

From Courtrooms to Classrooms: Experiments in Survival

JUSTIN SURDYKA

University of New Haven, Yale Prison Education Initiative

The transformative powers of college-in-prison programs are known, but students get the grave of continued incarceration—even if we are fully rehabilitated. For the college-in-prison student who spends years in classes, degrees and parole denials are synonymous, especially for those of us who have committed violent offenses. We are educated but not redeemed in the eyes of the system. My classmates and I¹ are the degrees behind the denials, the students behind the degrees, the prisoners behind the students, the human beings behind the prisoners who are the reason higher education in prison is praised for being transformative. Yet we are often denied the ability to realize our own transformation. We learn, we earn degrees, we change ourselves and our community, but we still have more time and more torture ahead. Prison is torture: an intense suffering, an excruciating pain—distorting mind, body, soul, at all times, in all spaces. What follows is a look into our classroom for the Yale Prison Education Initiative (YPEI) course “Experiments in Survival: On Livability and its Im/Possibilities.” YPEI is a degree granting college-in-prison program that promises transformation and evolution through a space—the prison—that is counter to our survival as a species and therefore counter-productive to our individual and collective growth. Our course embodies the principles of our program and education in its entirety when approached as a communal project.

Our journey is complex and our studenthood collectively draws from the ecosystem of our class. Throughout the semester we engaged with a range of concepts our lives have been submersed in in one way or another, from self-preservation to generational trauma, from transformative healing to alternatives to prison, from community outreach to social justice advocacy, activism, and accountability. As individuals who have been dispossessed and have dispossessed others in society, we deserve better. We grow together, we build community, we contest violence, we find purpose, and we imagine freedom. The reality of our dispossession is not lost on any of us, nor are those we have contributed to dispossessing, as nearly everyone in the room has received a lengthy sentence for murder or manslaughter. Nothing within a prison can achieve our collective desires toward generating greater tomorrows.

"What does it mean to be reading and writing, falling asleep and waking up, inhaling and exhaling, amidst these dire conditions of dispossession?" reads our professor from the syllabus as we flip through our fifteen-pound course readers with hope and curiosity. Our professor, Minh, is our longtime friend and ally, advocate, and teaching assistant for YPEI who has earned their way into being able to create this space with and alongside us. We are thankful and appreciative that they have thoughtfully stitched together course readings that validate us. This isn't just another class, another semester, another credit in pursuit of our bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies. As incarcerated college students, our education—learning, understanding, growing—is our way of life. No class, no semester, no number of credits, degrees, nor convictions can fully narrate our journeys.



Growing Together

We begin every class with our Keyword Reflections, a weekly assignment that is meant to be as interactive as it is insightful: a word pulled directly from the week's readings that jumped out to us. One at a time we call on each other, state our Keyword, then reflect on why we chose it. This is a part of the collective work that guides the three-hour conversation that ensues. Minh takes their position at the whiteboard and graphs our thoughts in real-time, drawing lines to connect keywords that bridge our aligning perspectives. Several themes emerge each week, expansive and unique in their own right. Then we discuss, contemplate, debate, agree to disagree, imagine, contemplate some more, grow, take, and share with the people in our spheres outside of the classroom space. Our conversations transcend the boundaries of the bricks, metals, and plexiglass that make up our college campus.

To live in this space of education—simultaneously roaming the suffocating tightness of prison cells while roaming through the vast possibilities of paperbacks—we have to adjust. The first book assignment we receive this semester is Afrofuturist author Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (first published in 1993 and set in the early 2020s), a novel about living/surviving an apocalyptic climate crisis that stokes the collapse of civilization. It's not difficult for us to relate to the characters in the novel. In each of our individual worlds we all experienced some level of collapse to end up in prison.

Along these lines, "Adaptability" is Ackeem's chosen keyword. "It's about survival, right?" Ackeem begins. "People are being forced, by other people, by nature, to survive." Some of us take notes while others nod their heads as Ackeem concludes: "To survive we have to adapt to the environment of the world." Ackeem channels what we are collectively and holistically engaging inside the world of prison—our adaption to the violence of being imprisoned while navigating the violent conflicts that arise due to prison conditions, all while pursuing an education and a better world after prison.

But how can we achieve survival by adapting to the violence of our prison world and still grow into the people we desire to be in the world we want to see and contribute to when we come home? Charles, whom Ackeem selects as the next sharer for this week, offers us some insight with his keyword reflection: "Hyper-Empathy." Butler's protagonist in *Parable of the Sower* is a 15-year-old girl named Lauren Olamina who lives in a small, gated community still standing as the world around her is literally set ablaze by wildfires and humans. "Lauren has what becomes a super ability," explains Charles, "it's easy to lose recognition of other people's humanity when you are trying to survive the collapse of civilization as you know it." Charles's keyword and reflection speaks directly to what most believe is the foundation of survival: an "at-all-costs mentality," mindsets we once shared with the novel's characters who are faced with daily decisions that can mean life or death.

Lauren is described as having hyper-empathy, a secret kept because it is considered a weakness in a society where vulnerability is easily exploited, another point we can relate to. Lauren is the one who remains "most human," Charles says, because "she is forced to grapple with her humanity tied to others' humanity, feeling what she witnesses others feeling." What is considered a weakness in the novel Charles recognizes as a strength: "hyper-empathy"—feeling each other's humanity—a "super ability" on our way through a collapsing world toward a better one. Charles ends his reflection with a rhetorical question: "How often would we harm each other in today's world if we had to physically and emotionally share the feelings of what we put someone else through?"

The following week we dove into the second half of *Parable of the Sower*. Lauren's community was destroyed, and she lost her entire family. Likewise, prison separates us from our loved ones and the places we call home. Many loved ones have passed since our incarceration. This is why Allen began our week three keyword session with "Healing." Allen offered a deep level of vulnerability and perspective into his personal hardships before sharing a profound insight recognizing that one "has to be in a state of hurt to heal." Allen's keyword is a guide to the process of growth—we cannot grow as individuals or a community until we can understand and forgive ourselves.

Building Community

Reflecting with intention and recycling that knowledge to those we are in community with throughout our housing units is integral to a classroom environment in prison. This is how higher education in prison can materialize into a collective project combatting the prison's individualistic ecosystem. Higher education in prison can position us to engage with our peers, while the nature of prison, and the lived experience within one, demands that we retreat to ourselves and distrust everyone. In the classroom, note taking is vital and essential to the further sharing of information learned in a secluded setting, where access to higher education serves maybe one in every thirty or so incarcerated individuals (at least in the facility we are in).

In the next reading assignment, we learn that our seemingly mundane note taking is transformative, and not so ordinary at all. Christina Sharpe's 2023 reflection-memoir *Ordinary Notes* revisits 248 notes she authored—some recent, some from decades ago, some letters and responses, some public and some personal—bridging past loss to future possibility through the Black experience, while continuously confronting the presence of (post) chattel enslavement. Sharpe examines the collective experience of life in what she calls “the wake” of complete confinement, urging readers to use memory and reflection, among many tools, as ways to ground themselves in examination of current circumstances.

Rizzo directs us to Sharpe's mom, Ida Wright Sharpe—her primary educator and influence—before sharing his keyword, “Mother,” to open our week four gathering. “Mothers link all of us,” Rizzo states, “at one point in our lives we all have had one.” Rizzo builds a connection between a photo of Sharpe with her mom. “Mothers help children survive,” Rizzo smiles, before frowning, “but mothers can also be neglectful.” His words clarify that we are all accountable to each other, recognizing that we are all susceptible to not being our best selves. But the innate potential resides in each of us. This space allows us to be hopeful, to recognize similarities, and to build futures, yet it also steps beyond theoretical utopian fantasy and allows us to weigh what we know, a mother's role in helping “children survive,” and what we want to participate in changing: the root causes that can sadly lead to a mother becoming “neglectful” to begin with.

As classmates we come together and think together, but our backgrounds do not mirror each other's. Each one of us brings a unique knowledge to the weekly discussions that creates a robust collective learning environment. Learning ways to communicate with each other, despite differences in backgrounds, teaches us that we can create our own language if we are all open and willing to listen to and see each other.

Communication through attentiveness is important. When Rizzo speaks - we listen. When Minh translates their keyword and reflection onto the existing graph - we observe. When we look upon the keywords in totality - we decipher and discuss. Inside the classroom we are an organism striving toward educational transformation and community goals; in this setting, one does not exist without the other.

Contesting Violence

In *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (2021), our reading for week six, Eric Stanley explores the different structures that create not only an atmosphere that promotes violence toward a specific group of people (in this text, the LGBTQ+ community), but also the material culture that blossoms from that oppressive atmosphere. Matt brings us to his keyword, “Violence.” Matt wants us to think with him about the “graphic and physical” nature of violence, “not as definitive attributes,” but as a way to get to the “root causes of violence as a means to preventing it from occurring.” Our education teaches us that it is possible to find solutions to everyday issues in the literature that we read. This is where the underlying, yet overt, experiment of the class lives: in our collective desire to understand, prevent, transform, and respond to ongoing harms without causing further harm. We express the need to contemplate and address the foundation, the systemic circumstances, and not just individuals struggling and striving within them. What we learn in this space empowers us to spread our knowledge. Turning the TV room in our blocks into a classroom effectively creates a community space that disrupts the potential violence stemming from stagnation and boredom.

From reading to reading, from conversation to conversation, from our lives inside and outside of the class, we learn that the reflections we write from the bunk are informed by the things we choose to intake daily amid our unfree circumstances. In *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (2022), Ruth Wilson Gilmore's three decades worth of written work is compiled for readers who are attempting to obtain true freedom. Freedom not as a principle, but as a place. Considering our geographical location as college-in-prison students, we connect deeply with the desires and questions that arise from Gilmore's text, juggling the harm we've caused against the harm we're enduring, while still deeply resonating with the natural human desire to be "free."

In the following week, nearly three months into our "Experiments in Survival," Scottie chooses the word "Barbwire." Reading Naji al-Ali's *A Child in Palestine: Cartoons* (2009) that depicts the decades long occupation of Palestine through illustrations, Scottie notes the barrier's sparkling metal teeth can be seen "keeping people in" across the globe. But Scottie is getting at more than the physicality of the metal. "I'm wondering more so, the effect that all that barbwire has on someone who is free. How do they survive that?" Scottie is thinking outside of himself, leading us into a discussion on perspective and what it means to not only be "free," or "not free," but the impact of what "keeping people in" can have on every single one of us, those who are confined by the barbwire and those who aren't. "Is anyone," Scottie asks, "Not confined?" How far does the harm extend? We are creating a culture of critique around the cultures of violence to replace them with a culture of justice.

Finding Purpose

For the last couple of weeks of class, before our final presentations, we revisit Octavia Butler with *Parable of the Talents* (1998), her follow up to *Parable of the Sower*. Set a decade later than the first Parable, in the year 2032, Lauren Olamina remains the protagonist having survived the death of her family and gated community to create a new religion that acknowledges God as Change, embracing the inevitability of life as ever evolving. Lauren begins to build this religious community despite a newly elected president who vows to "Make America Great Again." We read Butler against the inherent violence of prison and the current administration that seeks to reverse what can be said for progress. As Lauren evolves in the novel, we evolve in our pursuit to replace violence in our everyday life experience and our pasts that have led us here, building a community within the confines of the classroom, one with Anthony's keyword at the center: "Purpose."

"Purpose is essential," declares Anthony, "if you don't have purpose you give up," but "we have moved beyond the point of giving up," in pursuit of an education, a degree, despite our pasts. "We are the experiments in survival," he says, and we are being led now by "purpose, as a guide to our survival." Every reading can be applied to our circumstances, our obstacles, our reflections on the past, our present goals, our future possibilities. Anthony connects Lauren's journey to our own, reinforcing why we have come together. Beyond survival, beyond a degree, beyond prison, and even beyond individual freedom—we are building a world driven by purpose, eradicating the circumstances that lead to the foundations of harm. Who better than us, after having found our purpose, to be the ones to grow this purposeful community. Fran's keyword, "Leaders," transitions the discussion as we home in on individual and collective accountability and potential.

For the entire semester Fran has played the more than necessary role of impartial advocate, challenging consensus points, sparking debate, and bringing us to controversial moments within the texts with open ended questions. "We all have the potential to be leaders," believes Fran, "we all have the ability to be oppressive or justice serving in our respective role as leaders." We acknowledge that transformation is a lifestyle that needs to be harnessed, nurtured, monitored to be sustained. Each class has built upon attention to the broader world that awaits us when it comes to the potential for leadership both inside and outside of prison.

With each assigned reading, with each conversation, we embody my final keyword selection: "Learn." We've learned so much from everyone's keywords and reflections, week in and week out, where discussions have continued into study halls and housing units, amongst cellmates, and have extended into the outside world through phone calls and eMessages. Our learning doesn't stop. What we know and continue to learn is that our building of community in the classroom space needs to lead full circle: from courtrooms to classrooms back to courtrooms where we reckon with our past remorsefully, acknowledge the growth of our present respectfully, and hope to be afforded the first real opportunity at our futures.

In this space we "learn" that we all deserve an opportunity, that our remaining loved ones deserve this and that the communities we've harmed deserve the greatest versions of ourselves. We have grown from what we have done and deserve an opportunity at release in honor of who we have become. We must turn the physicality and violence of our literal concrete ceilings into concrete steppingstones ascending above theory, reaching actual evolution. We must experiment, as individuals and as a society, with the possibility of living without relying on prisons to warehouse poor people and people of color. We must not accept higher education-in-prisons as a solution; it is a step—an evolving response to social injustices and harm. We must examine the possibilities of the "impossible": a world without prison that is dedicated to education before harm and not disproportionately after. It begins with us, with recognizing that we are the survivors of a multiverse of harm and that our experiment must continue beyond these walls, freeing us now, as the next step towards freeing us all forever.

Imagining Freedom

In the final class of our semester Minh opens with a graceful speech, one of gratitude and appreciation for the time we've shared together, reminiscing on heartfelt moments to always cherish before closing with empathy and solidarity for the journey ahead, knowing most of us do not currently fall under any guidelines for sentence relief. Minh is aware that the classroom is our space, a refuge from the violence of prison, but that it is still of the prison, and our time in class is still time in a violent atmosphere that requires our ability to adapt. Minh directs our attention to the beloved whiteboard, where our names have been randomly listed in the order in which we will present our final project presentations. The finals we present will always be what Minh calls "unfinished, and ongoing experiments" as we attempt to survive the violent apparatus we learn in, while at the same time living, thriving, and contributing to the shaping of a better tomorrow—as the im/possible experiment of attaining complete transformation inside of prison.

Kevin offers a deep reflection on his conviction and the reason he is incarcerated. We witness in real time the evolution of our classmate and friend through how he came to be our imprisoned classmate and his desire to grow by taking responsibility, embracing acceptance, and speaking into existence a future beyond the violence of past and present—a future guided by remorse. Mikey's presentation shifts the heavy tone with a preview of love letters between himself and his fiancé. Having shared every classroom discussion with her, they built a private learning correspondence that they now want to share with the world through collaborative poetry. Don offers a personal reflection that brings us back to his arrest as a teenager close to two decades ago, the trials and tribulations of growing up in this atmosphere of violence, and his commitment to remaining a positive force through it all. We witness Don evolve from teenager to poet to perfect candidate for sentence relief.

Dwayne performs a play he wrote on the importance of higher education's impact on the everyday, monotonous activities that take place in prison and infuses it with humor. The play—a lesson on reading with purpose as opposed to reading for completion and memory—is set within a cell, where a higher ed student makes beef stew for himself and his friends. The cook (read by Dwayne), evolves from student to teacher, paying his education forward to those excluded from our program due to the prison's harsh limitations on the size of our student body, despite ample available classroom space. It is on us to spread our education to our peers who are restricted from this opportunity.

Charles and David present a collaborative skit that takes the form of a futuristic history lesson, one on forgiveness and transformative justice, that only they can teach. They are time travelers from the future, here to interview us about our current world that is destined for collapse. We are invited to join them if we can collectively piece together what exactly caused the end of the world. They challenge us to choose a fate between city life or a life in nature. In the city, technology has become king, and in nature, community is life. At the end we are asked to make our choice. We all choose community

As the pieces evolve, we see the authors' evolutions; they narrate through their craft the inherent flaw of viewing choices as individual, knowing that every choice has the potential to impact the community in one way or another. Roosevelt and Ackeem collaborate for a creative performance, a series of poetry and songs that consider the history of individual pain that leads to individual choices that may lead to committing harm in the name of survival. Roosevelt and Ackeem both aspire to reach young people through creative writing, poetry, and rap. Their performance is a perfect example, once again, of students extending their education into wider communities inside and out.

Roosevelt's performance includes a poem by a former YPEI student who has since been released after serving over 20 years. Hakim recently graduated with an associate's degree by completing this class alongside us and corresponding with Minh on the outside. He walked across the stage to receive his diploma on the University of New Haven's campus. I spoke with Hakim on the night he graduated. He reflected on our role in his journey, appreciating us as we appreciate him, before passionately describing a desire for us to "have that same opportunity."

Unfortunately, these opportunities are too easily denied. Allen missed the final presentations because prison authorities stripped him of the chance to continue his growth through education by removing him from the program for a minor infraction that took place in his housing unit. If preventing personal growth is not considered an act of violence, I don't know what is. Our higher education and college campus drowns in the inherent prevention of a truly transformative intervention. Inside of the violence of prison, what can be?

Nick has authored his own survival handbook for prisoners to positively work toward their future with education and acceptance. The handbook offers adjusting members of the imprisoned community a choice not to assimilate into the systemic violence of the prison environment (not dissimilar to the environment that may have led them here), but to be their own environment of care and justice—contributing to a culture that leads to individual as well as society's ultimate survival: Freedom! Nick gives us a perfect close to our night, to our course, to yet another semester spent building our futures while in prison, hopefully leading to a future outside of prison. We applaud and congratulate each other.

I share with my classmates a preliminary version of the collage I'm creating, featuring an image of every member of our classroom community, before reading the first ten paragraphs of this piece (this collage is included in Appendix A). I explain my intent to include each of our voices in my final project—which served as my rough draft of this article—while attempting to build empathy and insight toward an argument for collective sentence relief by bringing the outside world into just one of our classroom experiences, a journey that implicates all the unique experiences we have every semester.

Although higher education in prison is a refuge within an atmosphere of violence, the prison is counter to everything we learn within a classroom—growing, sharing, building collective empathy for each other, those we've harmed, and the harm we ourselves endure. The classroom can never be the truly transformative space we aim for inside of a prison. Our “experiments in survival” are just a glimpse into an aspect of our journeys, journeys that lead most of us to the brink of possibility, stopping short by not leading to the actual opportunity to use our education to fully impact our communities by being present in them in ways we once never believed could be possible. Today we have the belief, we now need the relief. Our degrees are only one degree of proof toward a greater journey that lays ahead of us—one without prisons.

Appendix A



References

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