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 RHET270  
 Hayes

## What Are Prisons For?

### I. The Statistics

- 1 in 3** - the number of African American men currently under the control of our nation's criminal justice system (Alexander)
- 790%** - the percentage increase of our country's prison population over the last 30 years (Biron)
- 12** - the number of prison facilities operating in Washington State (D.O.C.)
- 19,413** - the number of prisoners housed in Washington State (D.O.C.)
- 2,439** - the number of prisoners residing at WSP (D.O.C.)
- 13** - the number of incarcerated students in RHET-270 Fall 2017
- 16** - the number of Whitman College students in RHET-270 Fall 2017 (not counting 2 students in supporting teaching roles)
- 29** - the number of students receiving Whitman College credit for RHET-270 Fall 2017

### II. The Sponge

It is not uncommon for people at Whitman, and in my home region of the Pacific Northwest, to suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder. Sometimes when I complain to my parents on the phone about classes or the disillusionment I sometimes feel as a twenty-something on the verge of graduation, the first thing they'll ask is, "Well, hey, is it raining there?" as if the weather is indeed a significant contributor to my mood. They're right—I soak up my environment like a sponge, which usually pays off during high-energy events like sorority recruitment or weddings but can be my downfall in very serious or psychologically intense contexts.

This self-knowledge made me nervous to enter the space of WSP. I wasn't concerned about being in medium security with murderers or gang members or having conversations with them because, frankly, I know I can talk to a rock and probably get a response. I felt fairly prepared in my background knowledge of how to act and dress in a prison or jail space, given my mom's occupation and the various times I've had to bring her lunch to work at SCORE Jail. I had no fears about my own or my classmates' personal safety, and I felt as though I knew how to interact with the corrections officers in a respectful manner.

Selfishly, I was nervous about the impact the WSP environment would have on my emotions and my day-to-day functioning simply because it symbolized exactly the type of mass incarceration

we were investigating, and that bummed me out. *I'm not the one who has to live there, ostensibly for the rest of my life*, I told myself. *Woman up. You're just a visitor; you get to leave.*

### III. The Walk

To get to our classroom inside Washington State Penitentiary, we had to pass through eight distinct secure areas. Some of the spaces and walkways felt so expansive that they didn't necessarily connote the double-door secure entrance that the phrase "sally port" might, but I remember my mom's response when I told her how many there were after our first class:

"Whoa."

It has rained twice over the course of our Tuesday evenings spent at WSP. The first time was a light sprinkle, which began during our usual walk through the sally ports. We shivered in our Patagonia and North Face raincoats and moved a little closer to each other as we strode past the guard towers watching us.

The second time it rained was more of a torrential downpour. We scurried through the sally ports and waded through puddles where the concrete pathways lacked grates for draining purposes. We stuffed our bulky folders and notebooks and dog-eared readings under our coats so the ink wouldn't smear. My entire front was soaking wet; my jeans had turned a different color. When I shook my incarcerated group members' cold hands a few minutes later, we talked about how it hardly ever rains like this in Walla Walla. I had only lived here for four years, but they had lived here for decades, and even they admitted to the unusual nature of it raining so hard for so long.

### IV. The Drive

At the start of our semester, Heather mentioned that it would be unsettling to be released into the night after class, drive in our cars, and go home to our civilian lives, while our incarcerated peers are strip-searched and fall asleep in their cells.

I drove to and from the prison with Molly, Nolan, and Bryn. Nolan chain-smoked cigarettes to and from WSP as we raced down side streets; I would normally sit behind him with Bryn in the backseat, unclear if it was the cigarette smoke or the wind from all four rolled-down windows that made my eyes water. During our five minute ride, we recapped how our weeks had been, how midterms or finals or senior theses were going, and what plans we had for the weekend. This ride with the same people on the same route was my weekly meditation. We were moments away from shedding our privilege for a few hours and engaging in precisely the type of experiential learning liberal arts education preaches. How lucky we were to have our names on a list that allowed for our arrival to—and exit from—this institution.

Last week, on our way to the prison, almost the entire class was caught behind a train that kept shifting forward and backward but never stopped blocking the road. After a few frustrating minutes of waiting, Bryn turned to me and said, “So, should we go over speech stuff, or what?” I pulled out the flashlight on my phone and we read through our pieces together until the train started moving again and we could continue on our way.

Our drives home were a singular exhale, a sigh layered with relief, exhaustion, and satisfaction. We listened to Sales or Cigarettes After Sex and compared difficulties and triumphs in our groups. We discussed Grandpa’s progress with public speaking, and expressed disbelief the first time James shared his story with the class. We talked about how nervous we were for the Town Hall, the seasonal shift in the Walla Walla valley evident as we transitioned from sweating in the backseat and watching sunsets out the windows to hydroplaning through puddles in the December dark.

## **V. The Group**

DJ’s gigantic hands and wide smile made it easy for me to believe that we were going to be friends. James’s distinct and calming presence, I knew, would be a welcome balance to my frantic over-talking in our group dynamic. Bryn’s political awareness and articulate nature proved to be unfailingly useful in our deciphering of economic trends regarding decarceration.

Our first class inside WSP, we sat at our table—so cramped that my knees brushed up against Bryn’s, and my legs were almost entangled with DJ’s and James’s, as long-limbed as we were—and paired up to begin our introductions.

I learned James loved watching CNN and *Saturday Night Live*, and that *The Help* was one of his favorite books. I learned that in 2003, James graduated with an associates degree in Human Services and Chemical Dependency from Highline Community College. In 2013, I took my SAT at Highline Community College.

I learned that DJ’s favorite food was seafood, something that we both have in common. He played basketball and had a scholarship to be a guard in college, and his favorite team is the Sonics, which was my first hint at our Seattle connection. To the question “Why are you here?” DJ responded that he was in the previous iteration of the course, and that this class provided a rare opportunity to influence young minds, especially given his background as a concrete activist. “The four Whitman credits don’t hurt,” he concluded, laughing. I had already decided since our handshake that we were going to get along, but with that joke he had completely won me over.

## **VI. The Orals**

I'm a Film and Media Studies major, and this fall I had trouble deciding what text to analyze for my orals. I looked towards beloved childhood films, or spin-offs of TV shows or movies we had unpacked in various courses during my three years at Whitman; in true 90s-dork fashion, I came close to examining an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Then, our Rhetoric 270 class entered WSP for the first time on Tuesday, September 12th, and my focus shifted entirely to finding a piece of media which involved incarcerated bodies.

I selected a 2016 laundry detergent advertisement called "Free the Kids," the tagline of which is, "Who spends more time outside, a child...or a maximum-security prisoner? Watch this film to find out." I unpacked its connections to classic prison iconography and punishment and gestured towards its complex operation on both a storytelling and advertising level; I Skyped with its U.K.-based filmmaker, who is fascinated with our nation's mass incarceration system; and I emphasized the ad's occupation of a historically complicated rhetorical space. I worked for weeks on my presentation, and every Tuesday evening spent at WSP with my classmates generated a sense of purpose for me that I felt had been missing from my major studies for some time. I felt like what I was studying connected so many different facets of my academic career; I felt like the liberal arts model was finally clicking for me.

One of my professors told me during my question and answer portion of my orals that I was certainly "coming at this from a biased perspective; I mean, knowing your mom's a C.O., plus you *are* taking a class with Heather in the Pen this semester...."

"And?" I responded without thinking, knowing full well that I was about to go head-to-head with one of my mentors, and not necessarily in an academic sense.

My professor thought my own personal experience was coloring my stance. I concurred. My professor also argued that the job of the filmmaker is to complete the project and make money, and that it is not necessary for him to be socially conscious and humane in his documentary approach. My argument was that in a space fraught with intersections of power, bureaucracy, and surveillance, the filmmaker has an obligation to consider the politics of the space he is portraying and that he could have done better in terms of his exploitation of the prisoners displayed in the film.

My professor and I agreed to disagree. I did not earn distinction.

## **VII. The Topic**

Before our group decided on "decarceration" as our topic for our Town Hall presentation, we toyed with ideas like prison social movements and activism, rehabilitation post-release, police reform, and prison representation in the media. DJ was especially passionate about the media standpoint, knowing that I'm studying film at Whitman. When we brainstormed possible subjects during class one evening, he wrote me notes that he was "in my corner" and wanted to push for

the media standpoint so I could feel more involved. “We want you fired up, too!” he said. I assured him that although I was more comfortable discussing elements in the media sphere, I was also in this class to expand my mind beyond the liberal media perspective.

In the end, our group selected “decarceration” as our main topic because we thought it best suited the strengths of our group members. Bryn was going to analyze and discuss the economic costs of incarceration, I was going to introduce the topic and place it within the greater context of our class, James was going to incorporate his own story and end on the powerful line “Where does the pain end, and the healing begin?”, and DJ was to be the last speaker of the evening and advocate for stronger communities sans mass incarceration.

“We’ll be sure to pick on your mom, too,” he said, winking at me. My mom was one of the Town Hall invitees, and DJ was intent on making her an active participant. I agreed and assured him she would be a good sport about it.

DJ could not attend our final class period before the Town Hall because he was in the hospital. His cellmate, who is also in our class, handed me a note that DJ had written. It began, “Bryn, Mary, Moody (in alphabetical order :) )”—in classic DJ fashion, he was striving for equality even in his address of his group members. The note explained that even though he was sick, he was fully prepared to give his speech the following Tuesday and that he was on board with whatever decisions or changes we would make in class without him.

*“In Struggle,  
DJ”*

was how he signed off in sweeping, cursive loops.

## **VII. The Goodbye**

Dr. H announcing his leave from WSP for a new position in Oregon was one of the most impactful evenings of our semester. It is precisely Dr. H’s know-how, passion, humor, and connection to the college as a former Whitman professor that this course has been able to come to fruition at all, and his lasting influence on Whitman and WSP students alike was made clear in a matter of moments.

“I’ve accepted a job at OSP which starts in a few weeks,” Dr. H announced, choking back tears at the end of class. He mentioned that he would try his hardest to return for the Town Hall, and that he couldn’t thank “the guys” enough for welcoming him into their community. He shared stories about working with certain individuals in solitary and how proud he was of each and every one of them for their growth over the course of his time at WSP and over the semester.

Assad, the known “intellectual” of the group whose specialties included posing hypothetical questions and waxing philosophical, stood up in front of the class to say his goodbye to Dr. H.

“I’m a convicted murderer,” he began, staring around the room. Then, he gestured to Dr. H and said, “But you, man? You’ve always just seen *me*. You don’t let the worst thing I’ve ever done define me. When I’m with you, it’s like I’m out there. Nothing else matters; it’s just me and you. And when you leave here for OSP, I’m thinking, hey. *My friend’s* leaving.” For the first time all semester, I saw Assad break his usual stoic demeanor and smile broadly. “I want to thank you for that.”

As he and Dr. H shared an enormous bear hug, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

## IX. The Call

I couldn’t wait to call my mom after our first class inside Washington State Penitentiary. She picked up immediately; she wasn’t on her three days on, three days off graveyard shift that Tuesday night.

“How was it?” she asked. “You must be exhausted.”

“Mom,” I said, and I immediately started crying as I shoveled pasta my housemate had kindly prepared for me into my mouth. “It was so good.”

I remember my mom saying how she understood, how she knows inmates at her jail whom she has grown close with over their year-long stay, how the relationships you form in that environment are so different from relationships in the “free world” and how some of the most meaningful human interactions she’s ever shared have been in that space.

I said, “This is going to be the catalyst for something. This feels big, and not just mass incarceration big.” Then I started crying again. “It’s only the first night, and we have so many more weeks, and I know that at the end I’ll have to say bye, and I can already sense that I could form better friendships with some of these guys than the artificial acquaintanceships I have with some people at school, and we’re going to have to leave and I’m going to grow up and some of these guys will still be at the Pen and we’re going to say bye, I’m not going to want to. I’m not going to want to,” I repeated.

I could feel her smiling through the phone. “Oh, honey, I know,” she said. “With this kind of thing, like with anything, you just try to leave people better than how you found them and learn something along the way. And you’ll let them know that, just how you might impact them, they’ve impacted you, too.”

## X. The Thank You

I wish I could write about what my final exit from WSP was like, but this assignment will be due before that happens. Instead, I can write about our last class period as 25 students receiving Whitman credit just one week before our final Town Hall presentation.

During this penultimate evening at WSP, we ran through all eight groups' speeches and gave each other constructive feedback about the content and presentation style of our chosen topics. It is difficult to convey the sheer camaraderie of that room over the course of those two hours; we had each come so far from our initial introductions so many weeks before. Some students were leagues better at public speaking; others, like myself, had become so much more knowledgeable about the racial implications of mass incarceration. Over the course of these fifteen weeks, I personally had become a better listener and a more patient student. At the end of that class period, we shook our incarcerated classmates' hands as per usual and received goodbyes like, "See you on Tuesday" and "Have a great week" and "Be safe."

After our Town Hall on December 12th, our goodbyes will look different. We will shake hands and wish each other well and maybe even hug, and the Whitman students and faculty and guests will get to leave, but the majority of us will never see our incarcerated friends again. I will take my final round of senior classes, I will graduate, and I will move on, and my mom will become a police officer at age fifty-three, and DJ and James will live in WSP or somewhere else but will likely still be property of the Department of Corrections. They will continue to be at the mercy of our system of mass incarceration until the law says otherwise, and I will not be able to forget them or do anything for them besides remain, as DJ writes, "in struggle."

If there is even a chance that RHET-270 will be discontinued, I would like to invite any individual involved in that decision to read this essay and the essays of any of my classmates, incarcerated or not. This is by far one of the most meaningful courses I've taken at this school; it has done the academic work of any Whitman class, yes, but it has also placed my mother's career in a broader social and political context, it has catalyzed within me a love of social work and teaching, it has allowed me to make new friends, and it has broadened my view of the Walla Walla community and the world (also, it probably aligns really well with whatever Whitman's new mission statement may be...but perhaps that's a different conversation).

Thank you, Heather, for facilitating such a fantastic, safe, creative learning environment with such few resources. Thank you for your patience and humor, because managing so many college students on and off campus is a little like herding cats. Thank you for being so calm and collected when Evan's van ran over the curb, when Chris lost his wallet, when people accidentally brought silverware into the Pen, when my mother wanted to correspond with you via email about *The Wire*, when your printer would only print the color pink, and when inevitable awkward moments occurred inside and outside of class. In a semester that could have been utterly and completely draining for so many of us as seniors in our fall terms, this was the course

that lit my academic, activist soul on fire. I'm sorry it has drawn to a close, but I feel lucky to be an alumna. Thank you.

### Works Cited

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