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Poetry Slammin' in the Slammer: Questioning the Limits of Arts-in-Corrections

Rivka Rocchio¹

Through the process of creating—specifically of shaping new worlds of possibility through poetry and the performance of it—the arts may offer gaps in the punishment of incarceration and attempt the reclamation or claiming of individual expression. But what are the limits of artistic expression in a highly monitored and surveilled location? This reflective essay explores a performance of slam poetry by ten inmates inside Arizona's Eyman State Prison for an audience of twenty-five prisoners. Using Keoni Watson's winning poem as a frame, Rocchio questions the reported impacts of the slam and the larger culpability of arts-in-corrections in simultaneously supporting and undermining the existing carceral and state power structures in control over the bodies and souls of prisoners.

Prison Is Not... But It Can Be...

Those Pieces of Art That Leave Each Viewer Breathless

Somehow More Whole For Having Been Blessed Enough to Stand Before it

Reflect-as-Enrich Life Through It.

Prison Is Not But It Can Be

Performance Artwork Connecting Convict Community, Through The Communion Of Human Creativity—

Theatre That Has Magic To It

Power To Bridge Gaps Of Cultural, Generational Difference and Bias.

¹ Rivka Rocchio is a theatre-maker, writer, and educator interested in theatre as a means of cross-cultural communication. She is the creator of Theatre Across Prison Walls, a theatre-based project bridging university students and artists who are incarcerated. Rocchio is an assistant professor at State University of New York Potsdam. She would like to offer gratitude to the editors and peer reviewers for the feedback and guidance and her deepest thanks to the men and women she has had the privilege of co-learning, creating, and questioning with while teaching theatre in corrections. Rocchio can be contacted at rocchisr@potsgdam.edu.

As I walked through Eyman State Prison's gray and stark security block to Cook Unit's large visitation room, I laughed to find vibrant and humorous murals painted on the walls. I was struck, perhaps, because of the juxtaposition of tight security, uniformity, and the flat expanse of Arizona's desert landscape contrasted with the mural's vibrancy. One particular section stays with me, in which painted frogs sit in a row, holding up tiny scored placards to rate their frog compatriot's jumps. In addition to the artist's great skill, the unexpectedness of the mirth took me back. The tension of these conflicting environments pressed together—rigidity and open expression—comes back to me again and again as I work with prisoners to create performance inside carceral spaces. When I asked the Assistant Warden about the artist, he told me that a prisoner created the murals. This introduction to the prison environment challenged my assumptions about the role of arts-in-corrections; as writer and teaching artist Judith Tannenbaum notes, "there has always been art in prison," and the artist-practitioner merely joins an already existing cultural community.² Looking at that mural and then meeting and learning with the men inside, I came to understand that the arts programming I offered had to do something more than exist—the arts were already there. In order for my work, and the work of other prison-based arts practitioners, to be of importance, it had to be successful, but by what scale of measurement?

During the winter of 2015 as part of a special project and internship in my graduate studies at Arizona State University's Theatre for Youth program, I visited Cook Unit to teach weekly drama classes to 20 men incarcerated at Eyman State Prison.³ As a volunteer, I had previously taught courses in Shakespeare, performance, and theatre—depending on the interest and motivation of the students

² Tannenbaum, *Disguised as a Poem*, x.

³ Located in Florence, Arizona, Eyman State Prison is a medium security prison. According to the November 2015 Arizona Department of Corrections count sheets, Cook Unit, a special unit for those convicted of sexual offenses, housed 1,280 men. The courses I taught were offered without credit or cost to the students, and I was not paid for my teaching. Students were able to sign up for and drop the course without consequence. These dynamics made for a class with perhaps a more comfortable and certainly a more adaptable course progression than credited offerings.

involved. Based on interest in the intersections of performance and poetry and the assets of this particular class, the men and I organized Eyman State Prison's first poetry slam, an event in which ten poets performed original poems in competition against one another over the course of three rounds. Poetry slam judges were selected from the audience—in this instance, other prisoners from Cook Unit—and rated the poems on a scale of one to ten.⁴ Keoni Watson's poem, "Prison Is Not...But It Can Be..." won the slam and plunged me further into introspection and analysis about the impact of arts programming in prisons. I wanted to know what impact the slam, and the class as a whole, had on the participants. In this reflective essay, I use Watson's poem⁵ as guide to explore the limits of the Eyman State Prison's poetry slam to reject what Foucault labels "docile bodies" and attempt to offer what Boal and Freire refer to as tools for discourse and liberation. By looking at several evidence-based approaches of other prison-based arts programs in the United States, I question the complicated relationship of arts-in-corrections and our culpability in simultaneously supporting and undermining the existing carceral and state power structures in control of the bodies and souls of prisoners.

Docile Bodies

*Prison Is Not...So Heavy It's Easier To Want To Crumble Under Rather Than Transform The Weight Of It; Stand Tall As The Human Being I am—
Person First – Prisoner...*

The prison state functions on the belief that militaristic rules and routines create good habits, which can reform criminals into "good people." Therefore, prisoners are increasingly subjected to physically and psychologically demanding tasks. These tasks and routines lead to what philosopher and theorist Foucault

⁴ It seems worth noting that not all the men in the class performed as slam poets. Only ten performed. The rest of the class took on the following roles: emcee, D.J. (for music between performances), stage managers, and audience members. Because of this, I was able to collect feedback from audience members who were a part of the class but did not perform.

⁵ To read Keoni Watson's poem, "Prison Is Not...But It Can Be..." in its entirety, see *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal* Volume 2 Issue 1 (Summer 2017).

describes as “docile bodies;” bodies at the heart of the US prison system, that once “subjected, used, transformed and improved, are controlled and subjected.”⁶ The control of these bodies imposes power and discipline. According to Foucault, the specific rank and order of prisoner bodies meets the needs of the carceral institution and the larger social institution.

Prisons are concerned with maintaining themselves and fixing regulated docile bodies within their walls. Prisons, Foucault argues, are not troubled with the rehabilitation of prisoners, but rather in situating them within an “abnormal” criminal status as somehow different from the rest of “us.” The punitive model of the carceral state creates the prisoner in a way that reinforces the body and mentality of a convict. In my experience working within the prison, even the speech used by correctional officers and other staff dehumanizes. In multiple volunteer trainings, I was reminded that prisoners are not allowed to be addressed by their first names, but instead must be called “Inmate” Surname. This practice serves to remind prisoners of their sub-human status. Prisoners are not even deserving of being called by their birth names.

In a training manual provided to educators and volunteers in prisons and jails, Martha Hall, Education Director for Nevada’s Department of Corrections, catalogues the correctional environment and what to expect of inmates. Hall describes inmates as needy, manipulative people with poor problem solving skills and undeveloped higher-level thinking skills.⁷ These generalizations create an “us” and “them” dichotomy that reduces prisoners to an inhuman categorization. Calling a person an inmate, prisoner, or convict puts the crime ahead of the person and strategically labels to disallow maneuverability or complexity of personhood. While such a microaggression may seem to be justifiable, it is an example of

⁶ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 136.

⁷ Hall, “The Correctional Environment,” in *Volunteering in Jails and Prisons*, 39.

one of the many ways that people convicted of crimes (which is not always synonymous with criminals) are given no respect and little attention to the fullness of their personhood.

Reshaping Power through Performance

*But It Can Be...A Proactive Role In Co-Creating The Next Generation Of Our Convict Cultural World;
A Trust Put into the Hands of Inmates, A Trust We Will Serve More Than Ourselves:
Committed To and Responsible For...Right Action
That We Might One Day Contribute Our Personal Transformations To Serve Our Community,
Communities Within and Beyond Prisons.*

The process of creating art, of shaping new worlds of possibility through poetry and performance, could offer gaps in the punishment of incarceration, which could constitute a claiming or reclamation of individual expression. But is it possible to express oneself freely in a highly monitored and surveilled location? Paul Heritage, professor and leader in the field of prison-based theatre and co-founder of the United Kingdom's Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre, similarly asks: "what role do theatre workers in a prison assume or perform in the context of the transformed ideological intent of the process of incarceration?"⁸ If this question is viewed through Augusto Boal's requirement that ideology "must be conscious to direct actions so as not to support the dominant social class,"⁹ then what happens when the oppressed—the prisoners—reclaim space and time for performance? Can performance disrupt the social dominance of prison and lead to liberation and transformation? If so, how long does the liberation last? Does it matter that the liberation is not real?

The arts, particularly the performance of a slam poem, demand participation in the co-imagining of a new future and allow for moments of co-creation and coexistence between performer and audience member; the audience finds a role similar to Boal's understanding of the engaged spect-actor. The poetry slam's model requires the audience's participation—the snapping of fingers, audible agreement and

⁸ Heritage, "Theatre, Prisons and Citizenship: A South American Way," in *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, 31.

⁹ Boal, *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, 105.

support, or disapproving boos when the judges give a disagreeable score. As author and scholar Susan Somers-Willett describes, the performer will “look to audiences for purposefulness and praise” with the understanding that the “audience determines where the poem lives at any given moment, and this highly interactive relationship between author and audience is what sets slam poetry apart from both textual poetry and other branches of performance poetry.”¹⁰ The interactive relationship between audience and performer transforms. Boal describes this relationship around Forum Theatre, but this applies to the support of a slam poetry audience as well; the audience are not simply situated as “passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon, —into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action.”¹¹ The blurred lines of power in performance move toward the creation of social power through the symbiotic and fluid relationship between performer and audience. However, the feelings released are not in neat alignment with Boal’s visions of how theatre can create change. What happens after a transformative moment? Prisons are not designed to change.

Because of the calcified nature of carceral spaces, the feelings released by the slam performance might fit more into the realm of Aristotle’s catharsis and ultimately uphold the Foucauldian ideals of the prison more than in Boal’s *Poetics of the Oppressed*. Because the slam fails to move from the phenomena of the performance and “toward the law,”¹² the product does not fit into Boal’s fourth stage of transforming the spectator into actor—theatre as discourse. The spect-actor participants in a poetry slam have created a venting mechanism and performed their power, but no lasting discourse follows. Realities are not reshaped.

Only through the investigation of connection, through dialogical engagement in the artistic process, can realities be reshaped. Freire suggests that “people, as beings ‘in a situation’ find themselves rooted in

¹⁰ Somers-Willett, *Anthropology Series: The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 25-26.

¹¹ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, 150

temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark.”¹³ Only through a truly collaborative endeavor which has the potential to change can we engage and together create a new situation. Christine Wang, a Los Angeles painter, addresses the art world’s complicity in “the mechanisms of racism and incarceration” and says simply, “my paintings can’t vote.”¹⁴ In order to avoid the dangerous trappings of engaging with spaces of artistic creation only to support the punishment of the prison, artist-practitioners must push beyond supporting the aims of the prison.

That said, arts programs and correctional facilities maintain a fragile relationship. In order to be allowed in correctional facilities, arts programs must tread carefully and at times speak the same institutionalized language of discipline and development—or as professor and scholar Rob Pensalfini writes, “to turn to justifications and analyses of their work that support the stated goals of the prison system in which they are housed.”¹⁵ The arts must be shaped and described in pragmatic and functional terms. This is complicated in that the programs come to occupy the same spaces of power and control that they may attempt to destabilize. This language passes down from one power structure to the next and reflects itself in the reported experience of participants and artists.

Questioning the Limits of Arts-in-Corrections

*Prison Is Not... A Violent Environment.
Filled With The Fear—Sweat, Tension, Stench of Pent Up Men Aggressive
Underutilizing The Positive Force Of Inmates Who Have Decided To Transform Themselves
Honoring Both Cultures
Cop And Convict!
Coming Together As One Movement, Servin’ Society As Systemically Viral As Crime Impacts It Now*

*But It Can Be...Some Crucial/Integral Piece
Cutting Edge, Next Best Evolutionary Step
Prison Is Not...Staff Empowering Inmates To Have A Voice.
In Those Programs That Determine Our Readiness To Re-Enter Public Society
Inmates Empowered To Meet And Gather;*

¹³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 109.

¹⁴ Quoted in Heinlein, "Artists Grapple," *New York Times*, March 11, 2006.

¹⁵ Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, 5.

Our Ground Up Collaboration Approved and Legitimized By The Top Down Administration Given Credit And Credence—Room and Space To Fail and Succeed As It Will... Because That Is Success; A Significant Success; Something Beautiful To Behold.

Like most arts programs, it is important to measure the impact of arts-in-corrections programming on participants, including effects on individual participants, contribution to societal and cultural change, and artist/facilitator impact.¹⁶ With this in mind, I created a post-performance questionnaire to understand the slam participant and audience experience, explore the impact of the slam, and continue to develop the remainder of our creative time together. I coded the written responses and discovered some commonalities and shared impacts. Although I trusted the measurement of the questionnaire, I was troubled by the difficulties and problems of claiming these impacts. For example, when looking for impact, how can the larger reverberations be truly understood? Do participants say what needs to be said in order to keep the program running? In framing the very impacts I hoped to measure, I wondered if the data seemed skewed for what I, the researcher, wished to find.

Though the intended impacts of arts-in-corrections programs can be difficult to summarize, Larry Brewster has studied their impact for over thirty years and identifies multiple themes in how such programs impact inmate attitudes and behaviors.¹⁷ As I reflected on the feedback from the Eyman Prison poetry slam, four of Brewster's impacts emerged as remarkable for the participants: (1) rehearsal for the outside world, (2) therapeutic or inclusive transformation, (3) self-esteem building, and (4) teamwork and community-building.

(1) Rehearsal for the Outside World: “Those Programs That Determine Our Readiness to Re-Enter Public Society”

¹⁶ See Gardner, Hager, and Hillman's 2014 “The Prison Arts Resource Project: An Annotated Bibliography” for information on 48 prison arts projects and their impacts.

¹⁷ Brewster, “Impact of Prison Arts,” 14-15.

Rehearsal for the outside world, sometimes phrased as *re-socialization*, commonly justifies arts-in-corrections work. Cell Block Theatre, a program working mainly in New Jersey prisons in the 1970s, was modeled on “a re-socialization operation in which there [was] training in mutual responsibility.”¹⁸ Cell Block Theatre, and other prison-based theatre programs that emphasize re-socialization, use the “frame of the prison as rehearsal for release”¹⁹ with the belief that practicing skills and social behaviors that are deemed appropriate by the theatre companies facilitating them will lead to similar repetition of those behaviors once prisoners are released the outside world.

Participants in Eyman’s poetry slam shared the language of rehearsal for success; one wrote about the potential applications for re-entry skills, saying that “working with street volunteers might be one of the most significantly impacting and effective methods of ‘programming’ that an inmate can experience as a means to prepare for their re-entry.” Another participant wrote that writing and participating in the slam “was a way for me to look back at things that have went wrong in my life and help me figure out a way to change myself as a person.” The implication here is that the change and reflection would function again outside prison walls.

While I acknowledge the impact that poetry writing and performance can create for a person, I wonder how these rehearsals linger in future actions. James Thompson, author and co-founder of United Kingdom’s Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre, asks the question: “In an environment, like a prison, that is simultaneously ‘real’ and a constructed representation, can a person ever be prepared or ‘fitted’ for an alternative outside ‘real’?”²⁰ What is the likelihood that these new roles and identities that have been crafted and rehearsed inside the walls of prison could be called up at the right moment for performance on the outside? Social activity “is not constructed from ‘off the peg’ resources which we carry in neat

¹⁸ Ryan, “Theatre as Prison Therapy,” 33.

¹⁹ Thompson, “Bewilderment,” 249.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

compartments or can pass on in a calculable deterministic fashion. Our repertoires are constructed and performed in a more complex, shifting and adaptive way.”²¹ Taking on a new role can leave remaining ideas, possibilities, or options for new ways of reacting, however, it is an imprint, not what Thompson calls a “complete role competency for future regurgitation.”²² Taking on a new role within the context of a drama class cannot prepare one for the adoption of that role in real life. You cannot be a doctor simply because you played one on television.

(2) Therapeutic Impact: “That We Might One Day Contribute Our Personal Transformations To Serve Our Community”

Another way of talking about the impact of arts-in-corrections is in the therapeutic sense. Drama therapy has a long history in correctional facilities and evidence shows that performance-oriented projects have therapeutic value.²³ Drama therapy models seek to put participants “through a process aimed at making them more able—and willing—to resume a place in ‘normal’ society.”²⁴ This justification for arts-in-corrections correlates with preparation for the outside world, in the belief that rehearsal for behaviors on the inside of prisons would translate to action outside prison walls. Drama therapy brings with it a language of healing, that Tofteland, founder of Shakespeare Behind Bars program in Kentucky, describes as helping “prisoners to heal by working through their crimes and personal issues.”²⁵

Participants in Eyman’s poetry slam described feeling healing, relief, and the ability to self-express. Three participants wrote the following in support of the drama therapy model: “that poetry slam was a way to relieve stress, anger, depression and it was a way to self-therapy,” “I could express my feelings,” and

²¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Moller, “Project Slam,” 11.

²⁴ Etherton and Prentki, “Drama for Change,” 149.

²⁵ Moller, “Project Slam,” 12.

“[the slam was] a wake up to reality to see all kinds of emotions on display.” These participants and audience members placed an emphasis on the importance of therapeutic release. Participants in Brewster’s longitudinal qualitative study mark that over a three year period art helped them “express themselves, relieve stress, feel happier, be creative, and make better choices.”²⁶ The longer they were in the program, the more they concentrated their responses on these outcomes. If time matters, then what are the impacts of participation in a short-term project? How long does the purging of feelings last?

As we left the performance space, the prison’s educational supervisor shared her observations with me. She said she could see that the poetry was transportational for the men; that in listening to the poems, they were transported out of prison and could imagine another perspective. She assumed the act of writing had the same impact on the poets, that when creating or performing art, they were not within the prison walls. Many of the inmate participants also remarked on this phenomenon; one participant wrote “the performances were liberating in ways that even the darkest zombies cannot deny.” Another participant wrote “the SLAM was a liberation of conditional behavior.” A third wrote “this place called prison can just as easily be seen as a prison transformative space.” My ego and my work ethic compel me to want to believe their expressions of impact, but I believe this perceived rupture in the foundations of control of the prison complex is only momentary. And, perhaps the fact that the institution allows for these venting mechanisms only works to further support the institution, not function as actual escape from life as a prisoner.

Additionally, the therapeutic model assumes an individual focus that can be artistically restrictive. Maude Clark, who has worked directly and intensively with prisoners and ex-offenders in Melbourne with Somebody’s Daughter Theatre, writes that theatre in prison should not be about “wanting to dissect experiences for therapy but for creation.”²⁷ The language of therapy is limiting, as it focuses the benefit of

²⁶ Brewster, “Impact of Prison Arts Programs,” 7.

²⁷ Clarke, “Somebody’s Daughter Theatre,” 104.

arts-in-correction on a personally introspective model that privileges the individual above the community. As a community-based theatre artist, I do not believe that the individual acts in isolation but in response to complex cultural, historical, and community contexts. Within these contexts, participation in the arts may be therapeutic, but the arts are not therapy.

(3) Self-Esteem: “Stand Tall As The Human Being I Am”

Another way that arts-in-corrections practitioners discuss the impact of their work is in the development of self-esteem, or confidence building. Brewster’s data “show that inmates with arts training and practice are much more likely to believe in their ability to do almost anything they set out to accomplish.”²⁸ This does not appear to ever be the *main* goal of arts-in-corrections work, but is commonly talked about as an indicator of success. These “feel good” factors, like trying something new and having a positive experience, pushing beyond the comfort zone, or feeling proud during the audience’s applause—described by many of the participants and audience members in the Eyman poetry slam—may have “absolutely no long-term impact in relation to the issues around re-offending or other aspects of behavior change or the oppressive prison regime.”²⁹ Even beyond measurement based on re-offending, the questions around how long those confidence lasts, or even how to measure it, seem entirely subjective. Regardless of the indication of growth in the area, increasing self-esteem may not mean “that now the prisoners had [it] they could take [it] with them wherever they went. It is only sustainable if it is fitted into a structure that welcomes it.”³⁰

(4) Community-building: “Through The Communion Of Human Creativity”

Community or team building is a success indicator of arts-in-corrections work. Jean Troustine, who has directed numerous Shakespearian plays at a woman’s prison in Massachusetts, describes her work in

²⁸ Brewster, “The Impact of Prison Arts Programs, 16.

²⁹ Etherton and Prentki, “Drama for change,” 145.

³⁰ Thompson, “Bewilderment,” 253.

the context of helping to develop the framework for teamwork that allows for participants to contribute to a sense of community.³¹ Many of the men in the Eyman drama workshop described similar feelings of belonging and the sense of community. One man wrote about the impact of seeing his peers empower one another and “listen and see each other like we rarely do that allow for meeting together and expressing.” Another audience member described how “everyone was engaged together,” and wrote that the slam brought “everyone together and unites races for a period of time.” I believe that the community of trust and sharing that the men in the drama workshop built was a product of the class, but it is not something sustainable. Classroom communities dissipate when the class ends and the purpose that brought those people together in solidarity has been fulfilled.

Beyond this, there are significant concerns around the limits of programs based on community-building. What happens to the community built by students when the programming ends? What happens post-release when those communities are no longer legally allowed to be in communication with one another? One of the standard conditions of probation stipulates that once prisoners are released, they are not allowed to associate with any person their Probation Officer deems as detrimental to them. Programs that have the framework of teamwork and community-building also usually measure their success on “whether a previously excluded group now considers itself to be included.”³² Based on the specific and meticulous exclusion of felons from society, this is not a realistic or desirable goal for arts-in-corrections. Shouldn't equal emphasis for growth and development be placed on communities outside of prisons? Julian Boal argues: “We always talk about resocializing criminals. Why do we never ask how to decriminalize society?”³³ This question catalyzes action. Although the prison separates its inhabitants from

³¹ Moller, “Project Slam,” 11.

³² Etherton and Prentki, “Drama for Change,” 148.

³³ Quoted in Buchleitner, *Glimpses of Freedom*, 111.

society, the artist-visitor must resist the temptation to reify this separation in language, performance, and ideology.

The goal of community-building is limited because arts-in-corrections programs, as their title suggests, exist in carceral spaces and usually little to no attention is paid to the communities from which prisoners are drawn and/or the integration of the community at the prison site. These communities are generally not given an opportunity to be a part of the artistic processes of arts-in-corrections programs and the potentially new or shifting identities of ex-offenders.³⁴ Thompson recognizes: “unless the process focuses on the individual, the family, the community and the wider society as a form of total prevention, little will be successful in the long term.”³⁵ I see this as the area in which arts-in-corrections should develop. By avoiding what Foucault deems the prison’s tendency to throw “the inmate’s family into destitution” and thus “indirectly produce delinquents,”³⁶ arts-in-corrections should serve as bridges between the community members and families while inmates are serving time. The maintenance of connections between individuals who are incarcerated and their family and loved ones is key to ending the existing social isolation. Bringing community members across the restrictive walls would also mean a shift from a punitive model of incarceration to a rehabilitative or habilitative³⁷ approach.

Programs for People, Not Prisoners

*But It Can Be...A Spiritual Artist Practicing Grassroots, Ground-Up Empowerment
Praising My Peers As People; Paving Over Roadblock Fears That Dare Not...
Perform An Authentic, Vulnerable, and Orating Voice Of The Voiceless...
Speaking Into Existence A New Prison Paradigm...*

³⁴ One notable exception to this is the work of Mary Cohen’s Oakdale Community Choir at the University of Iowa, which brings outside community members inside Oakdale Prison to sing and perform together.

³⁵ Thompson, “Theatre and Offender Rehabilitation,” 207.

³⁶ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 268.

³⁷ I use the term habilitative to mean a *new* process of discovery and healing. Rehabilitative implies that those discoveries, spaces of understanding and healing merely needed to be done again, not for the first time.

After the slam concluded, the chairs slid back to their rightful places, and the poets, judges, and poetry enthusiasts lined up to return to their run something clicked for me. I thought of how each poet had opened up themselves to the audience against the ironic backdrop of the silly landscape murals, and I recognized what Boal describes as “the most human characteristic of the human being: it is his or her capacity to recreate the world...distancing themselves from the original reality, creating another, the similar and different.”³⁸ I thought of the frogs judging other frogs for jumping, their most natural expression of movement. They seemed a fitting analogy for a poetry slam. The ranking of the poetic expression, while a part of the event’s competitiveness and structured enjoyment, functioned as a device to “recreate the world.” The slam momentarily created a new way of knowing, interacting, and existing that would not have happened without our artistry and collective agreements. And while that was rewarding, it wasn’t enough.

To mirror Watson’s language of the winning slam poem, “Prison Is Not...But It Can Be...,” I feel called to complicate the easy solutions to the profound questions around what prison and the arts-in-corrections can be. Though the poetry slam, and the prison-based drama workshops I teach, are not all they could be, they are my beginning towards shifting the discourse around how the arts can do more to serve artists who are incarcerated and the communities and families from which they’ve been removed. It is not enough to do arts work within the prison context to create a counterbalance between the neoliberal artistic narratives of therapy, peace, love, and the cold tropes of an uncaring justice system. It is not enough to do arts work to make prisoners—or arts facilitators—feel better. It is not enough to do arts work as a release for the dehumanizing effects of the prison industrial complex. And it is not enough to use these as metrics of success even though it sometimes seems to be the only language with which to speak to Department of Corrections administrators, correctional officers, lawyers, prisoners, the public, and even other artists.

³⁸ Boal, *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, 41-43.

Perhaps the reason I struggle to articulate the best metrics for assessing arts-in-corrections is because of my own limits around understanding the carceral environment. As a free white woman, the liberties and privileges I exercise are brought to me in stark contrast when I cross the threshold of the prison state. Part of me—my full understanding of what it means to be locked away, deindividuated, bored, terrified, or just suspended—may never cross the threshold. Part of me—my naiveté, optimism, and hope around what I thought prisons were—never escaped the first time I witnessed the inside of a prison. It is difficult to really put into words what it means to create art and space for opportunity inside of a place that cages humans. Despite these limitations, I feel compelled to call for more from my fellow arts-in-corrections practitioners.

I call for arts-in-corrections practitioners to step aside from institutionalized language around the idea of measuring impact on the reduction of criminogenic behaviors and to stop the perceived support of the prison state. Reject the language of the institution in measuring impact solely around that of the “offender identity.” Advocate for validation of the whole person, not just the part prisoned by the state. How will our programs allow for a lifting of the divisive mentalities that separate *them* and *us*? The ultimate measurement of whether the programming is of worth is against what seems an unimaginable fantasy, a backdrop of true equity and justice. However unimaginable, it can only benefit to ask: do our impact measurements hold up in any other grouping of people?

I call for educators in corrections to step away from impact measurements that use radical but almost impossible to empirically measure outcomes like transformation, empathy, and confidence. Research efforts within the university environment must address the ways in which the academy creates their own impenetrable hierarchies of power, identity boundaries, and rigid expectations of success. We must stop creating narratives around the difference between students inside and out of prison. We must allow ourselves to ask questions as if the walls of all institutions were torn down and freedom of knowledge, opportunity, and admittance were possible for all. We must charge ourselves to work toward dismantling

these systems of oppression and ask critically how what we have done in this space together will have worth without them. Has what we've done shown the value of art? The value of humanness?

Prison Is Not, All It Can Be
But It Can Be, All It Can Be.

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