

Reflections on  
Comparative Classrooms: Teaching to Transgress

From the HEAR & NOW Interactive Oral History Exhibition, April 2018



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## INTRODUCTION

Yaa Gyasi writes in her epic novel, *Homegoing*, that history is storytelling and I am inclined to agree with her.<sup>1</sup> But when we come to conflicting stories, who do we believe? Those of us who study history must ask ourselves, Gyasi reminds us, “Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth?”<sup>2</sup> As a lover of literature pursuing a second degree in History, I was reassured on my path by Gyasi’s words. Throughout this course there have been many practitioners who have inspired and reassured me, even when they left me unsettled. I will quote only one, the literature professor and oral historian, Alessandro Portelli, who wrote, “oral history is more intrinsically itself when it listens to speakers who are not already recognized protagonists in the public sphere.”<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this, and the questions that Yaa Gyasi posed, that drew me to oral history, its theories, and methodologies.

The opportunity to develop an oral history project with the Center for Justice at Columbia University arose propitiously out of a review session after my first semester as a teaching assistant at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. The conversation shifted from teaching and grading to upcoming summer programs and potential oral history projects in the fall. One of those projects centered on the women who brought education back into Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF) after the ending of Pell grants under the Clinton administration in 1994. This project seemed to be prioritized because of the age and health concerns of some of the women involved. I was thrilled by this diverging path in the conversation and reminded my interlocutors of the Master's program I was about to embark on, while immediately offering to help with any oral history project they wanted. Although I had not yet formed a plan for my thesis or capstone project, I knew that the Oral

History Master's program (OHMA) held an exhibit every spring that could draw attention to any project we collaborated on as well as highlight the overall work of CFJ. In the fall, we began to create a plan to interview some of the women from Bedford Hills.

## **I. FALSE STARTS/RESTARTS/WHAT MAKES A PLAN?**

One of the most remarkable aspects about the return of college education to BHCF was the very process through which it made that return: conversations and organizing among incarcerated women in 1997 that were joined and supported by a sympathetic warden and visionary college presidents. In an extraordinary example of participatory action research (PAR) Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre, from the Graduate Center at CUNY, collaborated with women incarcerated at BHCF to produce "Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-Security Prison." This study, published in 2001, not only provide a critical understanding of the effects of college education on women in prison, the prison environment, reincarceration rates, and post-release outcomes, it also provided a template to other incarcerated students (in facilities with open-minded leadership) for bringing education back into other maximum-security facilities. It was a process that was empowering to all those involved, particularly the incarcerated women who participated as academics, often for the first time in their lives, as well as objects of academic study. For many of those women (and for some oral historians—if time allowed) this type of process, would ideally inform the design and implementation of an oral history project.

Unfortunately, not everyone involved in early discussions of the emerging oral history project understood the desire for PAR, which would have required a totally different planning process than what we were creating. When that was clarified within CFJ and to

me, all parties agreed that this could not go forward. Telling the story of the women of Bedford Hills through a process created and orchestrated by those very women would undoubtedly take more time than what an academic framework allows; the question became, instead, how to tell the story of the wider impact that “Changing Minds” and the women of Bedford Hills had upon other incarcerated students, their families, and the broader community.

There was not an obvious path from one project plan to the next. But there was a shared belief in our potential, and a desire to contribute to and advance an understanding of the liberatory potential of education. Dr Kathy Boudin, co-director of the CFJ and a participant in “Changing Minds” while incarcerated at BHCF, became first unofficially, and then officially, my project advisor. Together we pulled back from one project, reframed the focus, adjusted the research, collaboratively crafted potential questions, and created the project plan for what became “Comparative Classrooms: Teaching to Transgress.” Despite early upheaval, our shared belief, developed trust, and willingness to keep putting ideas forward eventually led to compelling interviews that contribute to the necessary conversation on educational justice. Interviews, it should be noted, that also demonstrate the dynamic potential of voice and agency to transform not only how we understand mass incarceration, but how we imagine collectively creating systems and structures of power based in justice.

## **THE INTERVIEWS**

As oral historians we are taught to recognize our interviews as co-creations between interviewer and narrator, rather than the results of one person's effort or agenda. We come to understand the process as an exercise in shared authority that brings to light

the most valuable information through a dialogic predicated on interactive subjectivities. The information we glean, the interpretations and analysis offered, the digressions that lead to unexpected revelations are in and amongst the uncomfortable, awkward, or merely mundane moments. Some gems jump right out at the first listen, while more often we discover the layered brilliance only after repeated listening. Perhaps this is just my experience as a relative novice. I mention this because even a year after conducting these interviews, I find what strikes me now as significant is different from what first impressed me. Perhaps like any conversation, it is all about what you bring to it: inter-subjectivity, indeed.

The three narrators who graciously agreed to begin this project were Bianca van Heydoorn, Vivian Nixon, and Sean Pica, each of whom, despite long odds, has become a powerful advocate for educational justice (more extensive biographies can be found [here](#)). While there were shared themes across these interviews, each spoke of the specificity of their own situation while consistently contextualizing it within a broader social scope. This framing never relinquished personal responsibility, while it simultaneously exposed social and structural frameworks that contribute to vastly unequal opportunities for individuals and communities to thrive.

My first interview was with Bianca van Heydoorn, who at the time was the Director of Educational Initiatives at the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College and a frequent public speaker. While van Heydoorn was familiar with talking to people she had not previously met, this interview was different; it started with her history, her experience, and her interpretation of events *before* she began doing the work about which she is now frequently asked to speak. As a first interview, I was trying to put into practice, to watch in

real time, the development of the theories we discussed so often in class. I was more than a little pleased when van Heydoorn made comments like, "I see what you're doing here," because transparency is incredibly important when trying to share power with someone you have just met.

The interview could be seen in one light as the progression of connections between autonomy, agency, education, and voice: a claiming of authority as when van Heydoorn acknowledges, "you let me tell it." Indeed. One hears in this interview that speech is related to power and autonomy, and is reinforced both positively and negatively through educational practices. When van Heydoorn describes her educational experiences in two demographically and economically different school districts, we hear of one in which students are encouraged to participate, to speak up, and are rewarded for thinking creatively. The other school district prioritized repetition, discipline, and attendance. Having the opportunity to experience the former in a mostly white, middle class district revealed to van Heydoorn the tremendous injustice and disservice of the latter in the districts of brown and poor people. This early recognition and validation encouraged her to use her voice, to draw attention to inequality, and to clarify the connections between criminal justice and educational justice.

Perhaps it should not be a surprise, then, that for van Heydoorn, more than its impact on returning college education to prison, the power of "Changing Minds" was found in the agency and autonomy it gave to the students, as participants as well as subjects, in the study. As a life-long learner and lover of education, van Heydoorn saw PAR as an empowering tool to stimulate intellectual curiosity and dexterity, particularly among those who had few similar educational experiences. The clips from this interview that I pulled for

the exhibit highlight not only the sheer joy of intellectual engagement, but the benefits and the necessity of educational justice in transforming individual identities as well as society at large.

As shown with Bianca van Heydoorn, the purpose of starting with biographical questions is to give our narrators an opportunity to contextualize their story. When I asked Sean Pica about his early education and the community within which he grew up, he spoke easily about his many academic struggles, as well as the love and support he received regardless of his grades. When he was sentenced to 24 years in prison at the age of sixteen, education was one of the last things on his mind. Yet without directly steering his life towards them, education and community form the strongest themes within Pica's interview.

Sean Pica is quick to recognize that he, like most sixteen year olds, had a lot of growing up to do; when he was first incarcerated he responded out of self-interest more than anything resembling strategic planning. When asked by a guard to consider reading to some of the men with whom he was incarcerated, Pica could hardly believe his ears. A high school drop-out, facing more years in prison than he had spent thus far alive, he did not believe he had something to offer. But an opportunity to spend time outside of his cell was already precious and rare. Pica describes his experience of reading children's books to men older than himself as the dawning of a years-long realization: that education, or a lack of it, either opens or cuts off opportunities. He reveals that reading to those men was also his first act, albeit unintentional, in establishing something that would help him throughout his time in prison: the building of community. For the next sixteen years, through transfers to nine different maximum-security prisons, there was always at least one guy from those

original reading lessons who was there, who remembered him, and helped him find his way.

From getting his GED to taking college classes, Pica was more interested in short term gains of having something to do or talk about with his family on the phone, than in creating a plan to turn his life around. Yet learning with and from other incarcerated men and building, at first unwittingly, a community served to broaden Pica's perspective. By the time college classes were withdrawn nationally from prisons with the ending of Pell grants, he had started making the connections between a lack of education and incarceration. Together, the students in Sing Sing Correctional Facility determined to find a way forward to continue their education. With the women of BHCF as their example, the men at Sing Sing organized and collaborated with the warden to allow incarcerated graduate students teach a class to students who were close, but unable, to graduate before classes were stopped. As he speaks of what was at stake—not just for the students involved—and how the whole, extended community worked together to ensure the project's success, Pica's voice resonates with palpable emotion. Here is just one example that transcends its particular details to demonstrate how access to education impacts the lives of a much wider community.

Although Vivian Nixon's educational and academic background was much different from Pica's in a number of ways, her experience in NY state correctional facilities also set the course for her life's work after she was released. Nixon acknowledges having gone to excellent schools, and speaks freely of her regret for having squandered opportunity. Pursuing her MA in Creative Non-Fiction Writing at Columbia at the time of our interview, she suggests that had she "toed the line...there's no reason I couldn't have ended up at

Columbia thirty years ago, or forty years ago, rather than now." Instead, as it turned out, Nixon spent most of her incarceration in Albion Correctional Facility where the educational offerings were meager and did not extend past remedial reading and preparation for a GED. While there was no structure in place to advance her own educational aspirations, Nixon refused to neglect her intellectual growth, making her way through every book in Albion's library. With a background interest in religion, she drew her faith from the values expressed in the Bible and cited an appreciation of it as a historical, philosophical, and literary source. She credits her involvement with the chapel at Albion as what saved her emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Nixon became an integral figure there, teaching bible study as well as classes on biblical translation from Greek to Hebrew (which she had studied on her own with dictionaries she had bought for that purpose). Her connection to the chapel combined with the job she was assigned in the basic education program revealed to Nixon that most of the women incarcerated with her had very poor literacy skills, poor math skills, as she put it, "just the basic stuff you need to function in society." Nixon taught reading, helped other women with letters to and from lawyers, and was elected by her peers to be their representative in communication with the State, all roles that clarified and sharpened her view on our systems of justice and education.

In our interview Nixon touched on many themes; most riveting to me were condemnation, redemption, and responsibility. To be clear, the overall interest of this oral history project is the effect of higher education on incarcerated populations. The context Vivian Nixon brings is rooted in her particular experience of a society that invests tremendous resources in keeping large numbers of undereducated people behind bars. It is from her position as an educated woman in this space that she speaks of her own

redemption through personal responsibility. Critically, she goes further to ask questions we must consider as a society: are we more interested in condemnation than redemption; what are we willing to give up in order to provide opportunity for others; how would things look different if we prioritized human dignity? You can [listen](#) to these pieces of Vivian Nixon's interview that were used in the exhibit, as well those from Sean Pica and Bianca van Heydoorn.

### **The Exhibit**

The OHMA student exhibit has generally been held on one evening only each spring, most often within the Social Hall at Union Theological Seminary. It was not clear to me how, in the six- by eight-foot space allotted me, I would bring to life the excerpts I had yet to create from these interviews (we were advised to keep our audio clips under two minutes per piece). Pushing the idea of inter-subjectivity beyond the confines of the interview, I imagined recreating a classroom framed by walls of windows (as is my experience in state correctional facilities), putting in three uncomfortable student desks (that is all that could fit), and bringing in some of the texts taught and work accomplished (with students' permission) to display on a teacher's desk at the front of the room. In short, I recreated as best I could the character of a carceral classroom for the audience to experience as they listened to the humanizing effects of education and considered what they might be willing to give up in order to live in a less unequal society.<sup>4</sup>

With so much to prepare for, I did not really imagine what the experience of the exhibit would be. It far surpassed my optimistic, if unclear expectations! The classroom was built, the sound pieces were edited, and an interested audience showed up: just as I had hoped. Even though it was what I planned, it was no less extraordinary to look across this

make-shift classroom at well-dressed people in uncomfortable chairs listening to this audio, while able to see beyond them to other audience members, some of whom were looking in at them, others engaged with other exhibits; all of the hall contributing to the noise and the ambience of the empathic scene I strived to compose. It was rewarding to have conversations with people from many different backgrounds, so many who left acknowledging they were impressed, albeit often without giving more detail.

Unfortunately, because of the exhibition's limited engagement, none of the narrators featured in the audio were able to attend. One of the contributors to the scene, Jay Holder—a recently released, former student from Sing Sing, whose research paper with comments from his professor was featured on the desk at the front of the class—was able to make it. I was delighted and surprised to see Jay approach me, camera-phone in hand, and immediately turn the tables on me by asking questions and recording my answers. In an exercise of amplifying inter-subjectivity he gave me his camera and asked me to record an impromptu interview with him through the window of the classroom—inspired by, yet so wildly different from the one he had just left. From inside the recreated class Jay talked about listening at one of the desks to the voice of his mentor and friend, someone who had helped bring education back into Sing Sing, making his own, Jay's, and as Jay was pointing out, so many other people's education and futures possible. Here is where my imagination had stopped short: Jay's message was to his classmates not yet released, encouraging them to not give up, to keep up their studies, to believe in themselves, because another life was possible. I had only considered the impact of this exhibit on those at liberty to attend. Although of course they could not come, it had not occurred to me to imagine what this project might mean to the students who helped inspire it.

## Conclusion

In the year since the exhibit I have worked on other oral history projects and continued my scholarship. As I consider my approach to creating project plans, collaborating across communities, and the process of interviewing, itself, I consider myself fortunate to have had these experiences with "Comparative Classrooms." My project taught me to weigh the process, as well as the outcome; to recognize shared authority is not something one gives, but something one claims and another acknowledges; to respect difference, and to recognize trust takes time more than will; to understand silence is sometimes just time to think. Most of all I have learned about voice. Voice is more than having your story known; it is telling your own story. And in telling our own stories, we not only claim our place in history, but in the present as well.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 225.

<sup>2</sup> Gyasi, *Homegoing*, 226-7.

<sup>3</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative and Genre*, eds. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (New York: Routledge, 1998, 2003), 26.

<sup>4</sup> I am enormously indebted to three people for their help in this part of the project: primarily Carlin Zia, who consulted on design plans and was instrumental in the construction of the scenery as well as the assembly and installation in the social hall; Sam Fendt and Alyssa Braun, who came to visit just in time to be recruited for the load-in, assembly, deconstruction, and load-out. They made this look good!