weeks without stopping. I do it without eating, without sleeping, or even using the bathroom.
>
> My real earliest memory is when I was five and on Christmas my mom bought me a basketball goal. Why my step-dad used to beat on my mom I used to go out and play basketball until I stopped hearing yelling. When I played basketball it tuned out everything and everyone. It was just me and the ball and goal and all my problems were gone. I felt free and like everything was good in the world. No more drugs, no more gangs, no more hate, just me and the goal.

And yet. "It is our work, the work of our field, to highlight the ways that seemingly inconceivable futures are not inconceivable, as much as it is our corollary work to demonstrate that white supremacy and fascism have no future on these lands" (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 16). The social organization of our lives can change. The power in the work of Michael, Eric, and Clinton is to push and pull us, to drive us, to encourage and motivate and compel us to imagine the impossible and make it real.

It was the writing of Toni Morrison (1992) that inspired me to see freedom everywhere – an absent presence – in the writing of young people experiencing incarceration. When I read, coded, and analyzed more than 6,000 pieces of writing by young people experiencing incarceration, I generated categories into which almost all of their writing fit: they critiqued social systems; they desired love and human relationships; they examined their own interior lives; they wanted change, both personal and social; and they explored what seemed possible and

impossible for their own lives. The one unifying idea in each of these categories is freedom. What young people experiencing incarceration are writing about, whether they use love lyrics to their romantic partner or critical rhymes about how school failed them, is freedom. In the next chapter, I explore exactly what freedom means to these writers.

Chapter Six: "It's Hard to Fly if You Got Too Much Weight"

When I can write, it makes me feel free.

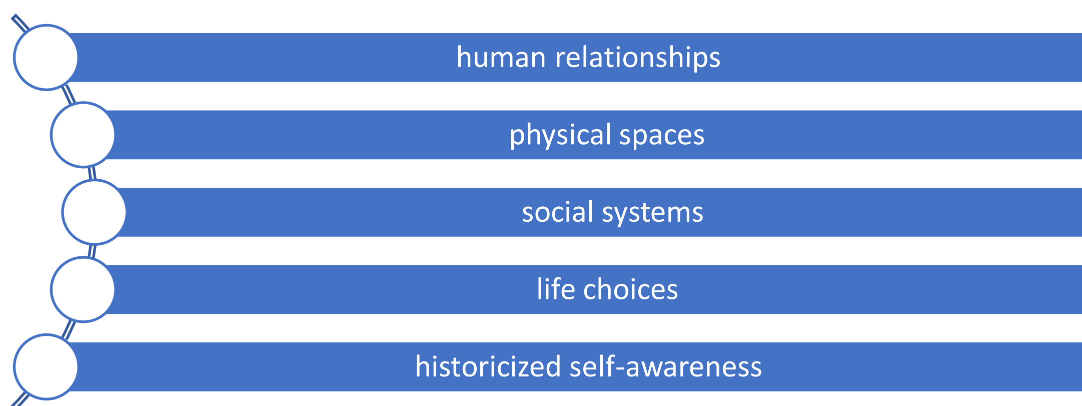
- Freddie

In the time I spent facilitating writing workshops in two Northern California youth prisons, I met artists, poets, writers, and cultural critics. These young people differed from each other in many ways. They were Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and white. They had been charged with a minor violation while on probation and would be out in a few weeks, or they had been charged with attempted murder plus a gang enhancement and did not know when they would ever leave. They had left school before 8th grade, had been kicked out of high school, or had graduated high school and were now enrolled in online college classes through local community colleges. They told me that both parents lived together at home and came to visit on Wednesdays, or they had never received a visit from family while locked up. They had no money on the phone to make calls home, or an auntie put money on the phone for them every day. They were locked up with the homies, "straight chillin," or they were locked up in this place and had never felt more alone. In many instances, these differences mattered to the experiences of their incarceration and were articulated in their writing. But in at least one instance, these differences did not matter. The unique experience of every young writer experiencing incarceration did not get in the way of what every single one wanted every single moment of every single day. They all, always, wanted the very same thing: freedom.

If freedom is the shared object and desire of young writers experiencing incarceration, what exactly do they mean when they say they want to be free? In collaboration with Writing is Our Right, I authored four writing prompts on freedom that were presented in 15 writing

workshops across California in the summer of 2019. The writing produced in workshops using these prompts on freedom appeared in a 2019 summer issue of *Writing is Our Right*. Among the 406 pieces composed by young writers in that issue, I identified 150 that directly addressed freedom directly.[17] These 150 pieces comprised the data set I analyzed to answer the research question, *How do young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom, and how do notions of freedom emerge in their work?* Figure 6.1 displays the five themes on freedom that emerged from my analysis, and in the rest of this chapter I present writing by YPEI that addresses each theme.

Figure 6.1 – Five Themes from 150 Writing Samples on Freedom



Theme 1 – Freedom in Terms of Human Relationships

Young writers experiencing incarceration often wrote of freedom in terms of the human relationships that mattered in their lives. Freedom, for many young writers, meant being free *with* family and friends. In this way, YWEI clarified that individual freedom, without others to be free with, is not real freedom. The ability to practice freedom with others echoes the ideas of

[17] Addressing freedom directly = using one or more of the following words: "freedom," "free," "liberty," or "liberation."

many Black and Indigenous theories of freedom, in which none is free until all are free. This is how we understand that my freedom depends on your freedom, and yours on mine. In their own work, young writers experiencing incarceration articulated calls for their own freedom that simultaneously included demands for the freedom of their “brothas,” “sistas,” “homies,” and “everybody.” In these calls, they echoed a long tradition of understanding that freedom depends on other people to be free with, as well as other people being free.

In the three pieces I present here, David, Jamaal, and Kevin give voice to an idea of freedom that is social, collective, and loving. Although there is complexity in these pieces, there is no confusion. For these young writers, freedom means being free with others who are also free. Freedom is a social practice, a verb, a doing. It requires other people to be free with. In “My Definition of Freedom,” David writes that being free means “being social with others” and “I need freedom to see my mom.” David ends the piece be telling us what freedom is not – “seeing my family behind glass. That’s not freedom.”

Writing Sample 6.1

My Definition of Freedom (David)

What freedom means to me is not being locked up, being social with others. I want freedom because I don’t want people telling me what to do every day and I need freedom to see my mom. I can’t keep seeing my family behind glass. That’s not freedom.

In “Freedom, Freedom,” Jamaal writes that “my sister, my girl, my mom, my brother” are necessary for their freedom. “Being with everyone I know enjoying life” is what Jamaal thinks about when they think about freedom.

Writing Sample 6.2

Freedom, Freedom (Jamaal)

The word freedom to me means doing what you want when you want. The first I think of when I think of freedom is all my people: my sister, my girl, my mom, my brother.
I think of being with everyone I know enjoying life. Freedom for me is happiness but happiness isn't always found in freedom. The freedom of choice can lead to some bad ones that can leave you dead, locked up, or broke.

In "Freedom from My Perspective," Kevin writes the quintessential sentence on understanding freedom in terms of human relationships. "Being free to me means being able to give my mom and dad a hug any second of the day." Kevin's freedom depends on being outside of the youth prison walls that prevent him from giving mom and dad a hug "any second of the day." Kevin's freedom also depends on his parents' freedom. They must be free from spaces of incarceration and detention, but they must also possess social and economic freedom so that they are free to receive Kevin's hug, and not, for example, absent due to the demands of a second or third job or anxious about any number of other stressors that disproportionately affect working and working-poor families in the U.S.

Writing Sample 6.3

Freedom from My Perspective (Kevin)

There are a lot of different perspectives of freedom. I have been deprived of freedom these past few years. I have been in and out of detention facilities due to the horrible decisions I allowed myself to make. Being free to me means being able to give my mom and dad a hug any second of the day.

Theme 2 – Freedom in Relation to Physical Spaces

Many young writers experiencing incarceration defined freedom in relation to the physical spaces of the world that were available, or unavailable, to them. Being locked up in a youth prison has this affect. In prison, almost everything is denied to you. Freedom to perform the most basic functions, like going to the bathroom or getting a drink of water when you want to, has been removed. Perhaps you are always allowed to go to the bathroom when you ask, but you must ask. The freedom to get up and go is gone, replaced by the requirement to ask permission from an officer or staff member to take care of your own body. The comforts of your home, of your bedroom, of your kitchen are all gone. You eat what is served when it is served. You do not walk or take the bus to school. You do not go to practice after school. You do not go out with your friends. You go to sleep in a cell behind bars and you leave that cell only when you are permitted. In the pieces below, young people experiencing incarceration write about freedom in these terms.

In "Remembering Freedom," Victor conjures up images of their home, of preparing desired food and drink, of hearing the birds outside and their phone ringing. Victor does not experience any of these sounds or sensations while locked up, and even misses the sounds of their little brothers "screaming and fighting in the morning" and of "mom yelling at us too." Victor misses their family, misses the annoyance of little brothers and the predictability of mom's frustration. For Victor, freedom means the sounds, sensations, joys, and frustrations of living at home, not in a cell.

George writes of a similar kind of freedom in "What Freedom Means to Me." Freedom, for George, means "being out, having fun, making memories" and "being able to wake up at home in my own bed." George laments how all this "can be taken away" and asks how it could

be “fair” for someone to lose all this for something they did not do. Not all young writers define freedom in terms of something that can be lost or taken away, but many do. George’s freedom, like Victor’s, is defined in terms of what they miss and what has been taken away.

Writing Sample 6.4

Remembering Freedom (Victor)

When I think of freedom, I imagine myself opening the door to my house, making myself food or anything I want when I want. I think about hearing the birds chirping, my phone ringing, dinging my little brothers on the head.

I think about hearing them screaming and fighting early in the morning. I think about hearing my mom yelling at us, too. Now that I’m locked up, I have no freedom and don’t get any of that. I miss all of that.

Writing Sample 6.5

What Freedom Means to Me (George)

What freedom means to me is being out, having fun, making memories with the family, being able to wake up at home in my own bed, waking up next to my son and girl, and knowing that everyone’s safe and sound. And, if something happens, I can be there to help or support family.

It’s crazy how fast you can lose freedom. It sucks that your freedom can be taken away from you. It’s also not fair you can get your freedom taken away for something you didn’t do. Things have been going well, so I just have to wait.

Notice, also, how George’s freedom is connected to their human relationships that have been taken away from them. George not only wants only to “wake up in my own bed” but to wake up “next to my son and girl.” George’s freedom is defined in terms of the physical spaces

now denied to him and the people he loves. George defines freedom as being able to "be there" – as opposed to here, a youth prison – "to help or support family."

In "Who Has Freedom Today and Who Doesn't," Trayvon writes of a freedom defined by prisons. The people who have freedom are not in them. The people who have freedom are out, on the streets, "walking outside with their hands in their pockets … doing what they are doing, just because." The people who do not have freedom are those "in prison in their cell." They only get out "when they are told to" and "can't do anything without master's permission." Trayvon, like Fahima in "Modern Day Slavery,"[18] explicitly connects the systems and structures of incarceration to those of enslavement. Neither Trayvon nor Fahima use the specific language of "the New Jim Crow," "abolition," or "the afterlife of slavery," but they see the world as critical scholars do (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Hartman, 2008).

Writing Sample 6.6

Who has Freedom Today and Who Doesn't (Trayvon)

People who have freedom are people walking outside with their hands in their pockets, with their earphones in their ears, doing what they are doing, just because. Ain't taking nothing from them.

Who doesn't have freedom is people in prison in their cell. Only time they leave their cell is when they are told to. Can't do anything without master's permission. All rights taken away.

Trayvon's final sentence may seem hyperbolic. Not "all" rights have been taken away from those experiencing incarceration. Young writers in prisons retain many human and legal rights, even if these are occasionally ignored, delayed, or suspended. By writing that "All rights

[18] I present and discuss Fahima's piece, "Modern Day Slavery," in Chapter Five.

are taken away," Trayvon gives voice to what it feels to be locked up. When you must ask permission to stand up, get a drink of water, and use the bathroom, it feels as if all your rights have been taken away. Those who are outside are free. Trayvon, who is not outside, is not.

Theme 3 – Freedom within a Critique of Social Systems

In Chapter Five, I showed how young writers experiencing incarceration are critical of their schooling experiences. Often pushed out, suspended, or expelled, YWEI are disappointed when schools fail them. They want school to be a path for their success. Yet, schooling is not the only social system that dehumanizes YWEI. The courts, including judges, district attorneys, and probation officers, have even more direct power over young people's lives once they are ensnared in the school/prison nexus. As Aaron writes here, the people working within the justice system have the power to "keep me locked up." Aaron articulates their understanding of freedom in terms of the criminal justice system, which takes too much away "from a young kid" and actively wants to keep Aaron away from their family.

Aaron's first line is a question I never thought to ask. Probably no one who has not been locked up has ever thought to ask it either. "Want to know how many bricks are in my room?" The very question demonstrates Aaron's understanding of freedom: "Freedom is something we don't have." Aaron has time to ask and answer the question of how many bricks surround him in his cell because Aaron is not free. "They" – judges, probations officers, and district attorneys – "keep us from our family friends and everything else" and "want to" keep Aaron locked up. Aaron's understanding of their freedom necessarily includes the powerful people in the criminal justice system who deny their freedom. Aaron admits messing up "pretty bad" in life but counters with the logic of crime and punishment, claiming "I did my time."

Writing Sample 6.7

Is Freedom Real (Aaron)

Want to know how many bricks are in my room? Three-hundred-and-ninety-five with the concrete slabs. I want my freedom back.

Tomorrow I'm supposed to get out. Hoping for the best in court, but who knows. Freedom is something we don't have.

The judge, PO and DA want to keep me locked up, but family, girl, and friends want me home. Damn, I messed my life up bad. I just want to be home with my girl and be there for her pregnancy. Why they want to keep a young kid locked up? Like c'mon I messed up pretty bad, but I did my time.

I just hurt myself and am constantly depressed and anxious. Is freedom even real? I don't think so. They keep us from our family friends and everything else. I never get to see anyone. Can't fight my case 'cause of my mental health.

In "Freedom," Tamir continues Aaron's critique of "POs and judges" but also offers an understanding of freedom that involves life outcomes. "Freedom is when the only options are not dead or in jail." For Tamir, freedom involves both freedom from and freedom to. Freedom means freedom from outside influences ("the government and the media") as well as freedom to move and be safe ("to get out of harm's way"). In Tamir's experience, POs and judges have the power to determine "where you live" and "how you live your life," and this is no freedom at all.

Writing Sample 6.8

Freedom (Tamir)

To me, freedom means freedom of speech and not having to be worried about being locked up. Also, freedom is when the government and the media aren't influencing what we see and what we do. Freedom is when people from other places can move from one place to another to get out of harm's way. Freedom is when POs and judges don't have a say in where you live or how you live your life. Freedom is when the only options are not dead or in jail.

Extending Tamir's analysis of freedom and life outcomes, Javier speaks directly to economic and historical freedoms before underlining their understanding of the point of freedom – to "help change this nation and the world." Javier implicitly critiques the economic structures that prevent some from securing "normal necessities" and links this critique to the history of enslavement. Javier points to "social justice, economic freedom, racial justice and equality" as the outcomes of true freedom. Observing that these do not currently exist, Javier commits to "join movements" and "participate in marches." Here, we can locate Javier's commitment to freedom and justice within the long tradition of social movements and political protest. For Javier, freedom is possible, but as the title of this piece makes clear, we need to fight for it.

Writing Sample 6.9

I Will Fight for Our Freedom (Javier)

Economic freedom is the freedom to take care of normal necessities.
We weren't taught freedom in school.
My family members were slaves.
I want to be a social justice, economic freedom, racial justice and equality activist.
I want to join an equal rights movement or association.
(I wish I could put that in an acronym.)
I also want to join movements.
I want to participate in marches.
I don't just "want to."
I will one day.
I will help change this nation and the world.

Finally, in "What is Freedom?," Lamar gets philosophical. Questioning the very notion of freedom, Lamar scoffs. "If anyone thinks they are truly free, they are blind[19] …" Critiquing the

[19] Lamar's use of "blind" here is an example of ableist language that equates blindness with unawareness. Of course, a person with blindness is capable of critiquing the very ideologies of freedom Lamar critiques. DisCrit Theory helps us understand how language often uses dis/ability as a metaphor for ignorance (Annamma, Jackson, &

freedom myths at the heart of dominant narratives of the U.S., Lamar demands freedom for everyone who needs it. Who needs freedom? Echoing the work of abolitionists, Lamar believes everyone does. "Free me, free everybody, free this world!"

Writing Sample 6.10

What is Freedom? (Lamar)

> Man, to be honest, what is freedom? If anyone thinks they are truly free, they are blind … If any official says I'm free, I'm gonna look at them crazy. There is no such thing as freedom! At least not in this country. There are too many things to tie us down. And they say the sky is the limit. PLEASE! It's hard to fly if you got too much weight. Man … Free me, free everybody, free this world!

Lamar critiques both the social systems that deny freedom and the epistemological systems that convince us we are free. But Lamar does not give up on being free because it does not yet exist. Recalling Black liberation theories of freedom that no one is free until everyone is free, and that individual freedom is incomplete if it does not include the freedom of others, the final sentence of Lamar's piece proclaims a belief that freedom is possible, for all of us, even if it remains presently out of reach.

Theme 4 – Freedom as the Ability to Make Sustainable Life Choices

Young writers experiencing incarceration often define freedom in terms of being able "to do what you want." Alongside a sense of physical freedom – being out in the world instead of locked behind bars – this is probably the most common notion of freedom. Being able to do what

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Morrison, 2017). I chose to include Lamar's piece both to show how the organizing structures of white supremacy have infiltrated our language, which can be used to dehumanize difference, and, therefore, to diminish freedom, and to present, in its problematic totality, the larger point Lamar makes – that we are not free even if we think we are.

you want includes the daily mundane – going to the bathroom, eating and drinking what and when you want, choosing to take a shower in the morning instead of the evening. It also involves extraordinary life events, like being present for the birth of your baby, graduating from high school or college, caring for your family. In "Is Freedom Real?" (see Theme 3, above), Aaron writes, "I just want to be home with my girl and be there for her pregnancy." For many YWEI, being free means being able to make the choices they want for their lives and for the lives of those they love.

In "Do What I Want," Breonna writes that "freedom is the ability to do what you want whenever you want to." But Breonna's conception of freedom does not stop at the level of the individual. Breonna considers whether they feel free when they are locked up and finds that they can achieve a feeling of freedom "when I'm in my cell laying down, closing my eyes, and allowing my imaginations to run wild thinking about all the good times I've had and things I could possibly have going for myself in the future." It is not only in the act of remembering previous freedoms ("thinking about all the good times") but also in the act of imagining their future-self experiencing new freedoms ("things I could possibly have going for myself in the future") that Breonna feels free within their prison cell.

Breonna observes that not "everyone's definition of freedom is the same" but maintains that "everyone has freedom," even in prison. Here, Breonna articulates a sense of freedom that does not depend on the media, the government, the police, the courts, or the economic structures of society. Breonna defines freedom as inherent to the human experience, writing that "everyone has freedom no matter the situation" but we "just have to dig deeper and find it."

Writing Sample 6.11

Do What I Want (Breonna)

What is “freedom” to me? To me freedom is the ability to do what you want whenever you want to. The first thoughts that pop into my head as I think of freedom are of times when I was out doing anything I wanted to.

Now the only time I can really feel like I’m free is when I’m in my cell laying down, closing my eyes, and allowing my imaginations to run wild thinking about all the good times I’ve had and things I could possibly have going for myself in the future.

I don’t think everyone’s definition of freedom is the same. I believe it all depends on people’s background and their outlook on life. I believe everyone has freedom, but it depends on how you find it.

Some people say after you get locked up you lose your freedom, but I disagree. I think everyone has freedom no matter the situation you just have to dig deeper and find it.

In “Being Free,” Ervin paints a mirror image of Breonna’s philosophy of freedom. Both writers express an individual, interior sense of freedom that starts (but does not end) with the self. Ervin begins by defending an inherent sense of human freedom, writing in the first line that “freedom is something no one can take, but only yourself.” For Ervin, freedom is “making your own choices” and “being free with your family and friends,” echoing the communal sense of freedom that depends on others’ freedom for one’s own. Finally, Ervin closes as Breonna began, asserting that freedom means “doing whatever you want and going wherever you want.” For Ervin, freedom is a practice – it is something you do – and one way of practicing freedom is physical movement from place to place. Here, Ervin’s and Tamir’s notions of freedom align, as Tamir wrote that “Freedom is when people from other places can move from one place to another to get out of harm’s way” (see “Freedom” in Theme 3, above).

Writing Sample 6.12

Being Free (Ervin)

Freedom is something no one can take, but only yourself. There is always consequences to your actions. But freedom is you making your own choices, being free with your family and friends, doing whatever you want and going wherever you want.

The lives of young people experiencing incarceration and those who are implicated in the larger criminal justice and border patrol systems of the U.S. are often in danger. Being safe and getting out of harm's way are often daily concerns for many young people today. Freedom of movement necessarily works its way into their conceptions of freedom. But, sometimes, freedom just means the freedom to eat real food. In "Hope for a Change," Reggie reminds us that eating good food with people we love is an important part of being free. Here, again, we see freedom as a communal practice, something Reggie will do with "my Mom, Auntie, Cousin, Baby Mamma, and Baby Sariah."

Writing Sample 6.13

Hope for a Change (Reggie)

This is what I'm going to do when I get out. Hopefully next week! First, I'm going to Moon Buffet, all you can eat. My favorite thing there is chicken wings and macaroni and cheese, sometimes chicken nuggets. I always save room for dessert. My favorite is banana pudding with vanilla wafers. I will be dining with my Mom, Auntie, Cousin, Baby Mamma, and Baby Sariah.

Next time I'm out I will make a commitment to do everything in my power and to the best of my ability to change my ways and be the best role model, father, and Baby Daddy. My first step is to apply myself and do my best in my new job. To be continued.

Reggie writes about the freedom to eat good food before articulating his understanding of freedom as a "constant struggle" (Davis, 2016). Reggie's idea of freedom does not end with a family meal at the Moon Buffet but contains "a commitment to do everything in my power and to the best of my ability to change my ways" so that they can be present with their child, their partner, and their community. Reggie wants to be "the best role model" and believes in his power to do so. Like so many experts on freedom, Reggie acknowledges that there is no finish line, no final achievement. We are always practicing, always struggling, always taking steps toward freedom. Freedom, as Reggie writes, is always "to be continued."

Theme 5 – Freedom in a Process of Historicized Self-Awareness

Some young writers experiencing incarceration write with a critical sense of the past and an agentive sense of the future. They see themselves not merely as objects of history but as actors within it. Some understand that they, too, can write history by enacting personal, social, and historical change. This historicized self-awareness recalls the notion of historical actors, theorized by Gutiérrez (2008). In later work, Gutiérrez and colleagues define historical actors as those who are "able to see historically so that they can transform their own sociohistorical circumstances and futures as learners and agents of social change" (Gutiérrez et al., 2017 p. 44). Historical actors understand, as Gutiérrez and colleagues describe, "the present as a product of history and as the starting point for the future" (2017, p. 44). Here, Timothy, Cruz, and Freddie demonstrate in their written words their own awareness of historical forces limiting freedom and their desire to practice a freedom that is real and true for themselves.

In "The History of Freedom," Timothy is critical of both the historical and present modes of freedom that have influenced his life. First, Timothy recalls how freedom was denied to his

ancestors for centuries and then challenges the schools for failing to teach "the full truth" about this history. Next, Timothy critiques the police who harass him "a lot for no reason," and interrogates the idea that freedom is a right for some and a privilege for others. For Timothy, freedom involves movement and social connection. When they next have freedom, Timothy writes, they "will never lose it again."

Writing Sample 6.14

The History of Freedom (Timothy)

> Freedom was something that my people didn't have for three-hundred years. In school, I learned a lot about my history (my black history) but I know a white man wrote it, so I never took too much of it in knowing it wasn't the full truth.
>
> Even now, I get harassed a lot for no reason with the police. It seems like all they want to do is take away my freedom. I don't think freedom is a privilege, it's a right unless you lose it, justifiably.
>
> With my freedom approaching soon, I see myself enjoying it. I plan on traveling and reconnecting with old family members. Freedom, I now realize, is one of the most important things in my life and after I get out, I will never lose it again.

Timothy's critique of white supremacy, which denied freedom to his ancestors through enslavement and the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2008) and continues to deny freedom through a hypercarceral state that surveils and harasses those deemed dangerous or troublesome, reflects a historicized self-awareness about how it is possible to enjoy freedom again. Timothy takes ownership of their freedom, calling it "one of the most important things in my life" and writing that "after I get out, I will never lose it again." Here, Timothy proclaims a freedom that they can possess and "never lose," even in the face of social systems that have tried to take it away from them and their ancestors.

Cruz's critique of "the system" is even more focused than Timothy's. In "Does Freedom Exist," Cruz asks, "is there such a thing as freedom" and questions what freedom really is if "you could lose it in a blink of an eye." Cruz asks readers to remember "why the system was created" and argues that feeling "hopeless" about change is why change is so hard. But Cruz is committed to a world that allows them to be free and calls for others to be committed, too.

Writing Sample 6.15

Does Freedom Exist (Cruz)

> Freedom for me is when I'm on the other side of this place but the question is, is there such a thing as freedom? A lot of people say there is but the last time I checked there is rules to freedom. Just as you think you have freedom, you could lose it in a blink of an eye.
>
> We got so accustomed to people putting us down that we start shutting down and begin accepting things how it is but that is why the system was created, to make us feel hopeless. They don't want us taking their spots. That is why we got to stay strong and faithful. Freedom starts when you're free from the inside.

More than a personal ownership of their own freedom, Cruz's piece is a political call for solidarity: "we got to stay strong and faithful." Freedom, for Cruz, is not given by others. Echoing Breonna's sense of freedom in "Do What I Want" (Theme 4, above), freedom, Cruz writes, "starts when you're free from the inside."

Locked up in a youth prison, the feeling of freedom is elusive for many young people. Some will never find it, and some are convinced it cannot be found. In "Goodbye to Writing is Our Right," Freddie reveals the connection between writing and freedom in his experience of incarceration. Freddie is getting out soon, and Writing is Our Right was a space and a practice that helped him "feel good." Feeling good is not a trivial sentiment in this context. There is not a

lot of “feeling good” going around youth prisons. But Freddie found some such moments while writing and wrote this piece to share his gratitude to WOR. Freddie also found a little bit of freedom in his writing practice. “When I can write,” Freddie declares, “it makes me feel free.”

Writing Sample 6.16

Goodbye to Writing is Our Right (Freddie)

> I been writing to WOR since I first got locked up. I want to thank them because this program is where I basically expressed myself by writing anything I want.
>
> When I can write, it makes me feel free. When I get to write in WOR, I feel good because I get to express myself. Hopefully I don’t come back. It was nice to write to WOR. See y’all.

To understand what we mean when we argue for abolition or abolitionist futures or even just an end to youth incarceration, we must know what we mean when we say we want to be free. If it is true that nobody is free until everybody is free, we should know what it means to be free. The writing by young people experiencing incarceration offers a framework. Freedom means the ability to be in relationship with the people we love. Freedom means equal access to the physical spaces of the world around us. Freedom means the right to critique social systems and influence change within them. Freedom means the capacity to make life choices that make us happy and keep us safe. Freedom means understanding our own position in the world as part of the unfolding of human history that can and will change. Perhaps, freedom means more than this. But, according to young writers experiencing incarceration, freedom certainly means at least this much.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

I want freedom
Freedom is what I want
Everyone needs freedom

- Brandon

This study examined the literacy practices of young writers experiencing incarceration and explored their ideas of what freedom is and can be. Through the theoretical lenses of critical literacy and critical social theory, I positioned young writers experiencing incarceration as producers of transformative critical knowledge (TCK), a concept I defined as knowledge that is intended to generate more justice within social systems and human relationships. Using ethnographic research methods, I asked what writing afforded young people experiencing incarceration and what they meant when they wrote about freedom. Findings show that young writers experiencing incarceration use writing as a tool for personal and social change and that freedom, for them, is a physical, social, internal, historicized, humanizing practice.

Our shared, if unequal, experiences of the effects of COVID-19 and the persistent stain of white supremacy across the world reveal the extent to which a new practice of freedom is both urgent and necessary. This study contributes to the fields of education and teacher education by clarifying what it is that young people want when they say they want to be free. While educators talk about freedom in all spaces and at all levels, I argue that by teaching about freedom as a collective, incomplete, and interdependent practice we can transform our understanding of freedom and its requirements. In the paragraphs that follow, I summarize findings for each of the three research questions of this study and discuss the implications of my findings.

Discussion of Findings

What are the Salient Characteristics of the Writing is Our Right Program?

There are many important characteristics of Writing is Our Right, including dozens of volunteers who facilitate workshops across the country, a specialized digital artist who designs every issue of the magazine, subscription fees and donations to pay the bills, and so many young people who find power in reading and writing. WOR also relies on the willingness of some youth prisons to make both the writing workshops and the *WOR* magazine available to young people experiencing incarceration. In my analysis, the most salient characteristic of all these is writing. I found that writing affords three powerful opportunities for WOR workshop participants. Writing functions as a form of self-care, a source of connection to others, and a tool for potential personal and social change. To answer RQ 1, I collected and analyzed ethnographic data from nearly two years of participant-observation as a writing workshop facilitator for Writing is Our Right, including interviews with five young writers experiencing incarceration and with four adults who, in their varying roles, help make WOR workshops happen in youth prisons. Oscar, a consistent presence in our workshops at the Central County Youth Prison until he was transferred to an adult prison after his 18th birthday, explained why he came to WOR workshops and wrote so prolifically:

> The first time when I was locked up, I felt like it couldn't hurt. I could try it. I tried writing and it felt so good ... I had a lot going on that day, I remember around that time, family stress in that day, I was able to let things out that I was holding inside.

Later, Oscar revealed that writing "helps with the stress and the negative feelings and things that bring me down" and he compared writing to working out, which he did every day. Writing helped Oscar attend to his emotional and mental health, but he told me that he almost never

wrote on his own, in his cell. Writing is Our Right was his writing time. When I asked him to explain, he said that "it feels better writing in the group, we can talk about it." Oscar did not write on his own time, alone in his cell, because doing so did not afford the workshop community to share and "talk about" his writing. For Oscar and for many other YWEI, writing was a process of acknowledging pain, trauma, and stress and of being acknowledged as a writer. In this way, writing functioned as an important support for young people dealing with feelings of loneliness, despair, and desperation during their incarceration.

Writing also offered a connection to others on the inside and to the outside world. I found evidence of writing's function as a source of connection to others in a conversation with Alonso, a writer in Central County Youth Prison. Alonso wrote frequently, and his pieces were often selected for Pieces of the Week, a special section in the magazine. When I asked Alonso what he liked to read in the magazine, rather than show me his own pieces, as many other writers did, Alonso highlighted a new poem by a writer in another youth prison. He told me that this writer's poems teach him a lot and that he always appreciates reading the work of this writer, so much so that he looks for his pieces in every new issue of the magazine. For Alonso, it was not his own writing, but writings by other writers published in *WOR* magazine that afforded connection to others. Dante, WOR's Founder and Executive Director, explained to me why the writing published in *Writing is Our Right* is so powerful:

> By writing you're able to take what a person is writing and bring it beyond wherever the classroom is, the walls of the criminal justice system. Right? And share it with the greater community that inspires and gives hope to other readers of the magazine to read it, and also helps people realize that they're not alone and the struggles and challenges that come with day-to-day life.

Dante went on to tell me that he hears:

> Time and time again, how Writing is Our Right helps folks feel a sense of family, a connection, a lifeline that they are not alone and that there's someone else that has it worse or equally as bad as them, which is sadly a sense of relief. It's nice to know you're not alone. And we all know, from our work inside, that incarceration is a super lonely place. And it helps if you have the tools, the ability to put your thoughts down on paper, and get them off your chest.

Finally, in the context of Writing is Our Right, writing operates as both a personal and social agent of change. It affords the potential for transformation for the writer, for the court system that will issue judgement and, perhaps, a longer prison sentence, and for the officers who work at youth prisons every day. Jennifer, one of the youth prison program coordinators who supports the work of WOR, told me that affirming young people was an important aspect of her job and that writing often performed some of that affirmation for young people who were locked up. Jennifer told me that writing for *Writing is Our Right* "gives them the freedom to say what they want to say without adult judgement. And the other value is that they can say that they are published writers. And, you know, it gives them a sense of pride."

Dante told me how important certificates and letters of support from WOR could be for young people whose futures were going to be decided by judges, lawyers, and probation officers:

> If we can write a letter of support or get the writings into the hands of the judge or the district attorney, then we're making a small change that might make a difference for a kid that might be tried as an adult.

Dante emphasized that although these changes could make all the difference for specific young people and their families in the immediate or near present, WOR is a future-oriented project:

> This is a project oriented toward the future. Right? We're not closing prisons tomorrow, but we can create the situation in 20 or 30 years where people who are in charge have been introduced to the situations and the systems and they know it's an inhumane system.

In summary, writing affirms writers' sense of self, shifts youth prison staff perspectives on some of the young people with whom they interact, and has the potential to change the minds of the people in power who decide whether or for how long a writer may remain incarcerated or on probation. Writing, in the context of Writing is Our Right and the work of young writers experiencing incarceration, operates as force of potential individual and social change.

When Afforded Time and Space in Structured Writing Workshops, What Do Young People Experiencing Incarceration Write About?

Young writers experiencing incarceration write about love, family, the streets. They write about their memories and their dreams. They write about their anger, their sadness, their loneliness, their desperation. No matter what they are writing about, they are always writing about freedom. Informed by Toni Morrison's (1992) concept of an absent presence, I theorized that the desire for freedom was present in all writing by YWEI. While I argue that freedom imbues every piece and poem in *Writing is Our Right*, I recognize that freedom could often be implicit and not explicit to the primary message of any single piece of writing. To answer Research Question 2, I examined more than 6,000 writing samples published in *Writing is Our Right* over the course of nine months, and I asked five young writers about their writing process and product. I found that young writers experiencing incarceration explore what seems possible and what seems impossible for their futures, express a desire for personal and social change,

examine the state of their own interior lives, articulate a desire for love and human relationships, and critique social systems. The following writing samples offer a glimpse of what young writers experiencing incarceration choose to write about.

In “Wall,” Maria responds to the xenophobic rhetoric of the President of the United States and the social systems that fail her and her family, critiquing both and demanding better. In “Feelings,” Antwon uses rhyme to emphasize the love he has for his daughter as well as the sadness that accompanies the present reality of a father not being able to hug his daughter. In “Escape,” Daniel confesses “wanting to change” every night but admits that if nothing changes around them, they will continue to live the life they lived before their incarceration. Daniel wants to change their life but knows that it is not merely a personal choice. Writing from a youth prison in the middle of their adolescence, Samuel confronts the fact that the last time they felt “good” and “truly happy” was in kindergarten. The lack of happiness in Samuel’s life cannot be disconnected from the anger they feel from teachers, their mom, and police. Finally, Michael explores the possibility of the impossible. In “Open the Gates,” Michael writes that they want to live in a world “free in a place without violence … free from the racist corrupt police.”

At times, such a world seems both necessary and unlikely. If we are not teaching and talking about freedom in ways that include freedom from border violence and from borders, freedom to be with and hug our children, freedom to feel good and be happy, freedom from social and economic pressures that prevent us from making positive change in our lives and our communities, and freedom from racist cops, what kind of freedom are we teaching for?

Writing Sample 7.1

Wall (Maria)

Why are you building a wall?
I just want to cross over for my kids
I need money and to live in a better place
For the future of my kids
Don’t build the wall!
Fine, just let my kids go, so they can go to college
I’m not a rapist or a drug dealer
I’m just a hard worker
I’ll work in the fields
Under the sun for hours
This is the story of every Mexican (every Latino)
Don’t build the wall
Just let us live a better life that we deserve.

Writing Sample 7.2

Feelings (Antwon)

I want to see my daughter
I haven’t been a father
Ask me how I’ve been
I’ve been feeling really bothered
I wish that I can see her
It took me three months
Just to get to meet her
I know I haven’t hugged you
Just know that daddy loves you
The pictures in my folder are the closest that we come to.

Writing Sample 7.3

Escape (Daniel)

I have done a long dose of sitting in Juvenile Hall.
I awake every night wanting to change,
But knowing that if I go back to the same area,
I will have to do the same thing.
I have to escape to a better life.

Writing Sample 7.4

Time to Feel Better (Samuel)

The last time I felt good was in kindergarten. I got to take naps and be with my friends. I had a really fun time. That was the last time I was truly happy. We got snacks and candy and my teacher was super nice. I used to collect snails and lady bugs.

Nowadays I get yelled at by teachers, I get yelled at by my mom and I get yelled at by the judges and the police. I don't know when the last time I really felt good about something after kindergarten and then from first grade until eleventh grade. My eyes seen it all.

Writing Sample 7.5

Open the Gates (Michael)

I just want to be free in a place without violence
I just want to be free from the Juvenile Detention Center
Feeling like I am wasting my life in here.
I want to be free in a place where I can walk down the street
Calmly without police harassment.
I want to be free from the racist corrupt police
Telling lies to get answers.

How Do Young Writers Experiencing Incarceration Define Freedom, and How Do Notions of Freedom Emerge in Their Work?

To answer the final research question of this study, I asked young writers experiencing incarceration what freedom means to them. Data for this question included 150 writing samples by YWEI that directly addressed freedom and five one-on-one interviews with young writers. The freedom YWEI describe is a collective, physical, social, internal, historicized, humanizing freedom. Young writers experiencing incarceration define freedom in terms of the human relationships they have been deprived of. They write of freedom in terms of physical spaces and opportunities that have been denied to them. Their understandings of freedom involve critique of unjust social systems, especially schooling and criminal justice. Freedom, to these young writers, means the ability to make sustainable life choices for themselves and their loved ones. Finally, freedom involves the history of freedom and the personal, familial, and social histories of their own experiences of freedom. Importantly, as the following writing samples show, these themes are not exclusive of each other. Many writers express their definitions and dreams of freedom in ways that combine two or three themes in a single piece.

In “My Definition of Freedom,” David tells us that freedom must include “being social with others,” defining other people to be free with as an essential component of freedom. Emphasizing the requirement of human relationships in their notion of freedom, David ends the piece by articulating what freedom is not: “I can’t keep seeing my family behind glass. That’s not freedom.”

Writing Sample 7.6

My Definition of Freedom (David)

What freedom means to me is not being locked up, being social with others. I want freedom because I don't want people telling me what to do every day and I need freedom to see my mom. I can't keep seeing my family behind glass. That's not freedom.

Freedom for Victor, articulated in "Remembering Freedom," means being at home. It is a physical space filled by sights, sounds, and smells. Birds chirping, phones ringing, little brothers fighting. Like David, Victor ends the piece by emphasizing when and where he does not get to be free: "Now that I am locked up, I have no freedom … I miss all of that."

Writing Sample 7.7

Remembering Freedom (Victor)

When I think of freedom, I imagine myself opening the door to my house, making myself food or anything I want when I want. I think about hearing the birds chirping, my phone ringing, dinging my little brothers on the head.

I think about hearing them screaming and fighting early in the morning. I think about hearing my mom yelling at us, too. Now that I'm locked up, I have no freedom and don't get any of that. I miss all of that.

In "Freedom," Tamir begins by explaining that being free must include the freedom of not being "worried about being locked up." The implication is that even when they are not locked up in a youth prison, they are not free. Probation Officers represent unfreedom to Tamir. Tamir critiques the social systems of government, media, and criminal justice before concluding that freedom must mean more than the two life choices that they consider available to them: "Freedom is when the only options are not dead or in jail."

Writing Sample 7.8

Freedom (Tamir)

To me, freedom means freedom of speech and not having to be worried about being locked up. Also, freedom is when the government and the media aren't influencing what we see and what we do. Freedom is when people from other places can move from one place to another to get out of harm's way. Freedom is when POs and judges don't have a say in where you live or how you live your life. Freedom is when the only options are not dead or in jail.

"Freedom is making your own choices," writes Ervin, in "Being Free." Like David, in "My Definition of Freedom," Ervin considers other people to be free with a necessary quality of freedom. Ervin writes that being free means "being free with your family and friends." But Ervin also represents an individualistic ethic of freedom that I have critiqued throughout this study. "Doing whatever you want and going wherever you want" echoes dominant notions of freedom in the U.S. that are problematic to this study's definition of freedom. When we define freedom as the ongoing pursuit of the full humanity of all people, there are limits on what we do and where go.

Writing Sample 7.9

Being Free (Ervin)

Freedom is something no one can take, but only yourself. There is always consequences to your actions. But freedom is you making your own choices, being free with your family and friends, doing whatever you want and going wherever you want.

In the conception of freedom put forth in this study, and by Cruz in "Does Freedom Exist," the practice of freedom includes responsibilities. Cruz deals with the biggest question

there is when try to define freedom – its existence. Countering the notion of limitless individual freedom proposed by Ervin, Cruz writes that "there is rules to freedom." Freedom includes its own limits. In the poem's second stanza, Cruz exemplifies the fifth theme of freedom as defined by young writers experiencing incarceration: historicized self-awareness. Looking at the social systems that have denied humanity to so many people, Cruz argues that "accepting things" as they are and feeling "hopeless" is exactly how the systems of historical oppression remain dominant. Here Cruz illustrates an awareness of historical oppression, the social consequences of this oppression, and how human beings can respond within systems of oppression that are dominant in their lives. "Freedom starts when you're free from the inside," Cruz writes, displaying and articulating a sense of self awareness that can be used to resist systems that deny our freedom and humanity.

Writing Sample 7.10

Does Freedom Exist (Cruz)

> Freedom for me is when I'm on the other side of this place but the question is, is there such a thing as freedom? A lot of people say there is but the last time I checked there is rules to freedom. Just as you think you have freedom, you could lose it in a blink of an eye.
>
> We got so accustomed to people putting us down that we start shutting down and begin accepting things how it is but that is why the system was created, to make us feel hopeless. They don't want us taking their spots. That is why we got to stay strong and faithful. Freedom starts when you're free from the inside.

The body of knowledge manifested in these young writers' words represents what I call *transformative critical knowledge*. This knowledge is *critical* because it is oriented toward justice and it is sensitive to the relations of power that make freedom (and humanity) available to

some and deny it to others. This knowledge is *transformative* because it is intended to transform our relationships to each other and to the social systems that surround us. I argue that teaching and talking about freedom in ways that attend to human relationships, physical spaces, social systems, life choices, and historicized self-awareness will transform our understanding and practice of freedom and, therefore, our pursuit of every person's full humanity.

Implications for Practice

This study contributes to discussions at the intersections of teacher education, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy by clarifying what it is that young people envision when they think and write about freedom. Teacher education must confront the role schooling plays in the maintenance and (re)production of normalized violence against children, youth, and their communities. This includes how we teach about freedom. When Black people are killed on the streets by the police, who is free? When choosing not to wear a face covering in a global pandemic caused by a highly contagious virus is a question of personal freedom, what does freedom mean?

Those of us in teacher education must recognize our ability to direct new or different ways of thinking about students, families, communities, and the many knowledges students bring into schools. My own understandings and practices of freedom have been transformed by reading the work of young people experiencing incarceration. What else might be transformed in the pedagogies and ontological assumptions of teachers when they discover and elevate other branches of transformative critical knowledge with their students? How does one's reading of *Beloved* change when we think about freedom as defined by those who have experienced or are experiencing incarceration? How does one's understanding of the U.S. Constitution, and of the

13th Amendment in particular, change when we think about freedom as defined by those who have experienced or are experiencing incarceration? The concept of TCK could have transformative impacts on schooling itself if teachers were trained to discover, create, and elevate knowledge with students, valuing the knowledges their students bring with them in their histories, dreams, and hopes for the future.

While the kinds of freedom defined by young writers experiencing incarceration represent one body of TCK that is both useful and urgent, it is not the only TCK young people possess. What other bodies of knowledge could be transformed, if we were to listen to the TCK young people have about fairness, justice, equality, and equity – or about art, music, dance, gender and sexuality, criminal justice, and the environment? The best teachers will be attentive to the various transformative critical knowledges alive in their communities. The very best teachers will search for transformative critical knowledge *with* their students. For these reasons, the implications of this study have noteworthy relevance to the field (and practice) of teacher education.

Moreover, young people experiencing incarceration are not the only people who can transform our understandings and practices of freedom. Thousands of young people in this country have not experienced incarceration but have experienced varying degrees of unfreedom. Their knowledges can both inform and transform our ongoing practice of freedom. Asking what freedom means to Indigenous youth (on reservations, in urban centers, in the suburbs) would yield transformative critical knowledge. Elders from various communities across these lands might also offer TCK on freedom. Writing with young people, parents, children, elders, and adults in and out of schools that asks what freedom is and what it means can build on the body of knowledge represented in the work and words of the young writers in this study.

When and where else are young people being invited to imagine freedom and write toward joy? How often are young people invited to read and respond to each other's work as critical theorists? How else might we learn from the transformative critical knowledge young people *not* experiencing incarceration possess? In her own meditations on freedom, Fine (2018) writes that:

> As we witness, challenge, and resist the morbid systems, we have a responsibility to carve spaces where radical imagination could flourish; to pry open cracks in the cement, fissures to breath, in our schools and communities, in the university, theatre, museums, social movements and in our living rooms, where we might engage critique, resistance, and possibility, refuse complicity, dive into the contradictions, take seriously that freedom is both flight and obligation, desire and constraint. (p. xii)

This study described one such space, within one of our horrifying social systems, "where radical imagination … flourishes." The writing workshops documented in this study have "carved spaces" for young people experiencing incarceration to think, speak, and write as knowledge-producers. In this study, I positioned YPEI as experts on freedom, and I asked them what freedom meant to them so that abolitionists and educators might know what young people want from and of their futures. Where else are we asking these questions?

One space could be the classrooms wherever writing takes place in our schools. How can teachers engage their students in the type of writing practice modeled by Writing is Our Right? How can teachers consistently make space for students to write about what is important to them, to share that writing with each other, to learn from and lean on each other, to hear back from other writers about the importance of their work, and to publish that writing to the world? What if we did not wait until young writers had to choose between their cell block and a youth prison

writing workshop to ask them to think and write about freedom? What if we read their work seriously? What if we put them in conversation with the definitions and dreams of freedom documented in this study? What if we positioned them as important thinkers for the future world, broken and beautiful as it is, that we are leaving for them?

When Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) writes of his own education in West Baltimore — "The schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance" (p. 26) — teachers across the country know that his is not a unique experience. We also know that compliance often manifests in acritical, dehumanizing models of teaching that have no place in education that prioritizes humanization, liberation, and critical consciousness. I write from the theoretical position that the full humanity of every student must become and remain the primary focus of teaching and teacher education. How is teacher education – at every level and for every subject – oriented toward freedom that allows us to recognize and honor all humanity?

Implications for Research

In the present moment, educational research must confront at least two global pandemics. Our shared, if unequal, experiences of COVID-19 and the continued power of white supremacy to perpetuate violence across all intersections of life, also experienced unequally, show just how urgent educating for freedom is. To do this requires both refusal and imagination. We must refuse a return to what was normal, and we must imagine a new one. Teaching toward a new normal might be one way to refuse a return to what was normal. Figuring out how to do this, in the context of schooling thrown into relative chaos by COVID-19 and designed within ideologies of systemic white supremacy, is the goal of my research.

Laura (2018) writes that "we don't lack information about abolition; we lack imagination about abolition" (p. 20). But how? One way to expand our imaginaries is to include in research and practice the knowledges of young people experiencing incarceration. That is what this study offers. We know the damage and destruction wrought by the incarceration of our children. What we need to know more of is how they envision the freedom they desire.

One limitation of this study is the failure to test its theory of change. Can the notions of freedom documented in this study inform teacher pedagogy? How? Can new teacher pedagogy about freedom change anybody's understanding and practice of freedom and its requirements. If so, how soon? Asking how teachers define freedom and how their pedagogies might be transformed by definitions of freedom advanced by YPEI is a necessary extension of this study. What happens when we put young people experiencing incarceration in conversation with young people in schools about freedom, humanity, and their futures? What happens when YPEI are in conversation with teachers and teacher educators? The following questions extend the work of this study and interrogate its theory of change:

1. How can notions of freedom advanced by young writers in youth prisons inform the practice and pedagogy of teacher education?
2. How do pre-service teachers enrolled in a university teacher education program define freedom? In what ways can their understandings of freedom inform future pedagogy?
3. How do teacher educators in a university teacher education program teach about freedom? In what ways do their understandings of freedom inform their pedagogy?

Tragically, and terribly, youth prisons are not the only spaces where the childhoods and child-ness of our children are destroyed. The particular failure of youth prisons is precisely that – a particular failure. There are others. The catastrophe on this country's southern border requires

immediate humanitarian intervention. It might also be a space for humanizing ethnographic research. What might we learn about freedom from the children held in cages on the border between the U.S. and Mexico? How can their definitions and dreams of freedom transform our own, and what can they teach us about creating the world they deserve?

The most important thing is to end the caging of children at our borders and reunite families who have been separated. The second most important thing is to never do it again. Educational research has absolutely nothing to do with achieving the most important thing. It may have a role in helping us achieve the second most important thing. But educational research is not always be the answer. Only a careful and consistent listening presence can determine this. I did not enter youth prison writing workshops looking to answer questions about freedom. That particular research question emerged from nearly two years of my presence as listener to young people experiencing incarceration. Wherever such research does take place, and whenever it depends on dehumanizing systems and spaces, as this study did, researchers must take care to center our shared humanity. In all research that takes place in the midst of a humanitarian disaster, researchers must direct their questions and analysis toward a process of humanizing ethnographic research. This study, in its theoretical framework and methods, offers an imperfect model of a humanizing ethnographic ethic. We need more humanizing ethnographic research where impact, not merely intent, is the primary metric of a study's humanizing effect.

During the time I facilitated writing workshops with Writing is Our Right in youth prisons in Northern California, I wrestled with the questions of abolition, reform, and complicity. To what extent did my presence in a youth prison sustain the carceral logics that our current state requires? How did all the work we did for Writing is Our Right work help youth prisons be more humane spaces? Are more humane youth prisons more likely to stay standing?

The school/prison nexus is destroying lives and futures. I wonder if one way it continues to sustain itself is by virtue of youth prisons being more, not less, humane spaces of incarceration. I am not arguing for less humane youth prisons. I am arguing for no youth prisons. At the same time, we cannot let the existence of literacy programs, along with other educational programs and counseling services, in youth prisons distract us from the fact that there should not be a thing we call a youth prison and there should not be a framework for seeing youth as criminalizable. We need research that helps us think and work toward two goals: (a) the most humanizing treatment of young people experiencing incarceration right now, and (b) the abolition of youth prisons and the very idea of criminalized youth. Future questions around youth incarceration that would extend the work of this study include:

1. In what ways are literacy programs like Writing is Our Right exploited by the carceral state to maintain the institution of youth incarceration?
2. How do organizations like Writing is Our Right frame itself, its mission, and the young people it serves when seeking permission from county and state boards of juvenile justice?
3. How do organizations like Writing is Our Right disrupt logics of youth incarceration and youth criminalization? How do organizations like Writing is Our Right sustain these logics?

Any research with young people experiencing incarceration should involve research into the social systems which have decided that detaining young people in prison is acceptable. Research about youth literacy practices in youth prisons might also interrogate why carceral institutions permit programs like Writing is Our Right to do this work. What we require, most of

all, is research on how to refuse a return to what was considered normal and, just as importantly, how to construct a new reality of freedom based on our shared, equal humanity.

Final Words

Most young writers in WOR workshops did not express an interest in my research. I do not mean they did not express interest in participating in this study, which many did not. I mean they did not care that I was writing a dissertation on what was happening in our writing workshops. What they cared about was my interest in their stories, my presence on Monday nights, my listening. They cared about whether I could deliver the snacks they wanted from the prison canteen – chocolate chip muffins, not blueberry. They cared about whether I could convince the officer-in-charge to grant permission for them to leave a workshop early and make a phone call. They cared about whether Writing is Our Right would provide certificates they could bring to their next court date. They cared about going home.

Throughout this study I centered the words of young writers experiencing incarceration, asking them to write about freedom so that I could bring their freedom dreams to conversations about literacy, pedagogy, and abolition. Now, I want to give them the last word. What are the implications for our research and practice if we listen to Felix, to Shantel, to Lauryn?

Writing Sample 7.11

Improving the Schools (Felix)

I think that they should put more programs in schools. They are building more jails when they should be building more schools.

I also think that they should put more money into our community and into schools. They should eliminate unnecessary things and add the needed things like arts and crafts, sports, poetry, spoken word, color guard and encore programs.

Writing Sample 7.12

Hopes and Dreams (Shantel)

If somehow, suddenly, someone out of the blue
Decided to buy a one way ticket out of here
To anywhere I wanted, I would go to my Dad's apartment
Or my brother's studio.
Because this system is a set up
For people like me to fail.
And rips those closest to me away.

Writing Sample 7.13

My Child (Lauryn)

I love the child in my womb
I wonder when I'll see my child
I hate when I'm stressing, my child can feel it
My child brings more light into my life
I would hate to lose my child to anything
My child is more than just a new life, it's my world
My child is the see that was planted
My child I wouldn't trade for anything
My child is a new start to my life
I will work hard to be the best mom I can be
No matter when times are hard, I will provide for my child
My child with be the little step and branch that grows
Times will get hard for my child
And I will be right there with my child
I promise my child, I will always love my child

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Young Writer)

BACKGROUND

1. Do you have any questions for me about this project or anything else?
2. Can you tell me in your own words what you understand about this project?
3. How are you today? Is anything on your mind? Different or same from most days?

WRITING

1. Why do you write? Does writing make you feel any type of way?
2. Who do you write for?
3. Do you think of yourself as a writer, author, or poet? Why/why not?
4. Did you write before being in here? Before Writing is Our Right?
5. Do you want others to read your writing? Do you read others' writing?
6. Will you continue writing when you get out of here?
7. What is the last piece you wrote? What is the last piece you read?

FREEDOM

8. What does freedom mean to you?
9. When do you feel most free?
10. What memories do you have of freedom?
11. What dreams do you have of freedom?
12. Does writing make you feel free?

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Youth Prison Program Coordinator)

BACKGROUND

1. Can we start with your name and position/job title?
2. Do you have any questions for me?
3. Can you tell me a little background about yourself and how you came to be in this position?

YOUR WORK

4. How do you understand your work/your role in this facility?
    a. What are your daily responsibilities?
    b. What are your short-term and long-term goals?
    c. What challenges arise – daily or always-there-challenges?
5. How does Probation Dept decide what programs/organizations to operate in this facility?

WRITING IS OUR RIGHT

6. Why does the Probation Dept allow Writing is Our Right to run workshops?
    a. Can you explain to me how you understand Writing is Our Right – what it is and what it tries to do?
    b. Have you ever read the magazine? If yes, What impression did it make?
    c. Why do you think young people choose to participate in WOR?
    d. What value does the program offer to young people who participate?
    e. What value does WOR offer to the YDF?

FREEDOM

7. What does freedom mean to you?
8. What do you think freedom means for a young person who's locked up in here right now?
9. Would you be willing to read some writing by young people on the idea of freedom and then talk to me again?

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Writing is Our Right, Director)

BACKGROUND

1. Can we start with your name and position/job title?
2. Can you tell me a little background about yourself and how you came to be in this position?

WRITING IS OUR RIGHT

3. Can you tell me the origin story of Writing is Our Right?
4. What has been the proudest moment of your work?
5. Can you explain to me how you understand the mission of Writing is Our Right – what it is and what it tries to do?
    a. What are short-term and long-term goals of WOR?
    b. Why writing?
    c. Why do you think young people choose to participate in WOR?
    d. What value does WOR offer to the institutions it partners with?
    e. How is WOR funded? What do contracts with detention facilities look like?
    f. Who decides the cover art/quote?

FREEDOM

6. What does freedom mean to you?
7. What do you think freedom means for a young person who's locked up right now?

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Writing is Our Right, Volunteer)

BACKGROUND

1. Can we start with your name and position/job title?
2. Can you tell me a little background about yourself and how you came to work with Writing is Our Right?

WRITING IS OUR RIGHT

3. Can you explain to me how you understand the mission of Writing is Our Right – what it is and what it tries to do?
4. Can you explain to me how you understand the mission of WOR – what it is and what it tries to do?
    a. Why do you think young people choose to participate in WOR?
    b. In your opinion, what is the value of writing for youth who are detained?
    c. What value does the program offer to young people who participate?
5. How do you understand the short-term and long-term goals of WOR?
6. What are your goals both short/long-term for your work with WOR?
    a. What challenges arise for you in this work?
    b. What has been the proudest moment of your work?
        i. The most surprising?
        ii. The hardest?

FREEDOM

7. What does freedom mean to you?
8. What do you think freedom means for a young person who's locked up right now?
9. Do you see your work with WOR connected to young people's freedom?
    a. How?
10. Would you be willing to read some writing by young people on the idea of freedom and then talk to me again?

Appendix E: Writing Prompts on Freedom

1. Freedom – What does the word freedom mean to you? What are the first thoughts, images, memories, tastes, smells, sounds that come to mind when you think of freedom? When you think of freedom, do you think of being by yourself or with others? Is freedom the same for everybody? Are there different types of freedom? Who has freedom today and who doesn't? Is freedom something that either we "have" or don't have? Can our freedom be taken from us? Does anybody else have power over our freedom?

2. Freedom songs – Do you know any good songs or books or movies about freedom? Beyoncé has a song called "Freedom" on her album *Lemonade* (2016). She sings: "Freedom, freedom, I can't move. Freedom, cut me loose. Singin' freedom! Freedom! Where are you? 'Cause I need freedom, too. I break chains all by myself, won't let my freedom rot in hell. Hey! I'ma keep running 'cause a winner don't quit on themselves." What if Beyoncé had asked you to write the next verse in this song? She calls up and tells you to write a verse about freedom that's true to you – that's all. You're gonna be famous if you can do it. What do you write?

3. Freedom histories – What did you learn about freedom in school? What is the history of freedom in the United States? What is the history of freedom in the country you call home? What have you learned about freedom from your family? Has your family struggled for freedom, either here or elsewhere? If you could talk to any one of your ancestors about their experiences, what would you ask them? What are your memories of freedom? What are your dreams of freedom? What do you want to do with your freedom?

4. Words from the wise, quote of the week – "Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take, and people are as free as they want to be." James Baldwin (1924–1987) was an African American writer and activist, born in Harlem. One of his novels was just made into the movie *If Beale Street Could Talk*. What do you think of this week's quote? What is Baldwin trying to say? Is what he says true for you? If not, tell us why you disagree with Baldwin's idea about freedom: "Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take, and people are as free as they want to be."