Arianna Alamo, High School in the Community > Being able to communicate with ex-prisoners and hear how their lives have changed was very impactful, and I’ll always remember that.

Mya Baldwin, Metropolitan Business Academy > The best part of the program is meeting new people, and the most memorable part was learning about our jails.

Katie Browe, Educational Center for the Arts > I’d recommend this to my friends because they can meet new artist with different experiences in a different environment, but centered on a theme. I expected a strict structure and liked the go-with-the-flow attitudes.

Myles Davis, Common Ground High School > I learned to expand my vocabulary while rapping.

Dymon Ellis, Career Regional High School > The best part of the program is getting to know local teenage artists from all types of backgrounds and getting my work showcased.

Ruby Gonzalez, New Haven Academy > Learning about the criminal justice system, being so consumed by the information, and making art out of it—that was the best part. Going to the prison... it felt like we united and really were able to learn about ourselves in the process.

Emanuel Luck, Metropolitan Business Academy > The best part of the program is being surrounded by amazing artists.

Lisa Mwinka, Wilbur Cross High School > My favorite field trip was when we went to the prison. I learned that the men are also human, even if they are in jail, they are human like us.

Tyler Reid, Co-op Arts & Humanities > For me, art is a way to express myself. The best part of this program was working with fun positive teachers and peers.

Gaylord Salters, Metropolitan Business Academy > I would recommend the program for others because the friendly staff is like a family.

Kayla Salters, Co-op Arts & Humanities > I was cool with the trip to the jail, eventually. It was bigger than I expected. I learned that I never want to end up in jail, but I also learned not to judge. One inmate commented on how we looked at them like zoo animals. I felt bad.

Anthony Simpson, Engineering and Science University Magnet School > The student who inspired me the most was Jasmine. I just think her art is amazing. And I’m kinda nervous to perform with her.

Ivy Smith, Co-op Arts & Humanities > For me, art is one of the only ways to express myself.

Jasmine Smith, Hillhouse High School > For me, art is the only thing even relatively close to the freedom I wish I could have...

Mama Soumahoro, Engineering and Science University Magnet School > The best part of the program is meeting new people, and the most memorable part was learning about our jails.

Mekaylah Stricklin, Common Ground High School > The most memorable moment for me was when I was asked to make a comic.
CH: Yes, and as a sort of expansion on that idea of meaning and materials, I’m also interested in your ideas around experience as materials—how can those be translated into a work of art, and specifically related to our program and the few very powerful experiences we had here, both at the Historical Society in New Haven when we visited the Amistad exhibit, and at the prison–do you want to speak to that?

TK: I think it was really helpful for us to be able to have that experience first. It’s not like we planned it, but it was a perfect–the students left that situation (Amistad exhibit) feeling pretty upset. Normally, we’re not upset talking about that. It’s that’s not strange when you think of the folks who have been targeted by that system, they tend to be black and brown. And so it’s not surprising that our student body, which happened to be primarily black and brown, has those connections. But, in fact, they are targeted—I feel like the reality is that our students are targeted, and it’s a frightening thing to think about that, but it’s an empowering thing to think about giving us some space to speak out against it. So we talked about it to the studio and to look at that, to create a certain degree, if only through our art, to fight back against those attacks that are put on them. And it’s not just about New Haven specifically—I’ve had a lot of problems here, which I’ve been accused of all kinds of things that there was no left to the absence, so what we have here is this context without that individual, and then we asked the students to fill that emptiness with these contemporary images from these magazines that you have, fill that emptiness. And they each choose to fill that emptiness in these different kinds of ways, and they each produced an aesthetically interesting, but conceptually interesting piece of work that spoke directly to the experience that they just had… I think we didn’t just guide them into making a piece, but we actually introduced them to a process of making art, and what’s been happening with the Amistad exhibit has been able to transform these ideas into something more, something that will empower them beyond us, so that when they find themselves in situations like this in the future, and they want to engage that situation, they have a toolbox to do so.

CH: It seems like that’s a larger issue, in terms of the cultural accessibility of museums, especially to young people. What’s most ironic about this situation is that these exhibits that talk to us about our own history, but maybe only present one side or another, or actually remove a certain side. And so, as you’re talking about the empowerment of the process of making art, I think that this is a very important and valuable skill for all of us to have when we encounter this ongoing challenge. I know we also talk a lot about the role of the artist—beyond that being our own cathartic process and our own way to reflect on these kinds of experiences, here have the students been learning about their own voice as a communicators?

TK: Learning about their voices as a communicator, to a certain degree, has been the direct result of our visual artist interaction with our spoken word poetry theatrical artists (students working with Collective Consciousness Theater)...to have the writers come in and experience the work that the visual artists have made, and then respond to that work, and then communicate that responses verbally or through written word to our visual artists, I think is really powerful for them. I think also, in terms of learning how the power of visual art communicates, I would say that very few things would be as important as the conversation that we had with Kumar (Viswanathan)…would to speak to this idea that art communicates…very few things would speak higher than these two situations. Kumar is a brilliant articulate gentleman who came to visit us who had spent something like 25 years in prison, and had filled that 25 years with a lot of reading and, and a lot of thinking about the impact of the written word and the ability of the visual image to help us understand in some kind of way, iconic way. What happened to him—he also was so articulate and so connected to the students...(he) spent something like 20 years in jail, and seven years in solitary confinement—for him to say that the written word was the most powerful thing that he had as a means of education...I think in fact it was literally reading that saved him—for young artists to be able to hear that, not just from...from somebody walking around on the street, but it’s the very opposite, somebody whose freedom was taken away from them—the one joy that they had was the written word and images...I think this shows that we are pursuing here has a great deal of value and a great deal of merit, and furthermore, a great deal of power.

CH: And what does it mean specifically, that young people here in New Haven, all students of color, are not only researching and discussing these issues, but also making art that responds to these issues? Do you want to speak to that?

TK: You know, I think when we first sat down with the students at the cafe on the first day when we’re having that conversation, most of them know someone who has been in prison—the scene is not unfamiliar to them in terms of criminality. Now, it’s not that strange when you think of the folks who have been targeted by that system, they tend to be black and brown. And so it’s not surprising that our student body, which happened to be primarily black and brown, has those connections. But, in fact, they are targeted—I feel like the reality is that our students are targeted, and it’s a frightening thing to think about that, but it’s an empowering thing to think about giving us some space to speak out against it. So we talked about it to the studio and to look at that, to create a certain degree, if only through our art, to fight back against those attacks that are put on them. And it’s not just about New Haven specifically—I’ve had a lot of problems here, which I’ve been accused of all kinds of things that there was no left to the absence, so what we have here is this context without that individual, and then we asked the students to fill that emptiness with these contemporary images from these magazines that you have, fill that emptiness. And they each choose to fill that emptiness in these different kinds of ways, and they each produced an aesthetically interesting, but conceptually interesting piece of work that spoke directly to the experience that they just had… I think we didn’t just guide them into making a piece, but we actually introduced them to a process of making art, and what’s been happening with the Amistad exhibit has been able to transform these ideas into something more, something that will empower them beyond us, so that when they find themselves in situations like this in the future, and they want to engage that situation, they have a toolbox to do so.

CH: Their sophistication in terms of approaching the subject has also impressed me— it’s been really inspiring to watch. And also how even material, you introduced them to the tar paper, but they’ve also been bringing in their own personal source material—I feel like that marriage between those two things has made for some really interesting work.

TK: I think what it did is it told them that materials matter—as a matter of fact, we’ve had that conversation with them the last couple of times. It’s really important for us to show them that it seems to me that they’ve fully understood that idea and have brought in other materials that they think would be thoughtful in terms of using color a way that’s more symbolic. I’m thinking now of Tyler [Reid] who is working with red, white, and blue obviously represents the American flag, and that could be pretty direct, except for he’s using these colors to represent the least likely part of our society to symbolize America, which is those folks who are active in the criminal justice system...to make that much more interesting and of course...and then Nikhaya [Stricklin] taking over this anime style which has been a primarily Japanese style of drawing, and sort of infusing with content from our writing group, and creating these black characters to play out this story in the context of anime is also sophisticated and interesting—it speaks to number one, a desire to see reflections of yourself in the literature that you’re reading, and number two, the lack of those images that they see in the kinds of things that they’re reading.