

The Transformative Community: Gathering the Untold Stories of Collaborative Research and Community Re-integration for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, Post-Incarceration and Beyond

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Abstract

The Canadian carceral system is purposefully designed to disconnect and isolate people. Ongoing colonialism in Canada at the intersection of carceral, social service, health and child welfare systems has resulted in the disproportionate and unjust representation of Indigenous Peoples across each stage of the disciplinary process. Given the ongoing silencing of people who are or have been incarcerated, Participatory Action Research led by peers with lived and living experience of the carceral state and grounded in the wisdom of Indigenous Elders is urgently needed. In this context, a research network called the Transformative Health and Justice Research Cluster based out of University of British Columbia (THRJC), has formed to disrupt status quo research practices, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peer Leaders, Elders, academics, community advocates and student trainees, and support the empowerment of people who have been incarcerated. In this reflective piece, I, Nicolas Crier, one of the Peer Leaders, will provide an overview of the who, what, why, when and how of the THJRC, reflecting on the impacts and strengths of the collaborative community in general, as well as within the specific context of COVID-19. Co-authors representing diverse positionalities and perspectives within the THRJC add their voices where relevant throughout

Keywords

Decolonizing methodologies, story-telling, Knowledge Holders, health, social justice, equity

“The first thing you do when you get out after doing a long bit in prison is...you sit down on the sidewalk and cry”

Dennis Gates, Haida & Gitzan Nations

“Creator, we ask you to bring down your blessings on all those who are hurting, those who are hungry and those without homes...but especially, Creator, on those who are hurting.”

Elder Roberta Price, Ph.D., Snuneymuxw & Cowichan Nations

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First, Some Context

Nowadays, on these unceded ancestral territories of our good hosts, the *Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh* (Squamish), *Səl̓íl-*

wata?/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and *x^wməθk^wəy'am* (Musqueam) Nations, all one really needs is a cursory glance at current statistics regarding the disturbingly high levels of incarceration of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. This, combined with the identifiable gaps in equity and equality of services provided to Indigenous Peoples across health, social and carceral systems, makes it clear why the THJRC is now more critical than ever.

For those not aware, Indigenous Peoples face inequities at each stage of the Canadian carceral system, resulting in unjust and disproportionate representation across provincial, territorial and federal detention contexts (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2020b, Dickson-Gilmore and LaPrairie 2005). This overrepresentation is the result of historical and ongoing colonial policies and processes that create and perpetuate poverty, unemployment and under-employment, crowded and unsuitable housing, food insecurity, and substandard educational and recreational opportunities for Indigenous Peoples (Forsyth 2010, Kamal et al. 2015, Greenwood, De Leeuw, and Lindsay 2018, Mosby and Galloway 2017, Richardson & Crawford, 2020). These policies and the systemic racism they enforce have resulted in unequal and unjust treatment for Indigenous Peoples across health, social service and child welfare contexts (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 2018, Hadjipavlou et al. 2018, Sinclair 2016), compounding known correlates of carceral system engagement. Today, this means that Indigenous Peoples face unjust treatment across policing, court, bail and detention contexts. Specifically, Indigenous Peoples are more likely to: be denied bail, spend longer periods in pre-trial detention, and be charged with multiple and/or violent offences (Bracken, Deane, and Morrisette 2009, Farrell MacDonald 2014, Office of the Correctional Investigator 2020b, a, Sapers 2014, Willis and Moore 2008). Indigenous Peoples are more likely to be incarcerated in higher security institutions and to spend more time in segregation, more likely to be denied parole (Milward 2011, Sapers 2014, Welsh and Ogloff 2008), and have drastically higher rates of re-incarceration (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2020b, a).

It is also important to note that the Canadian carceral system is not working for non-Indigenous

people either. Colonial patriarchy and late-stage capitalism wreak havoc on the lives and wellbeing of many who face social isolation, exclusion, stigmatization, and harm across intersecting identities of ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, disability, and age (Erevelles 2014, Fortune and Yuen 2015, Hopkin et al. 2018, John Howard Society 2006, Kao et al. 2014, Ortiz and Jackey 2019). The criminalization of poverty and the ongoing failure of the war on drugs and resulting punitive drug policies continue to leave a long wake of trauma and harm.

Amidst the ongoing loss of friends, colleagues, and neighbours to overdose/drug toxicity and the compounding isolation of COVID-19 restrictions, and the recent tragic discovery of mass child graves at former residential school grounds across Canada, the THJRC forges on, fostering hope and breaking new ground in our cooperative mission to support long-overdue changes to cruel colonial systems. Systems that have, by their very nature, incited and indoctrinated our modern culture into this legacy of genocide. This includes the preventable trap and travesty of the so-called 'revolving door' of justice, wherein parole operates as an "open air prison," creating nearly insurmountable barriers to successful community reintegration as people try to navigate systems built to punish, not heal (McPhee and Lean 2020).

Additionally, Canadian governments regularly settle class-action lawsuits brought forward by Indigenous Peoples fighting for real justice. These lawsuits cover everything from loss of language and culture, to physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse, to the dysfunctional child "welfare" and adoption systems and their unchecked apprehension and institutionalization. The Residential School lawsuits resulted in many claimants receiving million-dollar-plus settlement pay-outs. The 60s Scoop class action was settled with \$875 million - \$75 million for a legacy foundation, another \$30 million to pay the legal fees; the rest is divided up evenly between the equal number of participating claimants. In many cases, these settlements are paid directly to the traumatized survivors themselves, presumably, so they can practice their money-management skills in the middle of multiple onslaughts of crisis and calamity. I've heard a few stories where this payout resulted in

an Indigenous person heading from their northern small town to [blinded], to see the big city... only to get robbed the first night, or blow it all, and then be forced to return home broke and with a new and terrifying relationship to fentanyl.

Wow. Sometimes, it almost feels more like *they* are putting *us* at risk... on purpose. But then again, I don't believe in "Us and Them". There is only us. And one boat, afloat, nearing adrift, like an unweighted buoy gripped for life by a boy who forgot how to swim. And there ARE sharks...

Introducing Nicolas

I guess I should share a bit about me, who I am and why you're reading my words. I am one of those without money management skills. I didn't grow up with my people or ancestral ties. And, well, I didn't really grow up. I just spent a lot of time in that place where many Native kids found themselves during the so-called "60s Scoop": in limbo. Far removed from my people, ancestral knowledge systems and ways of learning and more importantly, ways of healing from traumas I would not even realize I had, until they had already caused significant chaos throughout my life.

So now, in an uncanny twist of the fates, despite the struggles I had faced being a part of all those dire statistics (born with an alcohol related neurodevelopmental disorder, apprehended by child welfare 15 minutes later, fostered for two years through a series of abusive homes, adopted, then returned to the child welfare system after my adoptive mother died when I was ten. Then, followed by 20 years of streets, jail, and homelessness, addictions and angst, emotionally adrift, mentally and spiritually dislocated, no successful recovery to speak of), I end up being the writer (with no formal training whatsoever) who is randomly asked one day to join the THJRC.

So, I joined it. Well, maybe despite those things, but also because of them. I know I have an important voice and important stories to share.

The Transformative Health & Justice Research Cluster

Now, two years later, I've been once again invited to explore and explain for you, dear reader, what

this intersecting initiative actually is, and how our membership has grown, as a working team (and as friends), in this time. Hopefully, I can express how *now* is the ideal window of opportunity for participatory action and ethical relationship-building to step forward together and to take bold, generative actions to ensure that more definitive research is conducted in respectful and responsible ways that *actually establish results* in the form of *meaningful change*. Research led, witnessed, and approved by us –peers and Elders. Research that is ethically accountable to the community it claims to serve, working *with us* to develop decolonized, culturally (and now, virtually) supportive programming and policy design with and for Indigenous Peoples and others suffering in our punitive carceral systems. People experiencing disproportionate rates of harm from these oppressive systems, systems too long misunderstood as designed to include ALL Canadian citizens in the respectful treatment of health and fair distribution of justice, but which, ultimately, are primarily responsible for decades of insidious neglect and overt discrimination against the First Peoples of these lands.

The THJRC is a transdisciplinary, Peer- and Elder-led, cross-sector and community-driven network of academic and Peer researchers, Elders, organizational stakeholders and community leaders and advocates, all of whom are committed to transforming research and supporting the health, wellbeing and dignity of all people who are or have been incarcerated in [blinded] and Canada. We are a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, some with formal education and others bringing expertise and wisdom gathered outside university walls.

In January 2019, the project's co-Leads, Dr. Helen Brown, UBC School of Nursing, and Dr. Amanda Slaunwhite, BC Centre for Disease Control, was awarded a UBC Research Excellence Cluster Grant. Since then, the academic team has sought out and recruited a number of Peer Leaders from our diverse local communities, building on their pre-existing networks of relationships to include a variety of Lived and Living Experiences. Together we have been working to explore the scope and spectrum of social and historic determinants of health and justice. We acknowledge systemic racism and stigma and work towards a mutual aid-type approach to collaboration.

This work is done in the spirit of genuine humility, naming the harms done and progressing towards transformation by centering the voices of those most impacted by policies written and actively imposed by the colonial oppressor state.

What we found were stories. Many, many disheartening stories of Indigenous Peoples being excluded, exploited, and experiencing every otherwise erroneous effect of Canada's attempt to extinguish (or, if necessary, institutionalize) our existence. And stories of non-Indigenous people, also cast aside, unable or unwilling to fit the oppressive mold of the neo-liberal citizen. People who sit in prisons, disregarded, lost, seen as incapable of rehabilitation. And those who've already served (and survived) their time and been released to the community, expecting society to accept them back, yet are still treated like 'criminals' everywhere they go (especially in the hospital). Further ostracised and dehumanized, surveilled and shuffled along by a totalitarian parole system into halfway houses, an ultra-competitive workforce and a class-dominant social culture, they feel out of place within, because it blatantly stigmatizes and criminalizes them in relentless, systemically orchestrated ways which generally seem counter-intuitive to this naive native. Then they're told to stay "clean" and not risk reoffending (even though we secretly judge you as high-risk problem citizens anyway). And from the point of release to the *pre*-chosen community, the convicted felon, having served their "hard time", is actually expected to somehow "reintegrate".

Our THJRC has now undergone 2.5 years of active mandate implementation - mainly, to bring people together, support relationship building and collaboration, and support Peers and Elders to lead the way. This has resulted in the establishment of Peer leadership and employment opportunities, including for those living and working in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, as well as other neighbourhoods and communities throughout the Lower Mainland Area, touched by the long arms of the carceral state. We have also witnessed the vital importance of Elder Roberta's profound wisdom, guidance and leadership as we navigate through sensitive subject matter and partake in the trauma-informed sharing of stories and building of trust. We are led by the first-hand lived & living Experience of us, Peer Leaders. We

have collaborated to build collective strength, from which we draw incredible resilience and resistance. Ultimately, our goal is to educate, inspire, and shift the social and political will of policymakers, the general public, academics, community members, and beyond. And, because we believe in the power of art, here's a collaborative painting by Dezireh Feather Abraham, a collaboration between myself, Dezireh and the THJRC Program Coordinator, Samantha Young, who also happens to be a professional artist, which really captures the heart and soul of this work.

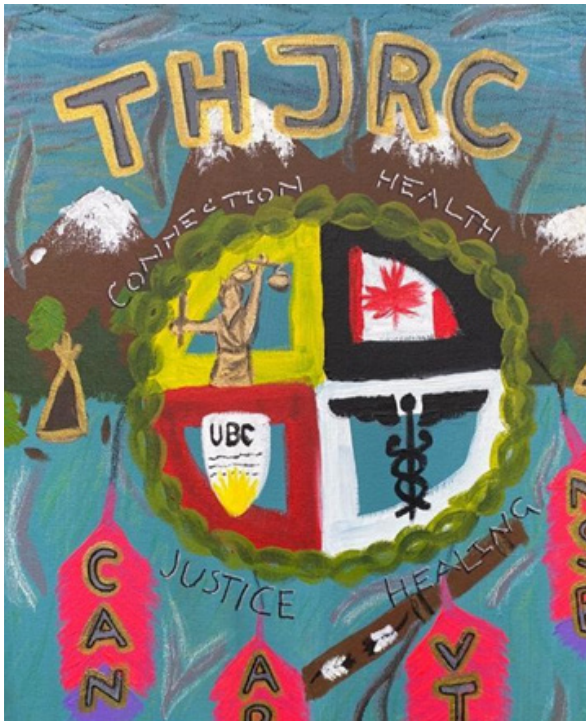
Reflecting on this artwork and all that we have worked on over the years, if I had to distill the THJRC down into components, they would be: Peer Leadership & Employment, Elder Leadership & Wisdom, Trauma-informed Practices, Visual Art & Storytelling, and Student Collaboration. Let's dig into those a bit more with the help of some of my friends.

Peer Leadership & Employment

Three years ago, my prospective employment opportunities consisted of getting up before dawn to stand in the cold line-up at a temp day-labour agency, only to be sent off to some minimum wage construction pseudo-slavery I was never any good at, and which never really got me anywhere but drunk and homeless. Today, I am actually given a living hourly wage for a leadership position with a research group that supports me to write, schedule my own hours, meet and have great discussions with some of the nicest, smartest people I've ever met, AND they order pizza right to my doorstep (the temp agency never did that)!

I'm not the only THJRC member with something to say on this either, so I have invited fellow Peer Leaders Patrick Keating (PK), an actor, storyteller and advocate, and Pam Young (PY), a Peer Health Mentor with Unlocking the Gates Services Society, to weigh in. Oh, and Helen Brown (HB), a professor and academic co-lead, will also share some thoughts. Over to you!

PK: Before involvement with the THJRC, the word Peer was somewhat foreign to me. In my life, it was only ever mentioned in reference to "a jury of your peers." Now to work with people that have



“The Truth of Art” is a collaboration piece between Deziroh Feather Abraham, a self-taught Indigenous artist who lives in the city of Vancouver and Samantha Young, THJRC program coordinator and a BFA graduate of mixed race with academic experience. This piece was created specifically for this article.

The artwork has pieces of Indigenous culture and wisdom throughout to visually express the Indigenous truths that influence the Cluster’s work: a medicine wheel, braided sweetgrass, a peace pipe, feathers and traditional Indigenous lodges. There are acronyms as well: THJRC, standing for the Transformative Health and Justice Research Cluster, and in the four feathers: CAN standing for Community Advisory Network, ARC for the Academic Research Committee, UTG standing for Unlocking the Gates Service Society and MSB standing for Megaphone Speakers Bureau. These groups are mentioned in this piece because they are the foundation for the THJRC’s work in partnership. In the four quadrants of the medicine wheel are symbols: Lady Justice, the University of British Columbia logo, the Canadian Flag and the Staff of

Caduceus. They have been placed within the medicine wheel to show the viewer the work involved (health and justice-related research and policy engagement) intersecting with the who (UBC) and where (across Canada) of that work. The mountains in the background are to display that the THJRC is doing this work within British Columbia’s carceral system. The four words surrounding the braid of sweetgrass encapsulate the four unified directions of our cooperative vision: Connection, Health, Justice & Healing

Deziroh Feather Abraham, 30, is a self-taught emerging Indigenous artist. Although she is a member of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, Deziroh was born and raised in Winnipeg, MB. Deziroh likes to incorporate her traditional cultural heritage and the 7 teachings into the work she creates. She wants to show beauty from her travels and empowerment for the Indigenous peoples through her work. Deziroh’s medium of choice is drawing and painting, but she also likes to work in mixed media, utilizing everyday items to make art. She currently lives with her kitten, Baby, in Vancouver.

Samantha Young is an artist whose work focuses on portraiture, nature, and social economic issues. Sam has her Bachelor in Fine arts, majoring in Drawing and Painting.

lived through similar experiences of incarceration as I have, and be asked to draw from those experiences as an expert in any field, is not only a ‘well duh’ moment, but extremely empowering for myself. I have long felt guilt and shame for those very same experiences of incarceration. To add to that, the important element of being paid a fair wage for our work as experts in our field gives me the sense of being a contributing member of society, the society that we are working to hopefully make a bit more fair, equitable, safe and humane.

PY: Being released from prison is a lonely and disheartening experience for many people. They

go from prison, where they had a roof over their head, three meals a day, access to showers and hygiene, friendships, and a level of normality, only to be kicked out the door with a bus ticket, clothes that are dirty or do not fit, no housing, money, or support, and nowhere to go for help. This is why peer leadership through Unlocking the Gates Services Society is so important! Peers can connect on a deeper level through our shared experiences. We know exactly how it feels to be that person getting kicked out the corrections door to absolutely nothing and will fight that much harder to ensure they do not end up on the street, falling through the cracks and ending up back

in prison.

HB: Having become an academic after being a practicing nurse, the turn to research for me was fraught with questions about how to make a difference for people facing multiple barriers to respectful and humanizing health care. I always have been – and remain – skeptical and publicly critical of the meritocracy and academic colonial imperialism that elevates “knowers” with PhDs, while simultaneously erasing voices, experiences, and knowledge necessary for a more just world. Indigenous Elders, community members and Knowledge Keepers must have their rightful place leading this work. The THJRC allows us to resist the dominant conventions of where and how we partner and value knowledge; research that is poised to tackle grand challenges was by its very essence and necessity about relationships. Our team of Peer Leaders, storytellers, academics, Indigenous Elders, and graduate students are united as people with a deep dissatisfaction with empty promises and research that has little impact on the most pressing barriers and harms endured by so many. We know that a living wage is honourable and ought to be the norm for Peer work and that respect for knowledge through experience is critical. Together we have created a transformative way of being and working together – that starts and ends in valuing, respecting, and inspiring our collective strengths while also taking good care of each other.

Elder Leadership & Wisdom

Back to me – dear reader, Nicolas, your trusted guide (my name actually *does* mean “Victory of the People”, in Greek). Earlier, I mentioned that my adoptive mother passed away when I was ten. Malignant brain tumor. Then, I found out at 21 that I had lost my biological mother to cirrhosis of the liver. After I was kicked out of my adoptive home, I never really saw my grandmothers again. But that’s not to say my life has not been almost entirely filled with strong, resilient survivor women, who have always watched over me with unconditional maternal instinct. I am blessed.

So, to have an Indigenous woman Elder as part of my life, opening our bi-weekly Community Advisory Network meetings in a good way, with gratitude, a woman who is so soft and kind and strong

and helpful and encouraging, Drwell, means a lot. An Elder who has been through horrific trauma, but who has stayed strong and reclaimed herself, and who now uses her immense spirit to share joy and blessings in a meaningful way with so many people and causes (and even yours truly, a mixed-up boy trapped in a brutal man’s world). This just seems, to me, to be about the best thing *any* research *could* contribute. She has taught me things I should have learned all along and perhaps, could learn from no one else. For this, I am grateful. Most of all, I am honored and humbled to call Elder Roberta Price a very special friend and an inspiring leader. With that in mind, I have invited UBC’s newly accredited honorary Doctorate of Laws, and resident Elder to the THJRC, to share a few words below.

ERP: It is the highest honour in my life to become involved with many wonderful, strong, courageous, amazing people in our THJRC; Helen Brown respectfully asked me to share an Opening and Welcome for a Circle in January 2019, and after sharing in that Circle, I advised Helen that I wished to remain involved as Elder to this powerful work. It has been wonderful for Musqueam Elders Thelma and Arthur Stogan to attend some of the Community Circles to share their Ceremony of Cleansing and wise teachings. It was a joyful time to meet in person, share food and speak together & then pandemic hit us all, and it was then lovely to figure out how to keep meeting, and we did! Zoom Circles & still feasting together, as we come together and share a bond in a strong, happy, healthy, and loving way. I have said many times, this is my most favourite Circle of People! A very special thank you to all of our Circle for wise, kind, joyful interactions and, especially Nicolas, for your wise words and kindness on this journey.

Trauma-informed Practices (including safety protocol)

Me again, practicing freelance reporter at large, Nicolas. I am now inviting Helen Brown (again) to share a few words on trauma-informed practices, including the safety protocol we collaboratively developed.

HB: During our first year together, we began our work, sharing stories and engaging in the important task of discussing how to dismantle and re-image the systemic and structural barriers produced

Graphic Facilitation of a THJRC gathering, by Corrina Keeling



through the colonial carceral system. Participants took risks, shared stories, performed live theatre, and asked questions together - learning how to *not* re-traumatize or trigger harm became our central guiding principle. THJRC Peer Leader Chas Coutlee reminded us all about the importance of carefully and selectively sharing story at the start of each gathering to maintain the spirit of safe emotional space for all. During our first year together, we cultivated a safety protocol to uphold our commitments to safety for all, reflected through the words in this image:

PY: The last time I left prison was in 2009, and since then, I've started telling my story, and it has really been a healing experience for me. I carried a lot of shame about my past and found that telling my story could help others realize they are not alone and also help to humanize people with experience of incarceration and drug use. When I share my story, it is in hopes that it will help it will end stigmatization.

Visual art and Storytelling

Hello again, Nicolas here! Now, as for those stories I spoke of? Haida Storyteller and former inmate Den-

nis Gates, whose words waited 29 years to open this paper, is now a critical player in a storytelling and empowerment project that is being supported, in part, by the THJRC. Stay tuned for more about this storytelling partnership project with the Megaphone Speaker's Bureau (MSB). Since 2018, the MSB has been providing training and support for members of the DTES related to public speaking, writing and storytelling, and hosting and facilitating customized "anti-stigma" workshops for service providers and the general public. As I am fortunate enough to have roles in both the THJRC as Peer Leader, as well as Storytelling and Community Networking Liaison title with Megaphone Magazine, I was able to connect these two groups and support the development of a carceral-specific partnership. This partnership involved a series of writing workshops for people with lived experience of being incarcerated to craft their own narratives and calls for social change, all supported through trauma-informed and culturally safe processes. Stay tuned for more on that! Now, the rest of this section, I'll again pass the mic to Patrick Keating.

PK: When I was inside, I was lucky enough to

be in at a time when University courses were available. That is where I was introduced to Theatre. Those programs are no longer available. For me, Art, especially Theatre, introduced me to a new community. Eventually, I ended up creating a one-man show about my time in prison. When touring with my show, I was given the opportunity to perform in a couple of penitentiaries and correctional centres and talked to the men about telling their own stories; their stories are so important to dispel the myths that surround people in prison. The THJRC is helping support and encourage me to bring my show into more places of incarceration with a digital adaptation and to talk with men and women inside to continue to encourage them to tell their own stories. They are also helping me to put together workshops touching on different artistic disciplines, working with some of the country's most established and renowned Artists that are more than willing to teach their discipline to those inside. I'm hoping that this and other initiatives started and nurtured within the THJRC will enable those who take part to access their imagination and talent in order to express themselves in ways they did not realize were possible.

Student Engagement

Back to me, Nicolas, now breaking my own word count record. I went back to school once. I completed a semester of high school upgrading in my early 30s, with a grade point average of 4.33 (straight A+). I did so well not because I was sober, or on medication for my depression and anxiety, or out of the Vancouver Downtown Eastside (DTES). It was because I love learning. I like writing. I'm totally addicted to approval, just this time, the approval was worth something. Not once in 30 years did injecting or drinking or smoking (or jail, for that matter) ever earn me anything but disapproval and abandonment until the DTES and the THJRC accepted me for who I am and, rather than give up on me, they actually believed in me. And so, admittedly, I do not really know why I gave up on school and went back to the war trenches. Fear, I guess. Addicted to approval, afraid of success and impulse-oriented. Typical, for me.

But the students, professors (and now official Colleagues) I have met through the THJRC make me believe in the future, believe that not all teachers or

institutions are "bad." Even while all those Residential Schools were attempting to destroy us, the idea of education as empowerment remained for some teachers and students, and is being passed along with avid passion and progressive thinking. It was only misguided and used as violence by people who had been misguided themselves. This is and will continue to change because of things like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and because of the wonderful hearts and minds of big picture thinkers like Ruth Martin, Helen Brown, and the committed students excited to walk alongside and help to actualize the fresh and important ideas from our Peer Leadership, on the front lines of a truly pioneering cultural renaissance (even sometimes, while still in prison themselves). For this, I will hand the stage over to Patrick and Pam again, and then to Kelsey Timler, the good friend who first welcomed me into the fold that has changed my life, and who I think will have a few things to say.

PK: Being an old guy (NC: ah, he's not *that* old...) who has been given the opportunity of working and learning along graduate students leading original work has given me the sense that I can do the things I'm tasked to do. Their knowledge and kindness in passing on information is a welcome relief for people like myself, people who have spent years fighting against systems and structures who hold onto knowledge as if it is a language that can only be used and disseminated by those in the club who know the handshake. They invite you into their circle with open arms, even old grumpy guys like me. I would certainly be remiss not to mention their encouragement, energy and intentional focus that is utterly infectious.

PY: Engaging with academics has always been a really good experience for me. I think it is very important that students hear the voices of people with lived experience so when they go out into the world as future health care providers - or whatever profession they choose - they have a better understanding of what it's like for formerly incarcerated people and those who use drugs, and the stigma and discrimination they experience. It also might encourage them, as our future policymakers or changers, to step up and fight for this population.

KT: I used to always say, vehemently, that I

would never do a PhD. Academia is generally an unfriendly, classist and colonial place, and not somewhere I was interested in hanging my hat. But over time, I have come to recognize the importance of disrupting this status quo, doing research in a good way. The [blinded program] has provided opportunities for me to continue this disruption *through* Relationship. It is an honour and joy to spend time learning from the Peer Leaders and Elder Roberta. THJRC funding has provided opportunities for graduate students to support Peer-led and participatory work, following the power of storytelling to where it leads us. Certain voices (white, cis, male, economically secure & upwardly mobile) have held the mic, the pen and camera for too long, and disrupting that through research and relationships that *actually does something* is one of the most important tools that we have at our disposal. We have put together a student group, called the ARC, which supports students like myself to network and collaborate with Peers, to sit and listen to their (always visionary) ideas, and work to find ways to make it happen. For me, this has included collaborating with Nicolas and MSB to develop writing workshops for people who have been incarcerated, exploring visual storytelling methods and filmmaking, and sharing some of my research skills, like interviewing, transcript coding and thematic analysis, with Peer Leaders. It is what academia should be. Listening to the expertise of those most impacted by the issue at hand and then working together, in a good way, to make change.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Well, there you have it, an outline of the Transformative Health and Justice Research Cluster - what we are working on and why it matters. It has been almost three years that I have been working with this amazing group of people: academics and Peers, thinkers and doers, artists and doctors, policy and politics. I thank them for opening their lives to me. We have come a long way together and what I have learned from them is this:

Everything continues on, shifts, changes... *transforms*. That is the nature of this life: constant transition. In unison. We are one thing, becoming something else. We are as unique individual enti-

ties (often, struggling, misunderstood and full of untapped potential), and we are a collective whole, empowered by our unity and fighting with our minds and hearts, resisting, reconciling and rallied towards justice through our shared vision and combined efforts and sacrifice. We are simultaneously inseparable from the universe, and indigenous to it.

Thank you as well to the Turtle Island Journal of Indigenous Health, for allowing us to contribute to this incredible second edition. And to you, dear reader, thank you for taking the time to try and understand something I hope you'll never have to experience yourself, but which you may now have a little more empathy-inspiring-you-to-action for. You honor the debt we have paid: with respect.

Hiy Hiy! O Siem! I raise my hands to you! Stay safe!

In Memoriam:

This article is dedicated to the thousands of inmates who have died in institutional corrections facilities, their families, and the communities that never got to welcome them home with open arms and hope for the future. May we all learn from your sacrifices.

& for Synthia,
a storyteller and friend

Know your story is being told through the voices of those who love and respect you.

RIP

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