

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED IN US PRISONS: EIGHT YEARS OF
WORKING WITH ADULT AND YOUTH PRISONERS EXAMINED

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In this dissertation, I locate my theatre work with prisoners within topics of interest in Performance Studies: examining performativity, troubling the representation of imprisoned bodies, considering the roles of ritual, play and liminality within the location of prison. I examine the limitations and the ethics of working with prisoners, and I have stayed focused on the prisoners' abilities to mediate and perform practical topics of interest to them using the Theatre of the Oppressed methods (such as staying connected to family and re-entry). My dissertation furthers the growing interest in critiquing Boal's techniques and in theorizing how they work and what they can and cannot achieve. For example, I consider the purpose of fetishizing images into icons and symbols in Image Theatre and critique my own use of the "Joker" role as a participant-observer coming in from outside the prison. I also consider the Brechtian heritage of Boal's work in theory and practice, especially in relationship to Brecht's *Lehrstück*, and I seek to reconcile modern and postmodern theoretical and practical approaches to understanding performance and critical deliberation using TO work in prisons. This work has ramifications for thinking about visual perception and Image Theatre. It also brings sociolinguistic "positioning theory" into contact with the concept of "restored behavior" through examining the practices of TO's forum theatre. A discourse surrounding the word "respect" and the conception of "prison values" as a social critique defined by prisoners in this research are keynotes to this work.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Martin Morgan Mitchell III is known as “Tim Mitchell.” He began offering college credit courses in drama and theatre to adult prisoners in the maximum and medium security blocks of Lorton prison while completing his master’s degree in English at Georgetown University, and he continued his involvement with the Georgetown program for four years until Lorton prison closed. Tim also founded, and served as Director, of the *Theatre in Prisons: Youth Program* at the Louis Gossett Jr. and Austin J. MacCormack Youth Residential Centers in upstate New York, sponsored by the Department of Theater, Film and Dance at Cornell University, also for four years, while in the MA/Ph.D program in Theatre Studies at Cornell University. Recently, Tim has published in the journals *Reflections* and *Theater* and he guest lectured at Harvard Law School on Theatre and Public Policy and Theatre and Critical Deliberation annually for several years. Tim also remains a member of Actor’s Equity Association.

This dissertation is dedicated to Elizabeth Holstine Mitchell
with all of my love and appreciation.

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CHAPTER ONE

LOCATIONS: THEORETICAL FRAMING AND THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE IN PRISONS

Locations

“In current cultural theory, ‘location’ is imagined as an itinerary instead of a fixed point (Conquergood 311).”

Dwight Conquergood’s statement about location “as an itinerary” is a helpful keynote metaphor for locating the topic of this dissertation: a critical examination of my work in Theater in Prisons with prisoners using the methods and techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed. Conquergood uses the metaphor of “location” to evoke the crossroads and intersections of a postcolonial world of multiple Diasporas, migrations and “to encompass the historical, dynamic, often traumatic, movements of people, ideas, images, commodities and capital (311).” Such categories of movement have an analogy in the rise of incarceration in the United States over the past 30 years. However, Conquergood also extends the metaphor to “two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective and abstract—‘the map’; the other one practical, embodied and popular—‘the story’ (311).” It is the exchange and traffic between these ways of knowing that serves to “open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice (311).” Overall, in his article *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research*, Dwight Conquergood is championing performance studies scholars who create performances that supplement their written research. In working with prisoners, I have taken an even more bottom up approach: most of my work with prisoners preceded and led to this written research rather than supplementing it. Thus the question of location: “where is this work located in a field of study?” has been both enriched and complicated by my immersion in the practice. A move from advocacy to critique has not always been easy. I will, therefore, often be striving to balance the map and the story in the following chapters.

Another relevant meaning of “location,” a quest for suitable theoretical frameworks, is further troubled by where the work took place—in prisons, specifically two infamous prisons Lorton (the former prison of Washington DC) and The Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residential Center in Lansing, New York, both known for corruption and violence. These physical locations do not necessarily impact the what or the how of theorizing TO work with prisoners, but have an impact on the “So What?”—implicating the need for well thought out principles and ethics for conducting work inside prisons during a period of expanding growth of prisons and constant increase in the harshness of punishment in the US.

Before leaving my keynote, Conquergood’s call for intervention and radical research in Performance Studies, and continuing on to introduce my itinerary of locations, it is worth looking at how closely Conquergood’s description of desirable Performance Studies research matches my own methodology (working with prisoners using TO techniques and then revisiting and re-examining that work in order to analyze its’ promise and its’ limits.) Conquergood identifies “triangulations of these three pivot points...(318):” accomplishment, analysis and articulation. Accomplishment refers to making art that is “performing as a way of knowing” and “participatory understanding (319)” among other descriptions of creative process and embodiment of knowledge. One of the guiding assumptions of my work from the start was that performances made with prisoners had the intrinsic value of prisoners performing their own lived experiences for themselves, not only as witnesses, but also as participants in creating and re-imagining perceptions that are otherwise hard to see and hard to say. In the chapters that follow, the accomplishments are the performances of Image Theater and Forum Theater that I describe and what the men made of them. Next, there is *analysis*, “performance as a lens that illuminates the constructed creative (319),” along with all of the critical reflections that bring context, theorize process and

critique outcomes—this is the role I have reserved to myself in writing this dissertation. Finally Conquergood calls for *articulation*, “projects that reach outside the academy and are rooted in an ethic of reciprocity and exchange (319),” among other descriptions of articulation such as activism and “contribution/intervention as a way of knowing (319).” On the one hand, I have maintained the ethic of reciprocity and exchange by starting from Freireian pedagogical practices. On the other hand, in this dissertation, such an articulation necessitates a differentiation between serving prisoners’ needs (to survive, cope, stay in touch with family, or reenter society upon release) and any broader critique of the institution of prison during the growth of incarceration in the United States that occurred all throughout the time I worked with prisoners. I will argue that one of the profound limits of any arts in prisons is that no direct criticism of prison itself is successful from the inside. Yet, I will also argue that an important contribution/intervention is possible inside prison by creating communities of learners, developing prisoner leadership, and providing positive tools for prisoners to mediate their own experiences and address their own needs. Conquergood’s article is useful for locating my work with prisoners within Performance Studies—it fits well within his schema for the kind of scholarship that is engaged in making performances within a community, such as prisoners in prisons. As he says,

If we go the one-way street of abstraction, then we cut ourselves off from the nourishing ground of participatory experience. If we go the one-way street of practice, then we drive ourselves into an isolated cul-de-sac, a practitioners workshop or artist colony. Our radical move is to turn and return, insistently, to the crossroads (320).

My itinerary in this introduction will first consider what is of interest for a Performance Studies audience of this dissertation at the crossroads of theory and practice. Then I will argue how this examination of Theatre of the Oppressed methods and techniques contributes to emerging theory and criticism of TO praxis. Then I will consider how the location of prison raises ethical concerns about working with prisoners and with prison administrators. Throughout the process of introduction, I will be tracking my own trajectory towards a theoretical framework for understanding what TO work in prisons does and does not do. Finally, I will give several examples of extant, and/or other well-known theatre in prisons programs, in order to locate my work in relationship to the questions raised by others seeking to work inside prisons with prisoners.

In his *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner admits “Theoretically, Performance Studies is wide open; practically it has developed in a certain way... (1).” In fact, Performance Studies intersects broadly with Arts in Prisons and more specifically with the subcategory of Theatre in Prisons across several well-known areas of interest: In the dissertation, I locate my work with prisoners within topics of interest in Performance Studies: examining performativity, troubling the representation of imprisoned bodies, and considering the roles of ritual, play and liminality within the location of prison. I examine the limitations and the ethics of working with prisoners, and I have stayed focused on the prisoners’ abilities to mediate and perform practical topics of interest to them using the Theater of the Oppressed methods (such as staying connected to family and re-entry). My dissertation furthers the growing interest in critiquing Boal’s techniques and in theorizing how they work and what they can and cannot achieve.

A Performance Studies audience will be interested in the location of prison as a site of performative activities of punishment, starting with how passing a sentence is

an Austinian example of ‘doing things with words’ and proceeding along a continuum of theatricalizations of punishment that includes gestures, sounds, uniforms, and rituals that display and enact punishment. The guard who chose to deliver all of the members of one of the Lorton drama classes in handcuffs (when the other guards did not usually do this) was performing his opinion of offering a theatre class in a maximum security cell block by displaying “dangerous criminals being unchained and left with you” (without speaking those words) for the benefit of me and my undergraduate volunteers from Georgetown. Therefore, the first important distinction that must be made is between Theatre in Prisons and prison as theatre (the performance of punishment). By working inside, one of the serious limitations is that TO work, or any other form of arts or education in prisons, is not equipped to engage in direct criticism of the performative functions of the prison. The best response to this limitation is a clear set of values that calls for sufficient self-awareness that theatre in prisons not repeat performances of punishment or add or contribute to them. An environment with constantly overwhelming performances of punishment has an impact no matter how alternative a space or progressive a method within the institution the theatre gathering accomplishes. When important instances of critique and witnessing of the total institution surface and are absorbed again by the group, they are acknowledgements that are rarely pursued in direct form.

The performativity of prisons is symbolic, signifying and enacting punishments in ways that impact the identity of prisoners (their self perceptions of themselves as well as the way the institution labels, categorizes and controls their behavior). Judith Butler offers a helpful definition, “...the meaning of a performative act is to be found in this apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting (198).” Butler extends her understanding of the signifying and enacting performative into a power to name and identify and control. She compares Austin’s “How to do things

with words” with Althusser’s concept of interpellation (the power of “hailing” or of calling an accusation into being):

The performative in Austin maintains certain commonalities with the Althusserian notion of interpellation, although interpellation is never quite as “happy” or “effective” as the performative is sometimes figured in Austin. In Althusser it is the police who hail the trespasser on the street: ‘Hey, you there!’ brings the subject into sociality through a life-imbueing reprimand (203).

By bringing these two conceptions of performativity together, Butler provides a useful idea of how the accumulated experience of naming, categorizing, accusing, judging and so on can all be performative on identity. If there is an critique of the institutions of incarceration that emerges from the TO work described in this dissertation, then that critique is one that offers the men a chance to reclaim the critical view of their circumstances and experiences in ways that make this accumulative, interpellative effect on identity visible: countering routine with rituals; reclaiming the signifying role of naming for themselves.

Richard Schechner has defined ritual as “ritualized behavior permeated with play (Performance Studies Intro 52).” He conceives of ritual as a structure or form for examining “collective memories (Performance Studies 52).” In the chapters below I will examine how the creation of performed rituals allows for the prisoners to develop for themselves into a community of learners learning and re-imagining and naming their own community values, ethics and expectations for behavior (which we called “prison values”). Several of the key components of ritual, as a discourse in Performance Studies, are in effect in this work: the liminal transgression of social norms in performance, the spontaneous “communitas” generated by the work, the development of a sacred, alternative aesthetic space (however doubtfully and fragilely expressed) inside the dominating aesthetic of prison walls and bars, and (for the young

men) the disruption of prison as a “rite of passage”. Victor Turner defined the term this way:

Communitas is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic, individuals, a direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities (45)

This definition is problematically utopian or idealistic by saying there is a “direct, immediate, and total confrontation” when it is just as likely that conflicting identities present indirect, subtle and fragmented realities. However, the key to its usefulness lies in the conception of individuals seeking collaborative group understanding of shared experiences in such a way that it is identity and identities that are opened for critical deliberation and consideration.

Prison as a Location

The number of prisoners in the United States has been growing rapidly for thirty-three years. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of the mid year point of 2005, the most recent number of prisoners incarcerated in jails, state and federal prisons is 2, 186, 230¹. This number of prisoners means that the current incarceration rate in the US is 738 per 100,000 residents, the highest per capita rate of imprisonment in the world. For comparison, here are per capita rates for some other countries per 100,000 residents: Russia 594, Cuba 487, Australia 126, Canada 107, England/Wales 144, France 88, Japan 62. The numbers also give a picture of continued racial and gender trends of growth. Black, non-Hispanic males between the

¹ The end of year Bureau of Justice statistics for 2005 show 7 million people incarcerated or on probation or parole. The numbers amount to one out of every 32 Americans, or 3.2%. 2.2 million of these were in prisons or jails. This is an increase of 2.7% over 2004 and an average increase of 3.3% since 1995 (qtd. in Associated Press Washington Post 12/1/06).

ages of 20 and 39 are 11.9% in prison or jail (versus the overall population) compared to 3.9% of Hispanic males and 1.7% of white males. Black females are incarcerated at four times the rate of white females and Hispanic females are at double the rate of white females. Imprisonment of women has climbed at double the growth rate for men for two decades to 106,174 incarcerated women as of the mid year 2005 figures. Women are more likely than men to be serving time for a drug related charge at 32% vs. 21%.

According to the Washington Post, although 2.2 million are incarcerated on any given day, up to 13.5 million adults “pass through” the system of jails and prisons each year. The bi-partisan report of a recent prison study “Confronting Confinement” sponsored by the Vera Institute helps to round out the picture of the situation as it is today. Members of the panel included former judge John J. Gibbons, former FBI director William Sessions, National Urban League President Marc Morial, Prison Chief Tim Ryan of Florida, Sheriff Mark Luttrell of Tennessee and prison rights advocate Stephen Bright.

The commission held 15 months of hearings and research and concluded several major findings including these three: 1. That “What happens inside jails and prisons does not stay inside jails and prisons,” prison life has wide and lasting ripple effects on family members and communities. This finding matches one of the key arguments of the following chapters that our performances revealed the exportation of prison values and survival strategies back into communities. 2. The most accurate indicator of successful reentry is connection to family. Again this matches exactly the major themes and stories that the men were most eager to use TO to address. 3. Most Americans are unaware or uncaring about the prison population and how it could affect them. Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, the co-chair of the study, said, “I do not think American people want to see people mistreated and abused in prison. I don’t think

they want to see disease spreading from prison to guards...to the community” (Slevin, Post 6/8/2006).

To understand the situation today, and as it existed during the eight years during which I conducted seminars and theater workshops with prisoners, it is necessary to briefly review three trends of the expansion of prisons since the 1970’s and their origins: the war on drugs and its impact on sentencing laws, the rejection of rehabilitation in favor of punishment, and the get tough movement that reinvented “the hole” as the modern supermax or segregation prison.

Beginning with the Rockefeller Drug Laws in 1973, and expanding throughout the state and federal system, sentencing in the United States changed dramatically from the 1970s into the early 21st century (where some backtracking is now taking place)². The laws were designed to take away a judge’s discretion to determine sentences based on mitigating circumstances (such as a first time offense) and generally introduced a zero tolerance approach for sentencing drug cases. Even small amounts of drug possession without any evidence of dealing automatically led to long sentences of 15 years to life under the Rockefeller drug laws, which were widely copied by other states. One supposed benefit of this approach was to drive smaller offenders into plea bargains in which they would give up the big dealers. In fact, it often worked the other way, with big dealers going free by naming multiple smaller offenders. Mandatory minimum sentencing, “three strikes” laws, and “truth in sentencing” all add automatic time, sometimes for minor offenses. For example, “three strikes” can mean a mandatory life sentence for a third felony regardless of the seriousness of that felony, although the details vary widely by state. These laws are known as “habitual offenders laws” and are supposed to address recidivism with long

² From 1995 to 2003 inmates incarcerated for drug offenses amount to 49% of the prison and jail population (Associated Press Washington Post 12/1/06).

sentences. “Truth in sentencing” laws sought to redress early release of prisoners due to overcrowding, good behavior, or earned time. TIS laws require offenders to serve a substantial portion of their sentence. Overall, sentencing reform over the past thirty years has moved from *indeterminate sentencing* (parole boards may decide to release an inmate early) to *determinate sentencing* (fixed terms that could be reduced by good time or earned time reviewed by parole boards) to *mandatory minimums* (specified terms without parole) to *sentencing guidelines* (sentencing commissions further remove sentencing from the judges) and finally to *truth in sentencing* (parole options eliminated or made impossible)³. These changes in sentencing came from “tough on crime” political campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s and track the “war on drugs” that they in large measure were supposed to address. According to the Sentencing Project, summarized from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, from 1995 to 2001 (the period of time I worked at the Gossett Center) the average time served in prison rose 30%. Crime also dropped since 1991; so, does that mean that these sentence reforms were effective? The answer is not simple. Even though crime was dropping, the rate of imprisonment seems statistically unconnected to the crime rate in state after state. One study found that from 1992 – 2001 “the *entire* increase” was accounted for by changes in sentencing practices and policies rather than an increase in catching criminals⁴.

Recently New York City has posted a significant drop in crime “despite fewer lockups” according to a Washington Post article from November 24th 2006 by Michael Powell:

It is one of the least-told stories in American crime fighting. New York, the safest big city in the nation, achieved its now legendary 70-percent drop in homicides even as it locked up fewer and fewer of its citizens during the past

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics Truth in Sentencing 2005.

⁴ Jennifer C. Karberg and Allen J. Beck, “Trends in U.S. Correctional Populations: Findings from the Bureau of Justice Statistics,” presented at the National Committee on Community Corrections, Washington DC, April 16th 2004.

decade. The number of prisoners in the city has dropped from 21,449 in 1993 to 14,129 this past week. That runs counter to the national trend, in which prison admissions have jumped 72% during that time (A3).

This finding raises interesting questions about whether high incarceration rates really lower crime, or whether other factors are responsible for trends in crime rates (such as policing methods or sentencing rules). According to the same article, other cities, regions and countries also report dropping prison populations along with crime rates (i.e. Canada). For example, Powell also reports, “No public official set out to drive down New York’s prison and jail population in the early 1990s. Quite the opposite...” (A3). The Post cites community policing of minor offenses in neighborhoods and an aggressive drug treatment and mental health initiative as probable factors in the drop in crime. At the least, there are reasonable doubts that imprisonment lowers crime. As Powell points out, “Such heavy reliance on prisons, epidemiologists note, carries a considerable social price tag” (A3). If prisons are training grounds for crime, and if they greatly affect families and young people (which corresponds well to what my work with prisoners below demonstrates), then a rise in crime may be the result of high incarceration as ever greater numbers of prisoners are released each year. Never the less, it is not my larger purpose to debate this issue or study it in detail, but rather to set out the questions of importance to working inside a US prison today.

Just as the Rockefeller drug laws of 1973 were the harbinger of harsh sentencing reform, the publication of Robert Martinson’s “What Works” in the journal *Public Interest* in 1974 sounded the death knell for all kinds of rehabilitation and education programs in prisons— in fact, in transmogrified form as “Nothing Works,” it was highly cited and began a long trend away from rehabilitation and towards harsher punishment. Apparently Martinson was the third, late joining member of a team of researchers who assessed 231 programs from 1945 to 1967 and reached a much more circumspect conclusion than Martinson’s single article reported that “the

field of corrections has not as yet found satisfactory ways to reduce recidivism by significant amounts (Lipton et al 627).” However, Martinson’s more inflammatory version was published first and began a national trend away from all types of inmate services, or program based attempts to address prison life, and was widely used to justify the coincidental changes in sentencing laws. Rick Sarre, who published a retrospective of Martinson’s impact 25 years after the fact, suggests that Martinson thought his skepticism would apply to imprisonment in general and prison life in particular, and that his intentions may have been to attack incarceration. This generous, ironic interpretation focuses on the possibilities of research findings and conclusions “assuming an inappropriate life of their own (2).” In 1989, the Washington Post writer Jerome Miller mused on Martinson’s later suicide:

Late one gloomy winter afternoon in 1980, New York sociologist Robert Martinson hurled himself through a ninth floor window of his Manhattan apartment while his teenaged son looked on from across the room. An articulate criminologist, Martinson had become the leading debunker of the idea we could "rehabilitate" criminals. His melancholy suicide was to be a metaphor for what would follow in American corrections (Miller Post 1989).

Nevertheless, Martinson is not all to blame, but the unhappy timing of his pronouncements certainly did have an impact. He was not alone. By 1989 the US Supreme Court, in *Mistretta vs. The United States* upheld the legality of removing rehabilitation concerns from federal sentencing. In 1994 Congress voted to remove prisoners access to Pell grants that had become the mainstay of community college programs in prisons around the country, despite studies that showed that Higher Education did greatly reduce recidivism. All of these moves made prison less and less about the future release of prisoners back into society, even though 95% of those serving time today will eventually be released.

The third trend has been the rise in high security segregation units and “supermax” prisons that intensify punishment through greater degrees of confinement and lack of human contact. Volunteer programs such as the one I describe in this dissertation have no access to these units or prisons, and so I can only describe them second hand here. The recent panel Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons (cited above) concludes that such units are “counter-productive” in that they raise levels of prison violence and have been linked to more serious crimes upon release. These units are at the opposite spectrum from theater in prisons because they seek sensory deprivation and isolation. In West Virginia, the Big Stone Gap and Red Onion Mountain state prisons are following the lead of federal “supermax” prisons such as the one in Marion, Illinois. The West Virginia prisons actually smoked over the windows because designers did not want the inmates to enjoy the beautiful mountain views outside: “Through the slats, there is a spectacular view here of the valley below, but prison officials plan to smoke the windows before the prison opens so inmates can’t see out (Finn A4).” Most of these prisons are on constant 23 hour per day lockdown in 7 by 12 foot cells. This means that inmates must remain in their cells for 23 hours a day, except for one hour of exercise. “...some of them also may be denied reading material (Finn A4).” What does that one hour of exercise look like? On a recent episode of MSNBC investigates, a woman in high security segregation is allowed her one hour of exercise in a converted dog kennel—in shackles. She explains to the camera that if she succeeds in getting down to a lesser security rating that will mean the same one hour in the same dog kennel, but with handcuffs instead of shackles. To prove the point, and as an obvious version of prison as theater, the camera pans down to the next woman in the lower security dog cage with her handcuffs.

A famous psychological experiment, ironically published in 1973 the same year the Rockefeller drug laws passed, randomly assigned male college students at Stanford to role play at being guards or prisoners over the course of several days in a simulated prison setting. Five of the “prisoners” had to be released early due to “extreme emotional depression, crying, rage, and acute anxiety (Zimbardo et al Theatre and Prison 26)” and the entire study was ended early when it became clear that the remaining prisoners were experiencing significant stress and duress. Many, but not all, of the “guards” exhibited hostility and aggression, including verbal taunting, but not physical abuse of the “inmates.” Both “guards” and “inmates” displayed “negative affect (26)” in as little as two days. When the experiment ended early many “guards” expressed distress that their roles had to end early. The “guards” had been showing up early and staying late without extra pay throughout the experiment. The researcher’s write:

The extremely pathological reactions which emerged in both groups of subjects testify to the power of social forces operating, but still there were individual differences seen in styles of coping with this novel experience and in degrees of successful adaptation to it. Half of the prisoners did endure the oppressive atmosphere, and not all of the guards resorted to hostility. Some guards were tough but fair (‘play rules’), some went beyond their roles to engage in creative cruelty and harassment, while a few were passive and rarely instigated any coercive control over the prisoners (27).

This theatrical psychology experiment highlights the performative function of interpellation that emerges from the roles of prisoner and guard, following Butler, and the internalization of prison routines and structures a la Foucault. Its’ significance extends to contemporary reports from Iraq of the abuses by “normal” service men and women abusing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. They were asked to play these roles just as the Stanford students were. Thus is the location of prison in which I worked with prisoners. To do so naively is perhaps to fall prey to the performances of punishment

or add to them. It takes a clear ethical stance to do progressive work in such environments during such times.

During the 1990s the Theatre in Prisons and Probation Center at the University of Manchester in England developed and expanded programs for prison and probation services by fitting themselves within an existing framework of cognitive behavioral therapy for rehabilitation. These were offense-based programs that targeted offending behavior such as drug use and anger management (Thompson, Teaching Arts 47).

James Thompson writes:

The early projects of the TIPP center too rapidly accepted the logic of therapeutic rehabilitation programs and came close to being theater workshops done to people to change them. I say they came close only because I have seen “theater-based” programs that do go over the boundary and drag people through a regime to make them “face up to” what they have done. One example was a program in the UK that brought young offenders and victims of crime on stage together in front of a public audience. This only resulted in the young people being objectified, displayed and made to look guilty for the pain they had caused. It is wrong to assume that art is somehow automatically a force for good in the prison system. The discipline and control that are often needed can just as easily be turned to make the art form part of the punishing agenda of the prison (51).

What Thompson and the TIPP Center learned was that there are profound ethical distinctions to be made between arts or arts processes that seek to manipulate and act upon prisoners as objects (problems to be solved, cured or transformed) and those that intentionally avoid performances of crime, punishment or apology by inviting prisoners to be the subject/makers of their own critical art. Thompson learned that “Theatre in prisons is not about changing behavior because that implies a preknowledge of what change is required (43).” It takes self-reflective effort to draw boundaries for work with prisoners that minimizes performances of punishment. In his book article, “Doubtful Principles in Arts in Prisons,” Thompson questions his

own trajectory through his work with prisoners towards ethical principles. In the following chapters, I will likewise note where and how I developed such principles of my own and how they shaped the methodology of TO work as I adapted it for use with groups of prisoners. However, for introductory purposes, here are my selections of some of Thompson's doubtful principles that I agree with. I address these principles within the following chapters:

Art is a verb not a noun⁵

Prisoners should be subjects not objects

Prisoners should be participants not observers

Sustainability is key

Avoid or counter the performance of punishment

Sometimes we must say no

⁵ Although theatre people can, on occasion, hold on to the luxury of explaining their work for what it is and not what it does, every time we enter a social institution that is not a theater, our work will be interpreted for effect. We can choose to engage directly with this or abstain (Thompson, Teaching Arts 49).

*The Gossett Center Today*⁶

Broken arms and scraped faces inflicted by guards at the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residential Center are being investigated by the state Inspector General since former guards and residents brought allegations against the facility (Daley, Ithaca Journal 1/20/06).

Dwayne Robinson, a former Gossett YDA from 1993 to 2004, used interviews conducted for his Master's degree to research inmate treatment inside the Gossett Center and gather evidence of abuse of juvenile prisoners there. He sent a DVD with four interviews of young men at Gossett to the Department of Justice. Robinson witnessed everything from "rug burns to concussions" during his time on staff. The allegations include using excessive force in restraining inmates and less obvious adversarial tactics (such as "tricking" and provoking inmates into breaking rules in order to exact punishments). "Gossett is a scary place, it's like the gallows," said another former guard according to the Ithaca Times. The record of TO performances studied in this dissertation support these allegations obliquely, although none of our Cornell volunteers witnessed any abuse during our four years there⁷. In the *Rhythm of the Machine* in Chapter 2, the young men portrayed images of being restrained along with "the count" and "the line up" and other daily routines. Gossett is indeed a "machine" of punishment and conflict. Robinson reports that part of the problem was the aggressive training the guards receive. He says, "they trained us like pit bulls in the beginning" (4A). Our theatre program and volunteers were escorted and sheltered

⁶ Today Lorton is a suburban housing complex and mall. Some of the buildings will remain as a historical site. However, the museum planned on the site is one that will tell a narrow story of some suffragettes who were imprisoned there briefly during the fight for women's enfranchisement in the early 20th century. Such a museum seems a cynical use of the voting rights story in order to efface the real history of the place that incarcerated mostly men, especially the outsized representation of African American men from DC.

⁷ See the example of the game *Friends and Enemies* in Chapter 3.

from such incidents. We were placed in the spirituality room, in our own safe space and oasis, and this raises the question of our accountability for not knowing the facts of ongoing abuse and for not witnessing or reporting them.

The young men who cite the Cornell Theatre in Prisons Youth Program that I led as the most positive and most effective experience they had during their time at Gossett do so in differentiation from the abuse that surrounded them:

They ain't never teach me nothin' All they did was swear at me all day. We supposed to have groups to help us out, and they just curse at us all day (Jordan Turner, former resident qtd. in Ithaca Times 4A).

I'm looking at everybody as my enemy. Before I was locked up, I was cool with everybody. Now I'm angrier. It just builds up and builds up and builds up (Lewallen, former resident qtd. in Ithaca Times 4A).

I am not proposing a satisfactory answer by contrasting the laughter and high spirits of our theatre class at Gossett, most weeks, and these compelling and damning testimonies of the daily life there. The questions will remain throughout this work. Working with prisoners inside prisons is often described by critics of the practice as always already “co-opted” by the total institution. Yet, work by James Thompson and the TIPP center or Buzz Alexander and the Prison Creative Arts Program (see example later in this chapter), or myself, does not treat the prison as one solid wall. We are looking for the limen and intentionally struggling to create the alternative space within that is progressive. “What kind of change can you know about in a place like this?” Patricia O'Connor once asked a man in a Lorton workshop when he said reading a play made him think about what he would be “suitable and appropriate for” upon his release.

In this chapter I also describe and contrast examples of theatre in prisons that use methodologies that are different from TO practices. These exemplars also

achieved performances outside of prison, or open to outside audience members, that I could personally witness. In addition, I attended annual retreats for arts against mass incarceration in the United States at the Blue Mountain Arts Center in the Adirondack Mountains for three years and there got to know Buzz Alexander of the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) and Michael Keck of *Voices in the Rain* in person, and their work in detail. I reviewed videotaped versions of PCAP performances (by the Sisters Within Theatre Troupe and also “Inside Out” by the men as well as *When Can We Talk?*) and attended Keck’s play and a production of *Slam* performed by Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) at Sing Sing prison, as an audience member. Each case illustrates a theatrical project that serves goals that are similar to, but distinctive from, my own work.

Rehabilitation Through the Arts

As the name implies, RTA believes in theater as a tool for rehabilitation and that art helps change the behavior of men. Although RTA does not express itself as an intervention in the institution of prison, or as a response to mass incarceration, the sheer size of the programming has created some of those effects ipso facto, but with limitations.

RTA believes in theatre “as a therapeutic tool in corrections” (Moller 175) without being much troubled by whether or not the business of prisons in the US is “correction,” or rehabilitation and not punishment or segregation.

Over seven years RTA has produced full-scale, proscenium style productions of existing and original plays such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *The Sacrifice*, *Slam*, and *Twelve Angry Men*. Each production: “Run by a steering committee of five to seven inmates and a handful of theatre professionals who provide support, the program engages 45 prisoners who perform, write, co-direct, stage

manage, run lights and sound, prepare packets for call outs, locate ‘inside props,’ do internal publicity and construct the set” (Moller 168). It’s nearly impossible to conceive that RTA acquired permission to perform in front of large audiences of 500 inmates per night in an actual auditorium inside Sing Sing prison in Ossining, New York. According to Lorraine Moller, the program’s Artistic Director, the responses of the attending audiences of 500 inmates constitutes a “meta-drama” as compelling as the one on stage. Of the audience for *Twelve Angry Men*, Moller writes:

This audience of inmates expressed their strong opinions about the workings of the judicial system while watching their fellow inmates engage in the intensive jury deliberation process, responding with jeers and cheers in support of the defendant” (168).

There are also nights for invited guests from outside the prison like a performance of *Slam* that I attended. It appears to me that each play has been selected as somehow or other socially relevant to prisoners.

When the medium security Tappan facility at Sing Sing closed, the original members of RTA were dispersed, though a version of the program continues in maximum security, and new versions are starting elsewhere in the New York system. During the final meeting of the original cast and crew of RTA one prisoner spoke of the program in these terms:

Remember we are a family. It’s not about the newspaper articles. We are reformed prisoners. Rehabilitated prisoners. We care, are trying to do something positive. The guys backstage, they not just doin’ the little things—the props have to be there. The sound has to come on. Everybody gives to make it work. That’s the big picture. Go with that for the rest of your life...I’m proud of everyone. I will keep with this from the street. I will never forget you guys in here. Never. (qtd. in Moller 175).

This obviously heartfelt testimonial, along with the unusual meeting of 500 prisoners at a time in the audience, does point to some of the same functions as previous examples in regard to transforming the space and creating alternative communities inside prison. “Reform” is another matter. Moller and the CUNY Research Foundation have conducted research to back up their rehabilitative claims of RTA by putting inmates through a battery of tests on “social and institutional behavior” before and after the production of *Slam*. The results? According to Moller, “In summary then, simply stated, the program contributes to the manageability of inmates” (175). Moller found statistically significant drops in infractions and higher levels of positive coping skills.

Moller’s study is worth including for what it says and for what it fails to say. She looks at institutional behavior (which may be useful for negotiating with administrators and also for measuring the men’s own valuation of their involvement in the activity of the program) but she does not explain what values “social responsibility,” “coping abilities,” or “institutional behavior” has for prisoners—only for the prison. These terms are also left undefined. The study:

The two groups differed in a number of important ways: First the RTA group reported a higher level of positive coping than the control group. Second, RTA participants had fewer—in fact roughly half the average number of—infractions during this six-month period ($M = .333$ as compared to $M = .654$ for control participants). In addition, while RTA participants spent 9.22 days on the average locked in their cells as a disciplinary measure resulting from a violation of prison rules, the control participants spent 17.46 days in keeplock during this period. Third, when the length of time inmates participated in RTA was correlated with institutional behavior, the analysis pointed to a strong pattern: The correlation ($r = -.326$, $p = .056$) was just below the level of significance, but pointed to a very strong pattern of fewer infractions the longer a participant has been part of the program. Original members had not engaged in any infractions during the six-month period in question, while intermediate members had engaged in an average of .07 infractions per member, and beginners had engaged in an average of .68 infractions. (174)

I interpret this data differently. I understand that the men valued their participation in the program and stayed out of the way of whatever or whomever they had to avoid in order to be part of it and the value of participation increased with time. I do not know to what extent members of RTA learned and internalized the language of reform and coping, as the man quoted above did, for these tests. But, again, I think it is an open question as to whether these are lasting effects of “rehabilitation” (which, after all should come with some skills for life outside prison) or “reform” (which should likewise include critical reflection on identity formation) or perhaps are manipulations by the men to keep and support the program, no doubt with all sincerity. All this really proves is that Sing Sing was better off all around when the men were happier and engaged in collaborative art.

The bargain RTA is striking with prisons makes the administration’s willingness to approve such large audiences more apparent. Moller claims a greater sense of social responsibility among the participants as one of her results. I see the possibility that the inmate steering committee and the participants are using this opportunity to their own ends as well—they are in fact creating positive, collaborative communities through theatre, even in the absence of meaningful social critique or critical deliberation. RTA is not transforming or intervening in the prison, but the men involved are claiming to have transformed themselves in regard to their present coping and future hopes.

When Can We Talk? : PCAP’s Performance Outside Prison

What if you could see inside a theatre workshop in a Michigan prison and you could get to know the prisoners through their personal stories and life experiences as they share them through improvisational performances? What if you could also get to know the workshop facilitators, teachers and volunteers in the same setting and could

see their motivations and intentions in being there, as well as stories from their lives? Then you would learn that prisoners are “like us” who have never served time in prison. You would be outraged by what a prison is and you would be outraged by mass incarceration in this country. In order to bring this kind of inside insight to an outside audience, PCAP developed a performance structured to tell stories from the arts workshops they have been running since 1990 inside prisons.

Incredibly, as of 2002 (the year of the play under examination here), PCAP had facilitated and performed more than one hundred and thirty two plays, two dance recitals and fourteen presentations of creative writing work at seventeen adult facilities in Michigan. That is not all. By 2002 PCAP also managed to produce 85 plays and three dance performances at juvenile facilities, as well as curating nine exhibitions of adult and juvenile prisoner art. Of course, since 2002 the count of plays, readings and dances has only risen and they are approaching their 12th annual exhibit of art by Michigan prisoners in 2006. It is fair to say that PCAP is the most successful producer of Theatre in Prisons and Creative Arts in Prison in the United States. It is an incredible achievement that has had an enormous positive impact in favor of the prisoners they serve. Yet, the majority of their work is inside prisons, so how could they take the inside experience of PCAP outside of the prisons in which they work in order to oppose mass incarceration without jeopardizing their work inside? The answer was in a play.

Four former prisoners and five facilitators, experienced with leading workshops and programs in creative arts in prison, performed PCAP’s play, *When Can We Talk?* on a conventional stage at the University of Michigan in 2002. The purpose of the play is to humanize prisoners and give voice to their stories while representing the experience of creative arts in prisons, especially theatre. The performance represents and reflects on arts inside prison and frames testimonial and

autobiographical material as opportunities for self reflection that ultimately call for the country to be self critical, and ashamed, of the expansion of prisons into our lives and our culture. Three major through-lines structure the action: Where were you at age 5, 12, 18 and so on; Re-created stories from theatre workshops inside prison; and Going in and Coming out of prison. These through-lines interweave with each other along with other elements of the play, including sharing prisoner art and directly addressing the audience.

A description of *When Can We Talk?* With commentary:

The play begins with a warm up (shaking stress out of the body) that includes audience members from their seats. A facilitator explains that this is how a theatre in prison workshop or class begins and she makes it clear that the setting of the play will continue to have a dual presence—both in the here and now of the University of Michigan theatre audience and as a re-creation and representation of what actually happens inside in a workshop in prison. The facilitator of this meta-workshop framing the play begins by asking “Where were you at age five?” and audience members are encouraged to reply, just as the performers on stage are replying, with a bit of where and a bit of memory from that age. Each performer on stage plays him or her self, so the answers are authentic, although not impromptu. The performers reveal that many in the cast are local and that the rest have come to the region through the University of Michigan.

The cast highlights what they have in common with each other and with the audience, growing up in good times and bad. Some report negative experiences at age five, but these are not exclusively from former prisoners. Buzz, the university professor and program founder, reveals that he was bullied at five. Touche, a former prisoner reveals that he witnessed a bloody incident in which older boys jumped onto

a younger boy's sled because they had none of their own. There was blood on the snow.

The point of these interludes, or check-ins, on where each person was at a certain age, will continue throughout the play. Sometimes they will serve as touchpoints for common ground, but just as often they reveal a relevant part of the life histories of each person on the stage (relevant to working in or being in prison). At age ten, Vanessa, a PCAP theatre workshop facilitator, found out that her father was in a drunk driving accident and was going to prison for involuntary manslaughter. At age 18, Tracy's (another former prisoner) father raped her. At 18, Buzz attended Harvard and enjoyed all the new books he was reading, though he still "didn't know much." At 18, Jesse, a PCAP Creative Writing facilitator, found out his roommate was arrested when he returned from break to find his dorm room ransacked and a search warrant left on the TV. The memories track each person through their lives. The audience is left to draw their own conclusions about how these revelations connect with creative arts in prison. Though they all have different access to education, different economic circumstances, different things to celebrate, different tragedies, yet they are on the stage together. They have come together through the arts in prison programs to say something in common against mass incarceration. The audience is invited to think about where they themselves were at each age and what happened to them that is the same or is different from what happened to the people in front of them, and to further reflect in a comparison and contrast with the lives of former prisoners.

Once past the first age inquiry (age 5), Jesse tells the story of one of his creative writing workshops in prison. First he describes what it is like for the volunteers from Ann Arbor to enter the prison facility ("Open 1" shouts a performer mimicking guards, "Open 2"). Once inside, the group begins, but a man collapses to

the floor. Apparently this is an inmate with a blood sugar problem. Someone calls for a nurse and they wait and wait for her. The nurse who appears moves with deliberate and maddening slowness to help the collapsed man. Everyone in the room witnesses the poor medical care and slow response that the inmate receives at the hands of the nurse. Now that the collapsed man finally has some medical attention, the room is tense and sullen. Jesse finds that his class is increasingly jealous of the loud laughter and noises of fun from the theatre group next door. Since he knows a theatre game or two he is put on the spot by another facilitator to come up with something for the group to do, which he does after initially being stumped. The game allows the group to recover to a certain extent and to work through the tension in the room. Finally one man jumps up and enthusiastically declares that the “creative writing class creates the reality that they [the class next door] try to portray!” and all burst into cheers. Following the scene, Tracy and Touche give testimony as to why they wanted to join the creative arts programs. Dave reveals that he didn’t want to join until the warden kept pressuring him to join.

Jesse’s story reveals how *When Can We Talk?* works. Jesse’s point of view narration shows what he sees as an outsider coming into a prison. His story of the institutional response of an uncaring nurse raises audience awareness of the kind of medical care one receives in prison. Then the group pulls together and finds a coping strategy from the prisoner who declares the superiority of “reality” in the creative writing class. Finally, there is some testimony as to why inmates would choose to join the groups. Jesse’s uncertainty and helplessness de-mystifies the role of facilitator and shows that he is the one learning. It is Jesse who is learning about the problem of the nurse, the men already know the situation prior to this workshop. Theatre functions to allow expression and also to represent the event to the audience of *When Can We Talk?*

Next up is the first of a couple of interludes based on the theatre game “what’s your choice?” Dave Hawkins’ brother is murdered. Does he keep his cool or does he seek revenge? His choice is explored through another workshop reenactment. As he drives a chair that represents his car, his two choices are personified and played by a devil character and an angel character— one on each shoulder. Dave’s ultimate choice is never revealed. The workshop facilitator stops the action to ask, “was it realistic?” Dave answers yes. The message of the scene again serves a dual purpose. It reveals that Dave had such a choice in his life and also how the theatre workshop might help him gain critical distance on his choice and work it through without imposing judgment on his choice. It is a problem-posing scene.

Later in the play, Jason, another former inmate presents his choice. He is on the yard of Jackson prison when his cousin approaches him for help. The cousin owes some money from gambling and wants Jason to “watch my back.” The problem is that Jason is “short time”, about to go home, and his cousin is “long time.” Jason doesn’t want to get into any dispute that could ultimately add time to his sentence. However, he feels a family obligation to his cousin. He doesn’t have much time to think it over before the man his cousin owes money to approaches with some backers to ask for the money. Again the question, “was this realistic?” is asked, but this time the answer is “not exactly” because the antagonist, seeking his money, seems too weak.

Immediately one of the PCAP volunteers takes over the role of the antagonist to make him more forceful and she enacts her idea of threatening. “Was it realistic?” no. Jason explains that in prison you cannot use large hand gestures as the volunteer did without attracting the guard’s attention. Also, Jason mentions that none of the guys would step that close to him “because then it’s on anyway.” The point of the scene is what is at stake for Jason as he makes his choice. However, the most revealing aspect of this scene is the failed attempt to be realistic enough. Jason teaches the PCAP volunteers

about prison realities and what I have been calling “prison values” in this scene. By reenacting this teaching moment, Jason also becomes the teacher for the UM audience.

Following Dave’s choice and an interlude on age 12, the play moves on to “Vanessa’s workshop” in which she works with incarcerated teenage girls. The whole cast jumps up to represents these young girls who are portrayed as typically teenaged in their insouciance and in their interests. The point is that teens are teens everywhere, even in prison. However, Vanessa is jarred by seeing one girl being held down by prison staff, spread-eagled on the floor in an adjoining room. Vanessa wonders how it will be possible to make theater with someone spread eagled on the floor in the next room, but then concludes that the answer will come when that girl can enact her story.

The sequence that follows begins with the story of the girl on the floor as enacted by the women of the cast. The story flows beyond the boundaries of an individual story and becomes the story of all the women inside prison. She, diffused into the ensemble of women, experiences childhood sexual and violent abuse, the lure of drugs and addiction (mixed up with common commercial ad slogans such as “do the dew” and “Bud-weis-er” and “you’ve come a long way, baby”), standing in an eviction line, and, most heart wrenchingly, being arrested and held away from her baby while her breasts are full of milk. At the end, Tracy says, “It’s amazing any of us survived.” The portrayal avoids positivism or essentialism by anchoring itself in economic critique and by relinquishing the question “was it realistic?” There is no attempt in this scene to portray the workshop itself. Instead, the ensemble provides support for a series of monologues by women. The dialogic structure of the “choices” and the testimony structure of the workshop scenes are replaced by an effective emotional appeal for empathy and identification.

After the representation of women in prison, the play presents the first part of a pairing about entering and exiting prison. The first of these is called “going in.” Going

in repeats the structure of the age sequences, but this time with the time sequence anchored in the experiences of the former prisoners in the cast— “going in” from first day to 3 weeks, to 3 years, to 4 years to 10 years. Here is a sampling from all four former prisoners:

- first day: all shuffle in wearing chains.
- 3 weeks: still hanging with my gang friends.
- 3 years: found a way to cope in yoga.
- 4 years: found a way to learn things to apply to life in arts workshops.
- 10 years: family members are dying off. Will any be left?

“Count is clear. Shakedown.” These calls frame the scene with the flavor of sounds that you hear from guards as they go through ritual counts and security procedures. But, “Count is clear. Shakedown” is also the metaphor of the scene as time gets counted off and lives are cleared off by prison. “Shakedown” can also be understood in the sense that the prison also knows how to hustle.

The play next moves to an issue of security and training among volunteers from PCAP and also explains why they must carefully adopt and follow all of the regulations of the prison on their visits. This section of the play, entitled “Touch,” reveals why PCAP is careful not to touch prisoners. Buzz steps forward and adopts the tone of a training session. He acknowledges that the lack of human touch is one of the ways that the prison punishes inmates and alienates them, “numbing them.” However, touch is a security risk for PCAP. Buzz says that prisoners are “vibrant, talented, funny, sad human beings just like us,” yet there is no way to know the fantasies, jealousies, or triggers prisoners may have. PCAP volunteers must be “professional” and they must learn not to act on the instincts of casual, supportive touch. Instead, Buzz argues, PCAP holds to the metaphor of touch: that they are touching when they make meaning together; that they find the humanity of “touching” metaphorically (in

the sense of emotionally moving). “We do not touch when we are touching,” says Buzz.

This scene serves as an important self-reflective moment in the play. The admissions that PCAP cannot overcome the “numbing” effect of prison, that they must train themselves not to be naïve about prisoners, and that they work inside prison regulations are all counter to Buzz’s statement in this same section that “they are like us.” As human beings, of course they are, but as prisoners they must deal with an environment of confinement and de-humanization. “They are like us” is a humanizing move that, perhaps rightly, positions prisoners as there but for the grace of God go I. Yet the most important revelation of the scene is really an accusation. How can we imagine the punishment of being confined to a place of restrained and restricted touch? It is the difference that compels awareness. The only statement in the play I take issue with is this one: “We do not touch when we are touching.” My objection is a sympathetic one; I know how hard this is personally and how much I’d like to be “touching” in the sense of emotionally connecting. Plus, I have not worked in institutions with very strict restrictions on touching yet. In this case, for the moment, I believe that the admission of not touching is more important than the rationalization of emotionally and intellectually touching.

Once the problem of touch is explained, the scene shifts to a beautiful presentation of prisoner art introduced by Janie Paul, the artist and University of Michigan professor. Art from the Michigan exhibits produced by PCAP appear in a slideshow accompanied by Janie’s soliloquy. This is where the statistics of mass incarceration are recited: “50% of prisoners are African American,” “the fastest growing population is women,” and others. Then Janie speaks of how prisoners use art to transform the space of prison by “finding the habitable in the uninhabitable” and

that art is the courage of prisoners who “believe in a world that has forgotten them.” The paintings are stirring.

The ensemble takes good advantage of the positive momentum of presenting the art by choosing this moment for a direct confrontation with the audience called “the absence of rage.” In this section the UM audience is not the target per se, but instead it is fellow Americans in general who have failed to be outraged by mass incarceration. The ensemble poses the question “Is it your desire? Does it serve your purposes—though you would never say so?” Thus, the humanizing message of presenting the beautiful art of prisoners is matched to a call for outrage: the social conscience of a national shame called forth by viewing the art is an awareness that should impel to action.

Next it’s time for “going out”— a time sequence of leaving prison:

- First day: just as scared as my first day in “for some reason”
- 2 weeks: my family is under pressure while I try to keep parole rules.
- 11 months: still trying to find work and filling out forms as an ex felon.
- 4 years: just now getting used to it and having a life.

The crucial question this scene raises is “When does the punishment stop?” which serves as a refrain throughout the scene. Just as in the Lorton fatherhood scenes or in the Gossett scenes of returning to the neighborhood, it is clear here that the punishment never stops because the identity, “former prisoner,” becomes so fixed and socially unforgivable that it carries on long after technical, legal punishment is over. The story of Nate Jones, a former prisoner who rehearsed with the ensemble, but disappeared before the performance, exemplifies the concept of when does the punishment stop and extends it into internalization. It is Nate’s “own self judgment” that he cannot get past. Buzz says he is “angry *for* Nate Jones, but also angry *at* Nate Jones” for losing jobs, crashing cars, substance abuse, and especially for “not

responding to loving intervention.” Buzz wonders when he could have talked to Nate or said the right words to make a difference. But when he gets Nate on the phone he cannot reach through Nate’s blocks, “we were not going to talk.”

The final section of the performance is Touche’s choice. He’s out of prison and trying to survive. He realized that he was a good cook in a prison cooking class and so he is trying to make it as a baker by selling cheesecakes. Eventually he realizes that his talent as a chef is not arbitrary because his mother was an “exceptional baker.”

Therefore he has a resource he had never drawn upon. However, the choice comes when his fledgling business needs cash. His car breaks, he can’t deliver cheesecakes, and his rent is two months due. So he visits a loan shark who wants him to sell bootleg CDs while he is on his cake rounds. He accepts, but soon finds that this was a ploy to get him in debt and then draw him into crime. How will he face the problem? What choice will he make to get beyond the loan shark’s debt? Again the answer is not given in the scene. Naturally all of these choice scenes would make excellent Forum theatre scenes, but this is not where the play takes them.

The play ends with everyone reciting their current age and with an open talkback with the audience members.

The play is a humanizing performance that holds to a high degree of authenticity and a high degree of self-reflection. Ultimately, the talk of *When can we talk?* is about what is not being said about mass incarceration and simultaneously is the conversation most people will never have with any prisoner. When will the punishment end? When will society wake up? And, when will we talk with prisoners as human beings who are not defined solely by being prisoners or former prisoners? This play serves the cause and mission of PCAP by showing the value of learning from prisoners about their lives and their stories and about what prisons really are. It demonstrates that creative arts behind bars can help express and work through these

tough “conversations” by opening up the problems, the choices and the life experiences, that need talking about.

Voices in the Rain: Michael Keck's Performance

Themes were developed using collected oral histories, letters from inmates and stories about communities, prison life, and available information about the problem. The early research for this work included interviews with a number of people who have been prison staff, inmates, their families and others in the community who are affected by and concerned about the problem. I hope this event will stimulate a community dialogue that examines solutions to the problems of violence in our communities. (Keck Voices 1998).

Michael Keck does not agree to perform his one-man play, *Voices in the Rain: The Struggle for Survival and Hope* unless he can do so as part of a residency, or other extended engagement, that includes workshops in a variety of settings, including schools, universities, community centers and correctional facilities. His commitment to community engagement and dialogue coming out of *Voices in the Rain* is a plan to extend its impact into civic dialogue and personal and group reflection on mass incarceration. For example, when I arranged for Keck to perform the play at Cornell several years ago, he also came out to the Gossett Center as a guest speaker. While there, he performed part of his play and moderated a discussion of the young men's responses. His process in creating the play is as translator and interpreter of oral histories and skilled performer; however, he also attempts to extend the audience response to the play into an interactive struggle for useful conversations on the causes and effects of mass incarceration.

The play brings stories that would be familiar to Gossett youth or Lorton men together with his own beliefs about the causes of violence in the black community and the links between racism, family violence and incarceration. His identification with mass incarceration as a black man stems from a personal incident: he once surprised

burglars at his parent's home and as he was calling the police and giving a physical description of the burglar he realized that he was describing himself. He became interested in how his life diverged or intersected with the man he could so easily be mistaken for.

A description of the play with commentary:

The play begins with a “polyrhythmic wake up call to America” from a hip hop character named “Shadow,” whose name suggests that there are shadows in America that are about to be explored in the play. The question to the audience, which will be repeated in refrain, is “do you know my name?” The words fear, choice, hope, struggle, community, thrive, apathy, survival are projected amidst images of concertina wire, guard towers and cell bars “from sea to shining sea” along with the American flag. Shadow may be a prisoner, someone's life heading towards prison, or unacknowledged racism personified. The tone of challenge and defiance sets a tone that will be developed throughout the play: that young black youth are trying for their own version of the American dream of monetary success even if it comes to them and through them as violence.

In the first piece, “911,” Keck performs his own story of the break in at his parent's home. Describing the burglar by phone he begins to see himself in the police's eyes, “kinda slim, black, uh African American, No...no facial hair. I don't know 150-160 pounds I guess. Medium complexion, baseball cap (pause as caller realizes he is describing himself) Yes...I'm still here...”

The character Bug Eyes is a “bidness man” who sells anything on the inside to prisoners, “as long as you willing to pay the vig. The VIG! If I give you a cigarette you owe me a pack. If I give you a pack you owe me a carton. If I look out for you—you gonna be *my* property.” Bug Eyes is one of the ways that Keck is able to draw on primary sources, but also make a larger social critique. It is the “bidness” that makes

Bug Eyes no different from any other business aspect in American life, if only more extreme. During the play, Keck uses Bug Eyes to give advice about prison life or about America. “The BIG HOUSE RULES are simple, do unto others as they have done unto you, trust nobody, ride your own heat, and follow the code” is his advice about surviving inside prison. Later, Bug Eyes comments on the war on drugs, “You didn’t see that in the news papers...bad public relations for the war on drugs...which is mostly a war on people, ‘cause if America was hell bent to *win* the war on drugs, wouldn’t prisons be the most drug free places of all?” asks Bug Eyes as he gets high. Bug Eyes is the character that gives the most insider information about prison, but Keck turns each of these pieces of knowledge into a comparison or contrast with the broader society. In this case, Bug Eyes gets to pose the tough questions to the audience about the drug war. When Bug Eyes talks about going to prison for the first time he admits “I was scared,” but quickly he was recognized and quickly recognizes others from his neighborhood, “Yeah! Going to prison was like walking around the corner.” The link between urban neighborhoods and prisons is so strong there is almost no difference to Bug Eyes.

In his final appearance in the play, Bug Eyes speaks about the growing harshness of the prison: “The Superintendent is folding under pressure from the conservatives who wanna ditch the iron, but that’s a bad idea. Pumping iron helps to keep the frustration down. The same die hard prisoncrats even want to dump the education programs.” Bug Eyes reveals that prisoners are under political attack from outside and the result of those attacks are the loss of common sense ways for the prisoners to cope. But Bug Eyes claims that he will survive this by being a “bidness man,” he says, “I’m just an average guy with predatory instincts without sufficient funds to form a corporation.” Bug Eyes is really no different in his values, he claims, than corporate America. In each case, when Bug Eyes appears the audience learns

something that would otherwise be hidden about prison life, but those inside stories are all linked to outside social trends and political policies.

Hangin' Wit My Homies...know what I'm sayin'? looks into why young black youth are alienated from education. If the student answers the teacher's question correctly then his homies make fun of him "YO! You tryin' to prove somethin'?" If the student answers the teacher's question incorrectly in order to save face with his friends then the white students think he is stupid. The whole atmosphere of school is like a prison, with security checks, metal detectors and a siege mentality that is "a fucking war zone know what I'm saying?" "Know what I'm sayin'" is the refrain that the student repeats over and over as if to say that every member of the audience should know all this about school already. "School ain't mo-ti-vat-in' so I ain't worrying about grad-u-a-tin.' I'm worrying about staying alive so I can turn 16." This reflection of the failure of the culture, racism and the school all leads seamlessly into a piece on making money and selling drugs to rich whites from the suburbs. This is the first of several reflections on how black youth turn towards prison. "Recipe for a criminal" continues the discussion with a series of snippets from the lives of future prisoners, all revealing child abuse, lack of care and the chaos of a painful family life. The recipe for a criminal, according to Keck, is to be alienated from school and from your family and to be marginalized and ignored by the rest of America.

"Walls" is the story of a man released from prison who still carries the walls of the prison around with him in the way he walks, talks and thinks. The story is told from his point of view as he tries to get room at a shelter. He reveals that every time he is near police he thinks they are talking about him; he reveals how strange he finds the world outside his prison walls and how few of his family are left to help him adjust. Even the smallest things seem to give him away as an ex-con, "When I went to

pay, it seemed like the cashier lady was watching me...close...like I still had on my prison clothes.” The man feels, and is, outcast:

When we pulled into town, the street was full of people, going and coming, walking and talking like they know where they are going and what they gonna do when they get there. I couldn't make eye contact with anyone. I was sure they could tell just by looking at me...I bet the Jews felt like this when the Nazis made them wear a star on their clothes and burned numbers on their arms. (Keck, Voices)

To drive the point home the man says, “the serious marks you never see because they are internal.” In fact, the story of “walls” is the story of the internalized social impact of prison on identity accumulated over time. Additionally, the man from “walls” is prepared for nothing and has nowhere to go and nothing to do. All of his achievements are prison based, such as being an expert in “international criminal cuisine” that comes from being creative with limited ingredients and a healthy dash of Tabasco. As the man tries to get room at a shelter he realizes that “inside or out we all looking at walls,” meaning that he remains a prisoner even though released.

Rhymin' Simon: the train “the American Dream” directly addresses one of Keck's recurring themes about getting caught up in crime as a desire to find a way through to the American dream of success. “No jobs, no money, scared the hell outta me...” so Simon leaves his small town for the big city before graduating high school. Simon is arrested. His friend back home reflects, “I had no idea that breaking the law was part of Simon's plan The American Dream? The Life Supreme? A Boy Becoming a Man? A Bright Mind Lost At A Terrible Cost...For A Dream So Real But Just Out of Reach Doing Time in the Joint.” In time Simon is released, but in no way has he changed. He still wants to be a billionaire. He wants to form “Simon's Enterprises, Incorporated” and he tries to talk his friend from the small town into going with him as he gets back on the train to the city to repeat his journey towards prison on the train

“The American Dream.” Other pieces such as “Call me Cash” reinforce this theme, “My education comes from years of chasing an elusive, super sonic dream that I rode all the way to the penitentiary.”

Where does the responsibility lie? The end of the play takes a turn towards addressing young people and their parents directly with the message that almost all of the men I worked with at Lorton also wanted to convey to young people: “Don’t Come To Prison.” Cash takes the “scared straight approach”:

So you want to look up to something huh? Look up at those guard towers and ask yourself what’s the difference between you and him. Look up at the razor wire and stone walls out there and think about why your life is *changed forever*. (Keck, Voices in the Rain)

Considering that up to this point in the play Keck focused on social ills and misplaced dreams that lead into prison, it is striking that in the end he addresses young people and their parents on their responsibility to keep out of prison by taking personal responsibility for each other. Cash says, “And when your son checks into the cell next to yours, blame yourself.” And, “Go do something good with your life. Something you’d be proud to talk about on Oprah. If not, I’ll see you in the BIG HOUSE.” The tie in is that sometimes it is the easy way out, the failure to struggle as Rhyming Simon, Bug Eyes and the high school drug dealer going for the money to buy the dream rather than the struggle. The overall message comes down to this: struggle to survive on the outside or you will struggle to survive on the inside.

For the final monologue, Shadow returns:

We are things exquisite to be achieved. But we are cut down in coded dances of violence...**our** voices screaming, floating through the landscape...creating an unfortunate soundtrack for the whole world. Remember **our** names. I signal my fellow children of the shadows to follow me and emerge from this landscape. To rise from the ashes of our defeat. To take our rightful place in

society. For once we have regained our dignity, we will **be** society. TURN THE VOLUME UP. (Keck, Voices in the Rain)

In the final monologue, Keck closes the circle on the shadow theme by calling for those who are prisoners, those who are leading lives that will lead them to prison, to step out of the shadows and overcome the violence they have experienced in their lives.

In this dissertation, I locate my work with prisoners within topics of interest in Performance Studies: examining performativity, troubling the representation of imprisoned bodies, considering the roles of ritual, play and liminality within the location of prison. I examine the limitations and the ethics of working with prisoners, and I have stayed focused on the prisoners' abilities to mediate and perform practical topics of interest to them using the Theater of the Oppressed methods (such as staying connected to family and re-entry). My dissertation furthers the growing interest in critiquing Boal's techniques and in theorizing how they work and what they can and cannot achieve. For example, I consider the purpose of fetishizing images into icons and symbols in Image Theater and critique my own use of the "Joker" role as a participant observer coming in from outside the prison.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RHYTHM OF THE MACHINE: RESTORATIVE BEHAVIOR AND UNMARKED POWER

Performance in prison

Two, among many, definitions of “performance” that have emerged in Performance Studies diverge in conceiving the function of repetition in performing: Richard Schechner’s “restored behavior” emphasizes the separation of behavior from “those who are behaving (37),” thereby making behavior that which is performed and that which can be studied as performance. Peggy Phelan, instead, emphasizes the qualities of performance that are not repeatable, or that resist repeating, especially visual imagery and representation. She writes,

Like the fantasy of erotic desire which frames love, the distortions of forgetting which infect memories, and the blind spots laced through the visual field, a believable image is the product of a negotiation with an unverifiable real (1).

Here Phelan points out that desire, love, and memory all make performances suspect. Her emphasis is not on behavior as much as the symbolism or iconography of appearing in a performance.

Schechner takes his impulse and emphasis from the repetition of rituals, of rehearsals, of learning cultural and professional roles⁸. Phelan takes her impulse from the slippages and lacunae of representation and she searches for the “unmarked” subjectivity of identity. These are not necessarily competing conceptions of “performance,” but are different emphases on aspects of performance that co-exist. Performances are repeatable and they are behaviors (a “doing”) that can be rehearsed and inhabited or enacted by different performers; however, performances are also ephemeral and never the same. They are subjunctive and subjective all at once. These distinctions are important to sort out in considering performance in prison where

⁸ Following Victor Turner’s work on ritual and Erving Goffman’s work on role playing in everyday life.

behavior is a special concern (and control by the institution) and where representations of imprisoned bodies, subjectivities and prisoner identities are always contested and troubled.

Schechner writes:

Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated and transformed. The performers get in touch with, recover, remember or even invent these strips of behavior and then rebehave according to these strips, either by being absorbed into them (playing the role, going into a trance) or by existing side by side with them (Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*) (36).

Schechner's operative metaphor is that behavior is like a film-strip which can be cut up, edited, reconstituted or remade. His emphasis is on the way that behavior gets rebehaved— thus, “performance” is behavior that is functionally carried out and enacted by performers.

With prisoners performing inside prisons, it is equally interesting to unpack the connotations of the word “restore” in this definition of performance. “Restore,” as in restorative justice, can also mean making restitution, and “restore” also evokes returning to the community outside the walls of the prison. “Behavior” is further troubled by the orientation of the justice system towards “offending behavior,” “criminal behavior,” and other related discourses, such as: penology, cognitive behavioral psychology, and rehabilitation. This is important because in prison, despite many rituals, it is routines that best capture the repetitive absorption of prisoners into the performativity of the prison itself. “Restored Behavior” is an excellent and useful description of what the prisoners can achieve through performances with TO methods and techniques, as I will demonstrate below with examples of Forum Theatre in a youth prison; however, it is wise to keep the emphasis on the kind of “restoration” that is not only a sliced film strip, or the twice behaved behavior, but also the imagination

and creation of restorative behaviors that are in line with Schechner's paradoxical inclusion of transformation and invention in his definition of "restored behavior" (seemingly contradictory only because transformation and invention are what is new, not what is repeated). In other words, it will be necessary to distinguish between the type of repetition of behavior that can be described as *routine* and variations that can be described as a newly formed critical version of behavior ("restorative" behaviors).

Likewise, Phelan's focus on problems of representation are significant and helpful in pointing out the blind spots of prisoner identities or for me in avoiding totalizing fictions of prisoner subjectivity or agency in describing their performances. Her doubtful approach to visual modes of representation are helpful in theorizing the functions and the limits of Image Theatre, as I will describe them below, since Image Theatre consciously intends to "concretize" invisible subjectivity by fetishizing images into communal, representative icons. When I apply Phelan's doubts to Image Theatre interesting questions about its functions emerge. Phelan writes:

Among the challenges this poses is how to retain the power of the unmarked by surveying it within a theoretical frame. By exposing the blind spot within the theoretical frame itself, it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim (2).

In the context of the politics of representational visibility as a prime concern of cultural theory, Phelan's statement is about *not repeating* the effacing power of framing and naming "under represented" (or other bodies and their images) under performativity. These doubts is a helpful cautionary for my study of prisoners in prisons who are already objects of surveillance. However, Phelan is still holding out the prospect of empowerment through the unmarked. For an insight into "the power of the unmarked," Phelan is seeking a value for that which escapes or exceeds

representation. Phelan suggest that “visibility is a trap” that “summons surveillance and the law” following her understanding of Lacan’s theories of visibility. This unmarked power holds several valances for theatre in prisons—what flies below the radar of the institution? Already prisoners have many types of “unmarked power” that exist in the blind spots of the panopticon or are ways of knowing that evade the traps of visibility. What does Image Theatre mean in such a context?

In *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner predicted a new kind of theatre director who would take up the call of restored behavior as ethnology and make it a methodology:

Presently the theatre director is leaving the shadowy, out of sight off stage and entering the stage not just as another performer but as a unique figure: the embodiment of the workshop rehearsal process. Fieldworkers now not only watch but learn, participate and initiate actions. Directors have been, and field workers are becoming, specialists in restored behavior. In this epoch of information and reflexive hyperconsciousness we not only want to know, we also want to know how we know what we know (109).

This passage serves as a good foil for introducing my function in developing and performing theatre in prisons with prisoners. TO techniques are rooted in the workshop rehearsal model, much as Brecht’s *Lehrstück* valued the repetitions of rehearsal and the process orientation of his plays. Such a focus is on the performers’ ways of knowing rather than the edification of an audience of outsiders. However, making restored behavior a process in ethnography means immersion, but it also means that the Director or fieldworker is “between two roles just as he is between two cultures (Schechner 108)” since he is not a performer and not a spectator, and also “not not” those roles. In the prison theatre described below my role as TO Joker is not as similar to that of an ethnographic fieldworker as it is to a teacher following the model of Paulo Freire. Similar to the expert in restored behavior described above

though, I did learn, participate and initiate action. In prison settings, the key is to have a process for restoring behavior that always draws out the contradictions of a theatre of liberation in maximum confinement is always aware of postmodern doubts about representation.

The outcome of this theatre with prisoners, as it is demonstrated in this chapter is not studying or recording ethnology of prison culture; the outcome is a “pathology of hope” (Baz Kershaw’s term for radical performances under constraint). Kershaw uses the example of Theatre in Prison in Britain to make the point that contradictions, limitations and co-optations by the total institution of prison are not the end of a radical meaning of performing there. According to Kershaw (on prison theatre):

Hence, radical performance may be generated by a performative reflexivity that embraces and comprehends, in the sense of taking in, the contradictions of its context. The sources of such reflexive, performative knowledge can be found at the heart of the very disciplinary processes that aim to eliminate it (Radical 154).

In this chapter, *The Rhythm of the Machine*, I look for the pedagogical process of such a performative reflexivity in the Brechtian heritage of TO and argue that the young men of the Louis Gossett Youth Residential Center in Lansing, NY express critical awareness of their own lived experiences in and out of prison that are otherwise hard to see, hard to say and hard to examine.

The Rhythm of the Machine

“They always talking about respect up in this place,” complained one young man with frustration. As a member of a group of young men in prison, aged 14-20, meeting at the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residence in upstate New York, he was not alone in his disdain for the topic under discussion, even though the question, “What is

respect?” had been proposed and chosen by the previous years’ group. At the end of each year, during four years of meeting at Gossett, we decided upon a message, a suggestion or a question to pass on to the next year’s group. But this offering, exploring respect, seemed tiresome and suspiciously programmatic to the latest group, or so I thought from the slumped bodies, glassy looks, and turned heads in front of me. Only our two Cornell undergraduate volunteers wanted to try. In response to the undergraduate volunteers, a few of the young men tried to define respect with platitudes such as “do the right thing,” “be tolerant of others,” “take responsibility for yourself and your actions,” but their deadpan, rehearsed deliveries belied their lack of interest. Language failed to speak in this case: the word “respect” that the earlier group found compelling and profound came across as overused and empty to the ears of the next group. The young men were rightly suspicious of our intentions in introducing a term that is a cliché across a range of programming in prisons. Though the topic or theme of “respect” had emerged sincerely from the end meeting of a previous year’s group, it appeared insincere to a group just starting out. It was a pedagogical dead end. How could we convey the heartfelt intention of the previous year’s group that somehow grappling with this word would carry forward what they had come to value about being a group—a group meeting to use theatre for critical deliberation in a prison. Why was this word important to pass on? To break this impasse I introduced the group to Augusto Boal’s Image Theatre techniques. Using the exercise *Image of the Word*, we made “The Image of the Word Respect and its Opposite,” and a significant transformation of the group into critical learners took place.

We began the image exercise by standing in a circle. In the center of the circle two of the young men agreed to be our “modeling clay.” I invited anyone in the circle to take a turn as sculptor by stepping forward and showing the two “modeling clay” volunteers the positions he wanted them to hold as sculptures or images of the word

“respect.” Each sculptor used a mirroring technique to show, rather than tell, what the image should look like. They created the images in silence. If the image required more bodies, a gesture of the hand invited more into the center. Another wave of the hands could wipe the slate clean and send everyone back to neutral positions for a new sculpture; or, adding or subtracting people from the center could modify an existing image. Without stopping to discuss and observe each image along the way, the young men proceeded to show as many images of the word “respect” as they could, one after the other, until there were no new ideas. The succession of images was like a dance in which rhythms and patterns emerged through collaborative choreography.

All of the images of “respect” created by the young men were violent: imaginary guns were pointed at heads, bodies were curled up on the ground being kicked or beaten by others, knives slashed at throats, people pushed and attacked and ambushed others from behind, within the sculptures. These violent and aggressive images were so different from the tenor and intentions of the “do the right thing,” and “be tolerant of others” statements made in the initial discussion described above that, at first, the group had trouble explaining how the images showed what “respect” looked like. “It’s like that, but…” one comment trailed off with a shrug of the shoulders. Considering the group’s general air of surprise at this outcome, I suggested we dispense with observations and try a second stage of the exercise: the image of the opposite of respect.

All of the images of “the opposite of respect” were more in keeping with the clichés of the original discussion. Brotherhood dominated the scenes: images of the young men with their arms around each other, “walking the other way,” “getting away from trouble,” and, in one interesting scene, an image from the previous set (of a downed and beaten body) was recreated in order to show lifting that person up and helping him. But how did these cooperative, compassionate images show the *opposite*

of respect? In order to think through the two sets of images, I asked the group for specific observations such as “What did you see?” and “What did you show?” The responding observations quickly reached a consensus that the images that showed “respect” through violence were reactions to situations that required “stepping up,” “protecting your own,” and “having somebody’s back.” One young man said he saw all the images together as a story of “a retaliation situation.” Respect, in these images, is violent because it is a matter of reputation and survival. Conversely, the brotherhood scenes were either “being a punk” or they were considered too unrealistic to matter and therefore the opposite of respect⁹. All in the group agreed that there was a big gap between this kind of respect and the kind of respect we had talked about in the discussion.

Later, one of the Cornell students—a black man from Brooklyn, where he had more than once seen former Gossett group members after their release back into his neighborhood— offered another explanation for the violent images. He considered them to be “safe” images. Because they were violent, they made the sculptor look tough to the group, and to us, thereby serving to protect the image-maker. However, I add, even this insight backs up the group consensus that the kind of “respect” we revealed was a matter of reputation and survival, not only relevant for the young men out on the street, but also a performance for their own protection within our group. The young men are alienated from the cliché of respect (respect for the law, respect for authority, respect for parents, respect for others and more), but they recognized the meaning of respect brought out in their own images as true.

Once the images revealed the gap between the living reality of respect and the hackneyed “respect” they had originally thought I was asking them for, an opportunity

⁹ Except for the re-created scene in which a person in need is lifted up: in that case the sculptor wanted to show the opposite of the previous image rather than an image of the opposite of respect.

opened for a critical deliberation that raised questions in the spirit that the previous year's group intended. A visit from a guest speaker with the authority of life experience helped develop these questions into an effective and moving critique. Elvin Johnson is a former prisoner who co-founded an educational program in maximum security at Lorton prison while he was a prisoner (the Washington DC prison in Virginia that is now closed) with Patricia O'Connor of Georgetown University. Elvin spent over ten years in prison for an armed, drug related crime before achieving parole. By the time he spoke with the young men at Gossett he had been out on parole for years. Elvin created an epiphany for the young men when he interpreted their images of respect and its opposite as *prison values*.

First, Elvin asked how many of the young men had fathers, brothers, or older cousins in prison or in jail. All but a few out of our group of 15 raised their hands in acknowledgement. Then he asked them what kind of teaching their prison-experienced relatives had offered them. What kind of advice had the young men received? After listening to a few answers, Elvin said that he could tell from their answers and from their images that they had learned prison survival skills long before arriving in juvenile detention. As he explained it to them during his visit:

It's a thing now, that you have to *build this character*— which calls [i.e. signals] status and respect. You know? Young men in society will nowadays do it with guns and violence and stuff and that's the sad thing about it. A lot of these attitudes ... extend from prison life. It extends from having an Uncle or cousin or a friend that's been in jail. And [they tell you] ... "You don't go for this and you don't go for that; this you just don't do, you just don't do that"...it stems from, they carrying a lot of these Uncles and Cousins that give them a lot of these *prison values* [My italics].

The fortunate addition of Elvin's expertise accelerated the emerging insights of the group, and his assessment was a necessary next step for the deliberations we had begun in Image Theatre because he validated the experiences of the young men and he

diagnosed the consequences of the alternative vision of respect they had shown in their images. He made an impression on them because his authority as a man who had survived adult prison gave him their immediate respect[sic]¹⁰. Elvin called their vision a set of values, pointing out that these values originated from widespread incarceration. It is also interesting and relevant that Elvin used a theatre metaphor, “building a character” to describe the performativity of prison values. This is an example of how performance is already part of a language of survival inside prison (other adult prisoners have confirmed the analogy of performance, telling me that they rehearse “looking hard” and how to walk, talk and present themselves— just as actors prepare for roles). The young men validated and agreed with Elvin’s conclusion that these “values” had come out to the street *from prison*, to the young, and they began to talk about the ways that prison values impacted their thinking and their decision-making out on the street. They agreed with Elvin that prison values create situations that can lead them into prison. Elvin thereby helped them to elevate their observations about respect to the large issue of endemic cycles that contribute to record high levels of incarceration.

My purpose here is to examine how and why theatre practices such as Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed [TO] can create opportunities, as in my opening example, for critical deliberations springing from the hard to see and hard to say, especially in prison. For the purpose of examining TO work in prisons, however, three major influences inform the methods: From Bertolt Brecht, theatre as a tool of social critique; from Paulo Freire, a pedagogy of power sharing and an ethical stance for practitioners and intellectuals towards the oppressed; and, from Augusto Boal’s re-imagining of role playing therapy, his definition of catharsis as the removal of

¹⁰ The young men’s *respect* for Elvin combines “respect” in terms of prison values (his ability to survive inside) with recognition of his experience and their perception that he would recognize and understand their circumstances.

“detrimental blocks” to action (Rainbow 73). Altogether, these influences converge in the attempt to realize an aesthetic, performance-based approach to critical deliberation. Prison is a limit test that makes clear both the promise and the limitations of TO work.

Pedagogy of Critical Deliberation

Perhaps the most important attribute of TO in prison is that the prisoners are put in control of making meaning. This is no small matter within the confines and controls of prison life. The Image of Respect and Its Opposite above, is indirectly analogous to Brecht’s call for a “demonstrator” actor in epic theatre who “has been through an ‘experience,’ but he is not out to make his demonstration serve as an experience for the audience” (122). The young men were demonstrating what respect looked like to them, and they were capturing a reality that was hard to say or see without the critical distance their images provided¹¹. The young men were then able to make the “changeover from representation to commentary” (Brecht 126) effectively by showing situations rather than platitudes, and with Elvin’s helpful label “prison values” they focused on how these insights fit into a broader social critique. Theatrically, these techniques build upon the “Brechtian device:” anything that jars spectators into a more critical view of representation¹². It isn’t stretching the term

¹¹ Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place, but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case a “catharsis” occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness (Boal, Rainbow 122).

¹² Gayatri Spivak cautions about out a common slippage in the use of representation by Western theorists:

Two sense of representation are being run together: representation as in “speaking for,” as in politics, and representation as “re-presentation,” as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only an “action,” the

“alienation effect” too much too claim that the young men were performing and witnessing their own alienation through the violent images they created. Though Brecht uses these terms to describe techniques and practices that break a theatre audience of the habit of empathy and the expectation of realism in order to awaken critical distance, Boal relies upon such Brechtian techniques to break participants, “spect-actors,” of perceptual habits that prevent critical perspective.

Mady Schutzman calls Boal a “Brechtian Shaman” for tapping into the “seemingly odd conflation between ‘alienation techniques’ (a la Brecht) and collective playing/storytelling...an aesthetic space in which activist and therapeutic agendas coincide” (Playing 148). Hers is an apt metaphor because a claim of TO is that critical reflection and artistic perception are simultaneous. In fact, because TO relies upon the

theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one representing reality accurately) (275).

Spivak, thus, explains two kinds of inability that emerge from the writings of theorists. First, that the theorists cannot presume to speak for a subject they themselves have de-centered. Second, by asserting that no realities are accurate (being also representations) they have removed the ability of the subject to speak the truth of his or her reality. Yet, Spivak claims, their own writings create these disabilities through various unacknowledged agendas—played out in their own representationality (and, I add, theatricality!). Further, Spivak concludes that “The subaltern cannot speak” (308) since oppression and repression exclude, or block, the very possibility of speaking; and, therefore, there is a duty for the non-western intellectual to theorize and criticize (“on their behalf” is the unstated implication— revealing a potential trap). She says “the female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (308). In other words, she ends up in an anguished position: she is writing from within an identity; she is fighting against an apparent paralysis.

In regard to Boal’s use of Brechtian devices this is a warning to heed. Boal means to both change the “speaking for” representation by means of the “spect-actor” and put the “re-presentation” of art or philosophy back under the control of the participant. Yet, this may open up new problems of “identity politics,” a frequent charge against TO is that it assumes coherent homogenous groups of participants who share an experience and the stakes in any outcome.

“spect-actor,” Boal’s term for an active, participant audience member most of the work is closer in spirit to the Lehrstück, the learning play, the performance that captures the learning spirit of the rehearsal when choices and interpretations are still open matters. Likewise, Boal has spoken of “rehearsing for reality.”¹³ This is a Brechtian rehearsal strategy seeking to propose alternative meanings and narratives as the images of respect and its opposite did. Brecht writes: “The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)” (79).

¹³ Rehearsal is a tricky term in this usage. It surely carries the weight of the standard meaning—repetition. However, all of the TO work is improvisatory in nature. This means that “rehearsal for reality” should not imply a scripted approach. Boal means that a performance, especially of Forum Theatre is like a microcosm of circumstances and he means that you can create a new character, one who tries out different strategies (not merely the behavior rehearsal of psychodrama, but actually the performance of a transformed self). Originally, this included examples in Brazil of rehearsing a strike or workers action, but by the time he reached Paris and started to develop the introspective techniques the change from “rehearsal for revolution” to “rehearsal for reality” implied that not all situations were simple class struggle, but that reality itself was a contested and improvisatory realm with multiple, overlapping claims on the self. It became necessary to develop the “Cops in the head” and “Rainbow of Desire” techniques to widen the project of empowerment to one of intervention in any case in which someone was, or felt, powerless for some reason. This improvisatory impulse is one that is important for prisoners, especially because it allows them an instant literacy in communicating, while being flexible enough to exceed the limitations of any one problem scene—to invite imagination, encourage the breakdown of narrative and leave the power of expression firmly in their hands.

In his first book Boal writes:

...the proletariat and the oppressed classes do not know yet what their world will be like; consequently their theatre will be the rehearsal, not the finished spectacle (Boal Theatre 142).

Thus, a practical use of theatre is for imagining the ideal and then playing out strategies for getting to that ideal. My comments in the preface and introduction resonate with this in two key places: the comparison with the rehearsal driven philosophy of Brecht’s Lehrstück, and in the conception of the think-tank theatre (which I will consider for its potential use in public policy and institutional change).

Yet this is not a didactic, proscriptive method, but rather a postmodern Brecht as envisioned by Elizabeth Wright:

[Brecht's]...plays provide a knowledge of the condition of representation for a subject (character and spectator) in such a way that s/he can only have access to such knowledge via a theatricalization of experience (99).

Similarly, TO work theatricalizes experience by providing access to representation and the re-presentation of knowledge. There is something about the experimental nature of playing with representation itself that suggests change and alterity.

So, what is a Lehrstück? It is a play meant for investigation and experimentation by non-professionals such as students, workers and other interest groups (Wright 12) that might have a stake in the problems posed by the play. Performers in a Lehrstück have a different audience than that for an Aristotelian play. For a Lehrstück the audience is "...a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it [the Lehrstück] treats it [the audience] as individuals of mental and emotional maturity, and believes it wishes to be so regarded" (Brecht 79). Brecht relies upon such an audience to be co-producers of meaning. Participant-performers make meaning through their experience of inhabiting the play—through pedagogic interplay within the theatrical representation. Brecht writes about the pedagogic function this way: "In this way a collaboration develops between participants and the apparatus, in which expression is more important than accuracy" (31). I interpret this statement to be an explanation of Brecht's new emphasis on the proper relationship of a performer to a play script, music score or other "apparatus" of the theatre: it is the participation in "expression," or performance of the apparatus, that leads to learning. The realistic "accuracy" of performance is not as important—the rehearsal learning experience is then more important than mastery

and accuracy for presentation to an audience and the learning is done by the participant-performer in “collaboration” with the play. By participating in a Lehrstück, a person may come to “a critical reorganization of experience” (Bathrick 98) because he or she is a co-producer of meaning. At heart, a Lehrstück is a problem posing play because it presents the player with an experience that is tough to organize (similar to “hard to see and hard to say” above).

One of the most striking TO games that theatricalizes experience in this way is “the machine of rhythms,” which is intended to project back a reflection of the culture of a place or of an institution—often parodically. A participant steps into the middle and offers a sound and motion that he repeats over and over. A second person steps in to add a second sound and motion that in some way attaches to the first, as if each person were a part of a machine. Then, in turn, each of the remaining participants steps in to add to the machine. The first run is for practice only and ends up as a nonsense machine. Then all of the participants are asked to start again and make a new machine that captures the lived experience of an environment or culture. For example, at Gossett we made “the machine of the Gossett Center.” Without discussion, planning or rehearsal, each young man stepped into the machine when he was ready to add something that “showed” the Gossett Center as it was.

The spirituality room at the Louis Gossett Jr. Youth Residential Facility in Lansing, New York looks like a conference hotel room. There is a flip chart in the corner. Sometimes slogans or bullet points remain on the board from conflict resolution classes or counselor meetings that also meet in the room. Once the word “RESPECT” was left on the board by one of the educational programs, reminding me of the frequent use of the term across programs. There is also small electric organ in the corner for church services. Usually 2 or 3 undergraduate volunteers from my first year writing seminar at Cornell, *Theatre Behind Bars*, begin by clearing the tables and

stacking the chairs against the walls to create an open space. The young men, mainly Latino, Puerto Rican and Black (one or two each year were White) are led into the room single file by their Youth Advisors. They wear uniforms of red polo shirts, khaki pants and sneakers that are so ironically close to Cornell clothing that I once showed up in the same outfit without thinking about it. Shoelace color indicates levels of achievement and privilege or of probation and punishment.

Gossett is a medium-security facility that looks a lot like a high school behind fences and gates. In making arrangements with the education staff we always asked for young men who did not seem to respond to the other programs offered at this medium secure facility. However administrators usually wanted to give us their honor students. On balance, we got a mix. No one was allowed to volunteer for the program, but we offered an “out” after two meetings to anyone who wanted it. Once I was told this was the only program that crossed the lines of the unit divisions. This was the setting of the *Manhood and Responsibility Seminar*, so named by Latino Studies and English Professor Ben Olguín, then at Cornell, who co-founded the group and participated in its first year. We read prisoner autobiographies, watched films and (taped) performances, hosted guest speakers on prisoner issues, and we used theatre as the mode of discussion and critique. The Gossett Youth Advisors also acted as internal guards and observers: they always stayed in the room with us sometimes randomly deciding to participate.

In the “machine” of Gossett, the young men performed the sights and sounds of the essence of their Gossett experience within this setting: the line-up, the count, the gate, the loudspeaker announcements, the walkie-talkies of the advisors/counselors, the regimentation of the cafeteria and the unit—they showed a machine of constant interruptions and constant regimentation. The individual parts of the machine captured their aesthetic experience of Gossett with fidelity and insight into the accumulated

effects of the sights and sounds. The parody of the Gossett experience in the game amounted to a commentary: lampooning something recognizable, but unsaid, about the place and its people, by reducing a motive or a behavior into a revealing sound or gesture. For example, the rhythm of Gossett was all of the things that it had in common with adult prisons. The “machine” of Gossett highlights those experiences that have their cumulative effect in repetition. Despite the school programs, the counseling, the sessions in conflict resolution, visitations from family, and a hundred other things that go on in a youth facility. The young men chose to portray what was most overwhelming about being there: the restrictions on their movement and their voices. The machine of rhythms was a canny way to cut through to their core aesthetic experience of the routines of Gossett by performing the gestures of those routines. It intensified the aesthetic dimensions of their reality—as the young men perceive them individually and collectively. Their machine was a collection of gestures that captured and yet undermined the reality they represented, as with Brecht’s conception of “gestus.” Elin Diamond describes the usefulness of Brechtian gestus as a critical tool well:

[The alienation effect and the gestus]... both are body conscious ways of fighting against dominant material social relationships (by estrangement) and of revealing discursive and representational structures by making the codes of meaning visible to the audience and by inviting critique rather than identification (89).

This reading of gestus describes what was shown in the machine of rhythms. By putting their bodies into the emblematic and symbolic language of images, the young men were showing what was familiar to them, but they were also estranging their environment too. The codes of meaning: the line up, the count and such things as ankle cuffs were shown—making visible prison practices that tend to cause visitors,

even volunteers, to turn their heads away. The machine of rhythms is a body conscious brechtian gestus.

In describing the effect of expressive rhythms in the machine, the racist history of the term rhythm gets in the way, but is also highly instructive. “Rhythm,” as a cultural signifier and coded word, has been ascribed to people of color throughout the history of US racism, and also deployed positively by people of color, often in resistance to white culture. “Rhythm” is an overdetermined, racially loaded word. Then it is helpful to define rhythm in this case, where that majority of the Gossett participants are young men of color, as an expressive and aesthetic critical gesture, differentiated by narrowly referring here to the gestic performance of routines. Brecht in his article “On Rhymeless Verse With Irregular Rhythms (118 –120)” develops “gestic” rhythm: he proposes the oxymoronic metaphor of irregular rhythms that prevent the ear from gliding past the message. Gestic rhythm is any rhythm that causes some difficulty that makes the listener question the intentions of the content (which Brecht understood as having a diminishing effect even in his time due to jazz inventions that were retraining the modern ear). Though the young men did not resort to “irregular rhythm”, nor would it have had the same effect as it would have in Brecht’s day if they had, their rhythm revealed something irregular and gestic about the routines surrounding them. All of the motions and sounds they made were about the actions of prison routine (from the YDAs, guards and staff) that control their environment.

What The Machine of Rhythms showed so well was an embodied experience of the physical sensations and silencing effects of living at Gossett: its daily rhythms. Their machine demonstrated that the same control and security apparatuses that the adult prisons use are used at Gossett and that they overwhelm the “reform” and “educational” mission of the juvenile “residence.” In our subsequent discussion

several of the young men felt they captured something in the performance that they did not know how to say about their knowledge of the place or of themselves in situ. Perhaps this aesthetic experience is a contributing factor in a cycle that does nothing to prevent so many “graduates” of Gossett from going on to adult prisons. Following one evening meeting, one Youth Advisor (YDA) admitted to the group that he was frustrated and downhearted when he visited an adult prison as part of his training and saw so many faces he knew from Gossett. This revelation adds poignancy to the metaphor of the “machine” — a machine producing adult prisoners from juvenile prisoners. The young men started with their bodies in the space they inhabit, but also performed a critical reframing of that “machine” experience, drawing on their embodied knowledge, both accumulated physical perceptions and habitual physical responses. These perceptions are not normally visible. In this regard there is a problem with the concept of a body conscious gestus that is analogous to the concerns some feminist scholars raise about the problems of representing the female body in performance. Peggy Phelan writes:

Like the fantasy of erotic desire which frames love, the distortions of forgetting which infect memories, and the blind spots laced through the visual field, a believable image is the product of a negotiation with the unverifiable real. As a representation of the real, the image is always, partially phantasmatic. In doubting the authenticity of the image, one questions as well the veracity of she who makes and describes it. To doubt the subject seized by the eye is to doubt the subjectivity of the seeing “I” (1).

This passage lays out a problem of disconnection between the ability to criticize representations of bodies and an empowering use of identity, and Phelan does so with special emphasis on the problems inherent in the visual field that is helpful in thinking through possible limitations of Image Theatre. Forgetting, blind spots, desires, blocks— all affect what we call an “image” to such an extent that there is a

“negotiation with the unverifiable real” (she could almost have said a negotiation with the phenomenal¹⁴). Thus, Image Theatre’s simple acceptance of images as instantly understandable is problematic. Phelan points out the danger of questioning the “authenticity” of an image is that any doubt amounts to questioning the authenticity of its maker. Phelan continues:

I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see is in every way related to what one can say. In framing more and more images from the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other. Representation always follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing (2).

In this passage, Phelan’s point is relevant to a practice such as the Image of the Word where both the image and the word are icons that can be deconstructed. The Image of

¹⁴ In regard to phenomenology, there is a surprising resonance between the theories of Merleau- Ponty and Augusto Boal. Both imply that perception is intermingled with artistic imagination. Merleau-Ponty establishes a dual reality of body and environment that encourages inter subjectivity (Jay 311) and so does Boal. Merleau-Ponty writes:

We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders (137).

Compare this with Boal:

Two Unities: We start from the principle that the human being is a unity, an indivisible whole. . . . all ideas, all mental images, all emotions reveal themselves physically. That is the first unity, the unity of the physical and the psychic apparatuses. The second is that of the five senses—none exists separately, they too are all linked. . . We sing with our whole body, not just our vocal chords. We make love with our whole body not just our vocal chords (Games 61).

In both cases there is a notion of visibility made concrete, and a modulation between the individual perception of a body and its generalizable properties.

the Word approaches from the opposite direction from Phelan's description: that what one can *say* may also hide what one can see. But once the image of the word is shown, then what can be said is indeed expanded into unforeseen "insight." Phelan links this potential to the appropriation of the image of the "under-represented other" by culture in order to further contain and control those images, such as images of women or of prisoners or people of color.

The unmarked is not the newest landscape vulnerable to tourists. The unmarked is not spatial; nor is it temporal; it is not metaphorical; nor is it literal. It is a configuration of subjectivity which exceeds, even while informing, both the gaze and language. In the riots of sound language produces, the unmarked can be heard as silence. In the plenitude of pleasure produced by photographic vision, the unmarked can be seen as a negative. In the analysis of the means of production, the unmarked signals the un(re)productive (27).

The metaphor "negative" is an artful way of encapsulating both an oppositional image and an "original" that is copied by photographic vision. Negatives are not shown, but they "make" the print. In comparison with Phelan's comments, it is important to remember that Image Theatre is silent and in the Image of the Word, "respect," our first set of images were the "negative" that we did not expect to see. The follow-up conversation with Elvin focused on prisons' self-reproducing qualities and posited a critique of the possibility of "un(re)productivity" of "respect" as the young men understood the word. In the passage above Phelan interrogates any subjective agency claim of eluding the forces that wish to contain such agency or self-representation. Phelan troubles the possibility of making meaning through images. This trouble with performing images applies to the prisoners' agency in making meaning vs. the prisons' structures of containment. She locates the power of resisting containment in the inversion of surveillance by looking for the unseen, unmarked, negative. But the key to the "unmarked" is its impossible location within the "broken symmetry between

self and other” (27). What is covered up by an image? This is a counterpoint to considering what it is that Image Theatre can do. “Between self and other” also invokes the oppressor/oppressed split that prisoners must deconstruct through self-critical reflection in representing themselves.

Boal tends to overlook the difficulty of self-critical reflection by thinking in terms of a “personal unity” of identity, and yet he too, looks for a practice that can transform the self-image and representation of the body from fixed image (like Phelan’s photos) into malleable critical reflection. Boal writes:

It is interesting to note that the word ‘psyche,’ which designates the whole ensemble of the psychic phenomenon that go to make up a personal unity, also designates a ‘cheval glass,’ a fixed base, mobile mirror the angle of which can be adjusted to allow one to see one’s whole body. In the psyche/mirror one sees one’s body; in one’s body (in the theatre) one sees one’s psyche (Rainbow 28).

As his illustration of this crossing of psyche and mirror image, Boal tells the story of a Swiss soldier, who is confronted by a superior officer. The officer forces the man to look in the mirror. When the man says that he sees himself in the mirror the officer corrects him: the mirror only shows a soldier. Boal continues, “instead of seeing himself in the mirror, he looks at himself on stage and sees himself directly; but the mirror is his first stage...The Theatre of the Oppressed is a mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image!” (Rainbow 29). By returning control of making meaning through the body TO attempts to transform the image of the self within social situations from a fixed image into a changeable image.

TO is also a method for focusing collective attention on physical metaphors useful in critiquing self and group: Boal’s “Great Game of Power” is a helpful example of performing a body conscious gestus as a metaphor for critiquing power. The game is played in two stages. In the first stage the Joker presents a group of chairs

and invites the participants to arrange them in various positions, but always making it clear that one or more chairs holds the power of position and space over the others. Each arrangement presents a physical metaphor of power that makes clear the power of position, height, distance, line of sight, and other matters of expressing and reading power in the aesthetic space. One of the arrangements is chosen for the clarity of the power relationship it reveals and because the group “recognizes” the power relationship, and then, in the second stage of the game, the participants place their bodies in the scene one by one—taking the most powerful position they can imagine. New power images emerge with each entry as each previous image is trumped more or less successfully by the next.

When the young men at Gossett played the Great Game of Power, they reached a physical impasse similar to the verbal impasse over the word respect. In three out of four years at Gossett, three different groups of young men created the same image and the same deadlock. They started with a single row of chairs that they believed showed the clearest expression of power, a line up. One by one, the young men entered the image and took a seat in the row. Once the row was filled nobody else would enter the scene and the young men in the chairs sat there waiting until the group gave up. We tried again the following week. This time we observed that, each person in the line of chairs had a different facial expression and posture which we characterized in discussion as “angry face,” “bored face,” “not really here,” “hanging back,” “glassy eyes,” and “can’t touch me.” These young men were signaling interior attitudes on the surface of their faces in subtle and suggestive ways. These were their choices for the most powerful position they could take: masks — attempts to preserve or obtain power against a force just outside of the image — the one calling for the lineup.

After we retried the game at the beginning of our meetings over the course of two to three weeks, the young men at Gossett finally stepped up on their chairs or

turned their backs or took other positions around the room. The first time this happened, it caused raucous laughter and the release of a lot of tension in the room. Following that first change from the row image, the young men raced to create all kinds of physically challenging positions, including upside down headstands against the wall. In discussions with the young men over what the initial deadlock meant, they concluded that it might have something to do with the constant lineups and counts they endured each day. Gossett residents line up for everything, much as elementary school students do. The day-to-day aesthetic experience of the line up impacted and informed the young men's critique of power in a way that would be hard to capture in words. From them, I have learned that groups using this technique may reveal the inner workings of the aesthetics of power within a group, and begin a series of deconstructive and self-reflective actions. As Boal has said, "in theatre we re-live and observe ourselves better" (Legislative 70).

In sharp contrast, in the year 2000, in the first of a series of annual introductory workshops in TO techniques for Harvard Law School students taking Lani Guinier's course in Critical Perspectives of the Law, a memorable and compelling progression of choices emerged during the Great Game of Power. As the law students assumed a variety of self-assured positions among the chairs, each taking the most powerful position available to them, one student immediately stood on a chair in the center of the image. The next student to enter placed herself in the position to whisper into the ear of the person standing on the chair (the power behind the power). The next person trumped the power behind the scenes approach by holding up a dollar on the other side of the student standing on the chair (economic power, bribery, or special interest funding). Following that, another participant reached into his pocket and held up an American Express Platinum card (deeper pockets). All of the students revealed their immediate understanding of competition and of trumping built into the game rules,

but, most interesting, were the creative types of invisible power made visible. The law students clearly felt comfortable with manipulating power as the Gossett young men did not. The law students were also comfortable with their assumptions about reality as revealed in the game.

Dr. Ann DuCille, the Director of the African American Studies department at Wesleyan University had hurt her foot on the day of a TO workshop I led on “political race” in the fall of 2002 (part of a two day symposium on Lani Guinier’s *The Miner’s Canary*), and so it happened that she made one of the most startling and original observations of The Great Game of Power—she saw it from the side. During the first stage of the game when chairs are being placed so that one chair has more power than the others, in different configurations, Ann noticed that one chair—the same chair each time—was unconsciously chosen by each participant in turn to be the most powerful chair in every scene. The same chair was put into the position of power each time. Did the chair have an aura? Ann’s observation suggests the inertia of power: each participant may have selected the chair because it was the one that held the power position in the previous scene. If so, placing the chair in power was an unconscious decision, a quickly internalized affect of seeing the chair in a power position. No participant chose this chair purposefully (which we confirmed in the follow up discussion). While this may not happen every time the game is played, it serves as a wonderful metaphor for the inertia of power and the aesthetic dimensions of power. It serves to remind of the power of fetishizing and objectifying anything or anyone who comes into the center of an aesthetic space. To think of one chair, with no special qualities, holding onto power in scene after scene with player after player despite all the appearances of change gives one pause. It is Ann’s critical vision of power through the medium of performance that Brecht wanted to achieve and that Boal’s games so elegantly capture.

Brecht has written of the Lehrstück, the learning play, and the performance that captures the learning spirit of the rehearsal when choices and interpretations are still open matters. Likewise, Boal has spoken of “rehearsing for reality.” The Great Game of Power is such a rehearsal. Its power is that an aesthetic space is vital to *feeling* and *seeing* the oppositional reframing of power dynamics. The playing of the game, as with the arsenal of warm up exercises in TO work, presents compelling and efficient physical metaphors that rehearse and experiment with alternative ways of understanding and realizing power and identity. In this way, Boal’s TO adds a pedagogical methodology to deliberative practice. The Great Game of Power worked against the prison environment by creating an opportunity for reflexivity on the performative power of constraint. It is a good example of how the power of repetition in “restored behavior” can accomplish invention and critique by making power effects visible. On the other hand, it also revealed an important limitation in that the effects of institutional power were examined as metaphor without being diminished. The young men were not empowered to act like the Harvard Law School students.

Augusto Boal often says that it is not the place of theatre to make “social movements but rather movements in the social.” Likewise, Victor Turner considered himself a social anthropologist interested in the analysis of micro events within a “social, dramatic” framework. By movements in the social Boal means that theatre cannot impose an ideological message: “it is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined” (Theatre 14). For Turner, possible paths of action that deviate from the dominant, ideological norms can only occur within a social dramatic framework when liminality occurs. Liminality is “literally ‘being –on-a-threshold,’ {which} means a state or process which is betwixt- and between the normal, day-to-day cultural states and processes.... A time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen”

(qtd in Austin 39). The liminal is a release from the normal and the law bound in favor of alternative social arrangements (Turner 12, 114). When the liminal is invoked “multiple alternative programs may be generated. The result of confrontations between monolithic, power-supported programs, and their many subversive alternatives is a socio-cultural ‘field’ in which many options are provided, not only between programmatic gestalten but also between the parts of different programs” (Turner 14).

TO techniques create an aesthetic and liminal space for undoing the internalized habits of the body and mind that the power to punish produces. This amounts to achieving Freire’s conception of a *conscientizacao* (Freire, Pedagogy 38) that refers to “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality {my italics} (translator’s note in Freire, Pedagogy 19). By creating speaking subjects that can engage and question their own interpellation, TO provides tools for prisoners to address their own survival, first, and then their potential return to the larger society.

In the TO technique known as Forum Theatre, a real to life, intractable problem faced by one of the participants is performed in order to disturb its intractability and in order to try out multiple, potential solutions. These problem-posing narratives dramatize conflict and deliberate and rehearse potential strategies for engaging or responding to the conflict causing the problem. Through such performances conflict becomes a pedagogical tool. The process begins with a story that is “resonant” for the group. By using the term “resonance,” Boal draws an analogy with the physics of sound vibration. This is important because participants in the Forum Theatre must recognize the relevance of the problem posed in the scene they are performing within their own life experiences; metaphorically, they should feel the vibration of the story at the same frequency in their own bodies (an intentional pun

on frequency here). Since vibrations at the same frequency amplify each other, the metaphor can be extended to suggest a synergy within participants that can lead to a collective empowerment interrogating the problem. In other words, the experience does not stay individual, but becomes generalized within the Forum, since interested parties recognize their share in the stakes of the outcome.

The Forum relies upon the active participation of “spect-actors” rather than spectators: audience members are expected to jump up into a scene and replace the protagonist at any point where they have a theory of how to take action to solve the problem. The spect-actor is an important concept that re-imagines representation by opposing the audience’s passivity. Instead, the audience members become the actors, thinking by performing. A spect-actor, Boal writes, “...delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change— in short trains himself for real action” (Theatre 122). The subjecthood of the spect-actor is specifically thought of as retaining the means of theatrical production, but this impulse has developed over time into a new understanding of the ability of the participant/spect-actor to represent himself or herself, thereby reframing the traditional actor/character split into one of spect-actor/character. Spect-actors are invited to make interventions beyond the boundaries of their own identities without anyone forgetting what those boundaries are. Seeing the split between the character and the spect-actor simultaneously, described by Boal as a dichotomy, reveals the negotiation between fictional and lived identities seeking solutions to problems. Of course, solutions are not the main point of Forum theatre; problems faced by the young men of Gossett are too complex and deep-seated for quick fixes.

For example, a Forum Theatre experiment at the Austin J. MacCormack Center, the maximum-security youth facility several towns over from Gossett, showed how conflict is performed in this technique. In the scene a “good student” had to pass by drug dealers on the way to and from school every day. He knew these dealers from school and they knew him by name. The scene occurred when they try to give him free drugs as a “friend”. In the first intervention, the protagonist just walked the other way.

A white Youth Advisor from upstate New York, who was present in the room during the Forum, applauded and cheered the choice to walk the other way as the right choice, the choice to “just say no.” But, the young men playing the dealers seemed dissatisfied with this quick outcome. So I asked the young men what they thought was wrong. “He has to come by here,” one said “we know where he lives,” said another. So I suggested that when we replayed the scene they make it *more difficult* for him. When we did, as soon as the young man started walking the other way, the dealers followed him. He went all around the room faster and faster, over chairs and into corners, but they followed him everywhere. We had just demonstrated a flaw in the “just say no” solution. In discussion, some young men defended the first solution, others asked for more detail about the character’s life in order to make a judgment, and others remained skeptical of the protagonist’s chances. The next day, I fielded a concerned phone call from an administrator wondering if we were glorifying drug dealing. It took some time to explain the goals of “difficultating,” though I was able to reassure him in the end. My perception from the exchanges after the Forum and the discussion with the administrator is that both sides of the conflict from street life, “dealer” and “student,” were represented in the room and the discussion, yet they were collaborating in deliberation.

During another Forum Theatre back at the Gossett Center the young men faced the tough prospect of engaging their own complicity with violent street life

represented in the room. However, they were able to talk about this conflict together. Though Forum Theatre does not usually deal with outright aggression (such interventions are unlikely to succeed), we found ourselves working on the following scene before we realized it was an untenable situation: A man walks into a neighborhood wearing an “8 Ball” leather jacket. He has no idea that the leather jacket has significance to one of the local gangs. When he runs into a group of gang members they taunt him and eventually beat him. The first intervention, replacing the man with the jacket, had him turn and run. Everyone laughed at this solution, because it seemed so obvious. Then, I tried an intervention where I replaced the character and I attempted to hand over the jacket to avoid trouble. This got an even bigger laugh, since it was naïve.

However, when we discussed the scene, one young man pointed out that no change from the man with the jacket would work: all he could do was run. The change had to come from within the gang group, he said. Thus we began a series of scenes in which various members of the gang enacted different types of interventions in the group. None of them worked. Usually the character gave in when the others pressed him on loyalty or toughness. These “failed” scenes depicted something very important. Some young men felt that the gang group was like a family that needed protecting at all costs, since it was a source of their own protection. The way to protect the group was to earn respect for it by becoming feared. Another young man pointed out that even if most people in the group would go along with the idea of not beating the man with the jacket, one person or another might do it anyway as to “prove he was tough,” thereby accomplishing an internal political goal unknown to the man with the jacket. A couple of young men found this to be extremely relevant, saying this was the first time they had ever thought critically of their own responsibility as a member of a group for that group’s actions. We certainly did not come to a satisfactory solution

that day, but we did dramatize the internal and external conflicts that were shaping the behavior and actions in the scene.

In another scene, one depicting racial profiling of car drivers, it was the young men who could do nothing to change the scene. The original four car occupants in the scene argued with the police and ended up getting arrested. A group of four young men did a group replacement and intervention in the scene to show that all four had to cooperate with the police and keep calm. In fact, after this replacement the group decided that nothing else would work. The only sensible route was to disengage from the conflict as much as possible, even if the police were disrespectful. In order to effectively address racial profiling, the young men would need broad support beyond the prison walls.

In all three of the Forum examples conflict is recast as a chance for deliberation., The intractable outcome of conflict is critically challenged. Finally, deliberation applies the insights to critical reflections. This progression takes advantage of theatre's suitability for playing out dramatic conflict; conflict is the engine of theatre, and it is the structure of prisons. Still, any personalized conflict would be dangerous, and so it is an advantage of TO that it makes a definite move to generalize and fictionalize stories and to set up a safe aesthetic space for doing so. This is one of the functions of the warm up and community building theatre games that precede any TO work. What makes this work is the influence on Boal of Freire's theories of exchange based pedagogy.

Paulo Freire writes:

During the phase of the closed society, the people are *submerged* in reality. As that society breaks open, they *emerge*. No longer *mere spectators*, they uncross their arms, renounce expectancy, and demand intervention. No longer satisfied to watch, they want to participate (Freire, Critical 13).

Boal's inspiration for the Theatre of the Oppressed was Paulo Freire's influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Starting from a committed Marxism, and within the movement to extend literacy and education to the peasantry of Brazil in the late 1950's and early 1960's, Freire's work is essentially pedagogy of power sharing. He re-imagined the role of the intellectual, scholar-teacher in order to find an ethical way for teachers to work honorably with oppressed people. Freire believed that this would only be possible if the labor of the worker or peasant was respected on parity with the teacher, and his or her daily life and needs were the topics of both teaching and learning. Thus, learners should be teachers and teachers should be learners: education must be co-intentional and transitive rather than depository and imposing (Freire wanted a problem posing, dialogic education rather than the "banking deposit" traditions of education in which the educator deposits information for later withdrawal.) (Freire, *Pedagogy* 30, 56, 62, 66, 108).

Essentially Freire's methods value and respect alternative literacy when "literacy" means a fluency of "reading" the world, or understanding and communicating in a vernacular language of daily life. Thus, field workers might not be able to read and write Portuguese, but on the other hand they knew much more than the city educator about their own lives and needs—in those regards it was the educator that was illiterate. In developing an ethics of exchange and dialogue between pedagogue and student, Freire called for "conscientização," that he considered necessary for democratizing participation in culture and politics. Such a consciousness awakens what the oppressed person already knows, but has not yet viewed critically. By critically engaging reality, the oppressed person ends a daily existence that is *submerged*, or overwhelmed, by daily survival and *emerges* as a subject with the right and the capacity to intervene in reality.

Augusto Boal incorporated Freire's basic lesson about power sharing pedagogy into his TO work and applied the concepts by overturning spectatorship in the theatre. He provided a method of intervention and participation by the audience that encouraged exchange and a co-intentional theatre. As he did so, eventually developing the concept of the "spect-actor" who comes out of the audience to act out his or her ideas, Boal integrated his Freirean pedagogical heritage with an interpretation of Brechtian theatre. He merged Freirean and Brechtian methods for activating critical consciousness at a sympathetic juncture between the two. Because of politically similar Marxist understandings of the need to awaken and activate classes of people between Freire's educational mission and Brecht's theatre of social critique, it was mutually reinforcing to bring these two practices together on their common points¹⁵.

One more major influence needs introducing —psychoanalysis. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen Cruz, editors of an anthology of TO inspired work, suggest that Boal's interest in psychoanalysis may be traceable to his wife Cecelia, an Argentinian actor who later became a therapist during his years of exile from Brazil in Paris (4). However, Boal describes his interest in therapy as a consequence of his exile from Brazil. In 1971 the military regime in control of Brazil sent the police to the Arena Theatre in São Paulo where Augusto Boal had been Director since 1956 and they arrested him (Playing 3). During what Boal describes as a "kidnapping," he was hung on a rod by the knees upside-down and naked, and tortured with electric shocks (Boal, Legislative 150-151). Afterwards he was told that he would not survive another

¹⁵ In his working practice as a teacher of the Theatre of the Oppressed, he eschews labels, carefully dodging questions which might pin down his current ideology or pigeonhole it in a category of, say, 'Marxist', or 'Brechtian', or whatever; such limiting categorizations are inimical to the whole spirit of the Theatre of the Oppressed, involving as they do the mechanization of actions and reactions, and eliminating the possibility of change or individuality—in almost every case, the Theatre of the Oppressed moves from the individual to the general, rather than vice versa (Jackson, intro. Games xxiii).

arrest, and so he left the country (Playing 4). Boal moved to Argentina, and for a time he continued to work by participating in the national literacy campaign of Peru. But, eventually, Argentina restricted him too, and so instead of theatre practice he turned his attention to writing for a time (Playing 4). After such an experience Boal resisted thinking in terms that would accept what he called “first world oppressions” as valid in comparison. He came to accept the therapeutic nature of his theatre practice with difficulty. Boal writes:

Living first in Lisbon, then in Paris, I worked for some fifteen years in European countries...there also appeared oppressions that were new to me: ‘loneliness,’ ‘impossibility of communicating with others,’ ‘fear of emptiness.’ For someone like me fleeing dictatorships of a cruel and brutal nature, it was natural that these themes should at first seem superficial and scarcely worthy of attention. It was as if I was always asking mechanically: ‘But where are the cops?’ because I was used to working with concrete visible oppressions. [Finally] ...I started from the following hypothesis: the cops are in our heads, but the headquarters and barracks must be outside. The task was to discover how these ‘cops’ got into our heads, and to invent ways to dislodge them (Rainbow 8).

This shift is interesting and important because it launched Boal on a series of experiments with theatre games as therapy using metaphoric role-playing and storytelling similar to Joseph Moreno’s Psychodrama (in which role playing serves personal therapeutic needs), yet retaining a commitment to social change. To combat the “impossibility of communicating with others,” Boal’s theatre began to talk in terms of “will” and “desire” and “catharsis” (Rainbow), yet he retained a commitment to social change by insisting that the link to the “headquarters and barracks” on the outside remain the focus of transformation. Thus individual transformation, while compelling, was not as important as showing the cops in the head as “blocks” to be removed for social change.

Yet, even while adopting “theatre as therapy,”(Boal’s Rainbow of Desire subtitle), Boal moved closer to Brechtian practices in keeping with his commitment to social critique. The images of Image Theatre are the basis for both “Cops in the Head” and the “Rainbow of Desire” techniques: both seek to break the narrative of a story into multiple, simultaneously performed visions of hidden influences and perspectives. Behind and around the protagonist come all kinds of complementary “characters,” some offered by spect-actors who act out what they feel was unconscious, but present in the scene.

In one workshop in Omaha in 1996 he demonstrated the Rainbow of Desire technique this way, based on the story of a participant spect-actor: A black woman comes home for the holidays to visit with her family in Chicago. As the first member of her family to enter a PhD program she is already leading a stress filled life. Her brother works as a prison guard. He begins an argument with her about her choice to go to Graduate School; She is costing the family money instead of making money, and he resents what he considers her “superior” attitude towards his work. In the original scene, she says nothing back to him, but desires to tell him that she disapproves of a black man working as a prison guard and thereby contributing to a racist system of justice. Even more than this, she resents his lack of support for her studies and aspirations. Once the scene was improvised with the help of spect-actors, other characters that represented her “desires” were proposed by the audience and accepted or rejected by her as true or false. For example, spect-actors from the audience played the scene with her simultaneously as characters representing angry versions of her, her as able to speak, a missing father, a character who kept asking her mother to stand up for her and so on. In the end she chose the characters that seemed to help her most and rejected others and then replayed the scene. In the end, she said this method helped her rehearse for an actual trip home she was about to undertake. She claimed a

therapeutic venting. Other audience members felt that the scene helped them think about their own families. However, a couple of the black participants noted that the technique never really addressed racism or justice and never returned to the values debate she wanted to have with her brother about his position as prison guard.

The “Thin Line of Respect:”

Violence is part of the story here. It is significant that the young men portray and perform hostility so often. The work of James Gilligan, former head psychiatrist in the Massachusetts prison system, gives one possible explanation in his book *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*. Gilligan posits that it is primarily humiliation that leads to violence. Since prison is designed to humiliate, concludes Gilligan, then violence is guaranteed to increase. It may be, then, that perceptions of respect or lack of respect sit at the heart of understanding both the purpose and the effects of prison.

As Boal notes, Image Theatre, can be, “... a medium for clarifying intentions” (Legislative 45). In the game *Friends and Enemies*, the young men stand in groups of three. The man in the middle closes his eyes and follows the instructions of the man on his right or on his left. The two on the sides give instructions, such as “lift your leg,” “relax your shoulders,” “honk like a goose” or whatever they like. The twist is: the men on the side, giving the instructions, each decides for himself to be either a *friend* or an *enemy* of the man in the middle. This choice is not revealed to anyone. The men give various hard or easy tasks to the man in the middle who must later guess who was a friend and who was an enemy. A friend might choose relaxing movements, an enemy might ask for challenging positions (stand on one leg and hop). A friend might say, “stop hopping on one leg.” The game is about perceptions of control and response. The game is about subtle observations and sly alliances. Everyone gets a

turn in the center. It's not only a fun warm up game, but it serves as reminder of the way intentions and perceptions can collide. As one student noted, "I just learned how hard it is to tell your friends from your enemies."

Once one of the white YDA's accidentally put himself in the place of "enemy" without officially joining the game and he unconsciously revealed that his expectations of the young men were of continual conflict. Most of the people in the room give challenging instructions (a headstand against the wall, "oink like a pig" etc.) and this sometimes lead to some interesting observations about the nature of payback and revenge. But it so happened that one group was obviously made up of three "friends." They kept giving each other light and pleasant tasks (roll your shoulders, remember a happy time etc.). The YDA observing this decided that this "friendship" must be wrong, so he intervened—to help them understand how they *should* play the game as *he* saw it. He went over to this group and started adding instructions of his own, "have him kick himself...that's it... no...like this" at which point he mimed kicking the young man. He went on from there, as the rest of the room started exchanging knowing glances in response to YDA's behavior that I interpreted to mean that it was no surprise to them that he wanted to be an enemy.

There is always tension between the YDAs who tend to be white and local and the inmates who tended to be persons of color from the city. This moment in which the YDA took pleasure in the fiction of violence—suggesting a "beating" to the only partners who chose to be peaceful—clarified the assumptions this counselor was making about the young men. He observed a group attempting a positive interaction and he assumed that interaction must be wrong. He intervened to make "enemies" without realizing he was doing so. He saw the lack of conflict as wrong—unexpected. Like the rhythm of the machine, this reveals that conflict is a pervasive daily aesthetic experience at Gossett. The YDA saw Friends and Enemies as a battle of humiliations.

I speculate that the choice the three young men made to avoid conflict and violence must not have seemed right to him— since this was the only occasion that this YDA felt moved to participate in any activity in the course of the entire program.

Apparently YDA's often "trick" Gossett residents into punishment. "They set kids up and put 'em in a stressful situation where you snap" (Powell, Ithaca Times 1/20/06 A4). Sometimes a YDA will fall behind when walking a resident who is under an "arms length" constraint in order to charge them with breaking the "arms length rule" and other such subtle and more obvious methods. The adversarial relationship between residents and some "Youth Advisors" is a palpable ongoing conflict. This is clearly what was unconsciously rising to the surface in the *Friends and Enemies* game.

For the young men, more often than not, the conflict of respect is a test for many situations. Elvin Johnson names this type of conflict a "thin line of respect" that is dangerous to cross. According to Johnson, this is caused in great measure by the limited space of confinement. He has said,

It's like, in other words if we're so confined in we can't get away from each other. So it's almost going to be this confrontation and where if I'm in society I don't have to deal with you. I can go my way and walk away from that. But by us being closed inside this little confinement, we have to have a certain space...which goes back to that thin line of respect (Taped Conversation March 2000).

The institutional conflict (lack of space, privacy and forced proximity) becomes personal when someone steps over the line of respect.

TO Theatre techniques expose and reframe such personalized conflict by transforming the aesthetic space away from conflict of confinement as Elvin describes it above. What is done and what is said is opened for deliberation by pedagogy of

social critique, especially whenever language is dangerous, failing, inadequate or hardened.

According to James Thompson of *Theatre in Prisons and Probation*,

Art is done when words are not enough. In prison, often words are not enough. We speak in an arts process that at times we should refuse to translate back into the restricted semantics from which it is seeking to escape. The point of arts work in prison is often that it is giving those that have struggled to find words a new language to speak in and through (Doubtful 60).

Thompson's closing point is focused on finding a new language, but, when he says, "we should refuse to translate back" he is invoking an alternative aesthetic to the prison's institutional aesthetic. In this chapter I have reported that the young men of Gossett do struggle to express things that are hard to say, hard to capture and difficult to examine otherwise, about their lived experiences inside and outside of prison. Boal emphasizes that such individual stories will be generalized to the group and to the social level as soon as other Spect-actors get up from the audience to substitute themselves in the scene for the original storyteller. According to Boal, this creates an important dichotomy, through performance of the story by others that allows critical self-reflection by the original storyteller and allows the group to take on the story from within their own understanding and observations of resonant experiences. Boal calls this "Ascesis" or, "moving from the phenomenon to the law" (Rainbow 28). This means that a practice for recasting conflict as institutional instead of personal is possible.

Due to the violence and the thinness of "the thin line of respect" that both the young men, the Cornell volunteers, and I must be aware of at all times, some words about the ethics of working in prisons are in order here. In describing these ethics I will draw upon principles developed by two other experts: James Thompson, who

works primarily with Theatre in Prisons and Probation at the University of Manchester UK (TIPP), though he also has worked in prisons in diverse locations such as Sri Lanka and Brazil; and Buzz Alexander, founder of the Prison Creative Arts Program at the University of Michigan (PCAP), who's work has led to hundreds of performances in more than 13 prison settings for men and women in Michigan as well as programming and classes in a variety of arts, and who's annual Prisoner Art Exhibit is passing its 10th year. I will describe two core principles here (and others in subsequent chapters): the humanity of prisoners is not limited by their crimes; and, respect must extend to everyone involved. By engaging these two principles, I maintain that theatre in prisons must offer opportunities for prisoners to express themselves without becoming additional punishment.

Many of us who choose to collaborate, or do service, in communities outside the confines of the university find ourselves in the presence of people who have been abandoned, damaged, and/or neglected by current economic policy. We find ourselves working with youth who are among the 20 percent of children who live in poverty. We work with the mentally ill who lost support when mental institutions were closed two and three decades ago. We work with the homeless, with those who have succumbed to substance abuse, with the survivors of domestic violence (Alexander 125).

The humanity of prisoners is not limited by their crimes. Once, one of my sisters was held hostage when she was very young during a robbery in New York City. For hours she and others cowered on the floor under threats and waving guns until a patron having lunch on the patio of a restaurant next door, and two stories down, happened to look up from his meal and notice the gunmen through a window. He called the police; the men were arrested. My sister was lucky not to be hurt. It turned out that the men who were arrested were already out on bail for another armed robbery. Another time, returning from a weekend trip, I found my apartment in Georgetown ransacked and many possessions, including a coin collection my step

grandfather had accumulated over 50 years, taken. I am lucky that these occasions, and others like them, in my life have been minor enough not to become defining moments for me. One time at Lorton prison a guard stepped up to a young, female volunteer from GU on her first night and opened a “jacket” (an inmate record) in front of her: Was she aware that one of the men in our group had raped a girl just like her? Why was she there to help him? I include these stories because, ironically, most of the time it is hard to imagine that the men we work with have ever done anything negative or have ever had anything horrible happen to them. We know it in our minds, but not emotionally.

When you run a program based on positives in a sea of negativity, the theatre class, group or meeting is an oasis in the desert. The positive attributes the men exhibit within the setting of theatre in prisons should, instead, be a reminder that human beings should not be defined only or always in any one way. There are thin lines running all through identity and selfhood.

In practice, as James Thompson observes, this means, “prisoners should be subjects and not objects” of the processes of art. Thompson is intentionally reversing Foucault’s position that the bodies of prisoners are, “...an object of information, never a subject in communication” (Doubtful 200). He is concerned that arts programming, especially those that claim to be rehabilitating prisoners, can easily cross the line and become part of the punishment of prisons. According to Thompson the problem occurs when theatre is “done to people in order to change them”(51). His example is one group that brought “young offenders and victims of crime on stage together in front of a public audience. This only resulted in the young people being objectified, displayed and made to look guilty for the pain they had caused” (50). A spectacle like that one erases too much that is complex about that pain for both prisoners and victims in any case. The problem is more nuanced when a theatre program like the Gossett program

is approved by the prison for its positive effects on behavior or for promoting “responsibility” as the program name *Manhood and Responsibility* promises. The challenge of creating and transforming enough space for prisoner subjectivity and agency will remain a challenge that sits on top of a precarious insider vs. outsider relationship to working in prisons.

At Lorton they call an inmate who is too close to the administration “hot.” How hot do we have to be to work inside? Pretty warm as it turns out. My approach is the similar to the way I work with prisoners. An operational correlative is: the humanity of administrators is not limited by their job. There are many cases where the day-to-day contact with prisoners causes awareness for administrators and staff for needs beyond those of the “total institution” of prison. In many cases these administrators are allies in that they step into the role of translators, using just the right coded words and justifications to get you in and keep you going when things go wrong. They broker deals for you with other administrators too.

There are hundreds of such individual choices taking place every day. Buzz Alexander reports that suddenly, after 12 successful plays by the Sisters Within Theatre Troupe at the Florence Crane women’s prison in Michigan, the warden and regional administrator required a script before the next theatre workshop could be approved. Buzz and his group replied that they had always worked through improvisation rather than scripts, but to no avail. They did however manage to get time to discuss the change with the sisters group. They used the meeting time to work up an outline for a script. However, the outline was not acceptable to the regional administrator because she required a line-by-line script. Over months the PCAP group negotiated with prison administrators until finally they won approval to return to “develop a script” with the sisters. In the end, the line-by-line script was approved and

the Sisters Within Theatre Troupe got one play performed that year instead of two.

Buzz writes,

Amid this proliferation of prisons that tells us so much about the soul of our country, we are inspired by the resistant imaginations of the incarcerated. We learn from them how to work in a framework not of our choosing and how to find legitimate pathways to success (133).

Buzz's lesson for outside practitioners is to learn from the example of prisoners how to work the system with persistence and with the heart to get things done.

In my case, I was helped at Gossett from time to time by the fact that I taught English classes at Tompkins Cortland Community College taken by some of the YDA staff from Gossett. On at least one occasion, when I was bringing in theatre artist Michael Keck as a guest, we were left sitting at the gate until one of my former students recognized me and smoothed our entry. The humanity of all persons from guards to prisoners to administrators to volunteers is not limited by the prison and is constantly negotiated.

Two of Thompson's "doubtful principles" (he calls them doubtful because he doubts their simplicity or universal applicability) are that prisoners must be participants rather than observers and that programs must be sustainable. Both of these principles apply to an approach that values the humanity of prisoners.

Respect must extend to everyone involved.

Who on the outside imagines prisoners circled up praying that God will touch the hearts of those holding power over them so that a play might be approved? Who imagines prisoners dancing with a focus and passion that causes an audience to catch its breath? Prison is many things; it is deprivation, punishment, humiliation, subtle violences to the soul, and much of what we learn there is pain. But it is also prayer and beauty and the resilience of the human spirit (132).

Respect is a term I have already troubled in this chapter. The respect that the young men believed was the respect of “prison values,” as expressed in the images of the word “respect” and its opposite. Then Elvin extended that conception of respect in his idea of “the thin line of respect” which is the instantly violent response to an entire nexus of real and imagined slights and humiliations promoted and exacerbated by the prison environment and the aesthetics of confinement. The “respect” I refer to in this case is in concordance with these previous iterations. I am referring to an attitude of learning that emerges from the roots of the work in Freirean, Brechtian and Boalian practices that promotes social critique from within pedagogy of critical deliberation.

Learning about respect means learning alternative, critical discourses of power and engaging in exchanges of awareness. As Thompson reminds advocates of art in prisons, “Prisons and punishment are performative” (Theatre in Prison 57). Respect for everyone involved mean never forgetting that prisons are a place that have impact on everyone involved. Theatre in prisons programs are often held accountable for positive “effects” rather than for art (see the example of the Sing Sing theatre program, *Rehabilitation Through the Arts*, in the introductory chapter for more on this). However, Thompson claims “Theatre in prisons is not about changing people’s behavior because that implies a pre-knowledge of what changes are required” (Arts Behind Bars 43). In other words, theatre should be at the service of prisoners who may decide the effects for themselves.

Conclusion

That's why I love your work and what you do, you know. Because it gives the kids in the institution a way of being creative outside their environment, you know. They don't always have to play the hogwash of their cliques. And when they play these roles inside their cliques, but outside their cliques is *theatre work*. It actually let them have a real sense of a good feeling of making another choice...*a good feeling of standing on the opposite pole* [my italics] (Elvin Johnson taped conversation March 7 2000, referring to the Gossett Program).

The “opposite pole” is both the furthest distance possible from the impact prison has on forming identity and a critical distancing effect. The young men of the *Manhood and Responsibility* group echo Elvin's assessment: one young man cited the group in his graduation experience as the most worthwhile thing that he did while at Gossett, another insisted on returning to visit the following year's group on the eve of his release to assure the new group that we were “serious,” a high compliment. Generally, when I start getting “pounds,” the quick half embrace with a friendly pound on the back, at the end of sessions I know we have something happening—trust in the process is building¹⁶. The professional education staff of the Gossett Center also

¹⁶ It's important to note here that in many institutions touch is a security risk and in many places it is illegal. Even the casual touch that often occurs in theatre exercises is a problem. However, it so happens that the “pound” I describe is an extension of a handshake and is not prohibited at the Gossett center, nor was it prohibited at Lorton prison before they closed down in 2001. In general, I have used a common sense approach to minimize touching. No undergraduate volunteers take place in exercises where their bodies are molded or shaped in Image Theatre by inmates. This is doubly true for female volunteers. I also steer away from any exercise that highlights touch, such as a theatre exercise that asks the actors to feel each other's faces with their eyes closed. We achieve a great deal by miming, mimicking and demonstrating, so that touch will not be an issue. Fortunately, so far, I have not been in institutions that ban touching to any degree greater than these precautions. Why is touch such an issue for working with prisoners? Generally speaking, prisoners live within a space of deprivation in regard to human touch. Families are allowed to touch at Gossett, but they are too far away to do so except in rare visits. Other prisons do not allow touch with visitors at all. In fact the cliché favored by movies and television is of the glass

noticed the efficacy of the program. In one letter the Assistant Director for Residential Services wrote:

I have found in my experience working with juvenile delinquents that many curriculums that are created for this age group are simply more relevant to white, middle class youth. The language used and the issues which are addressed are simply meaningless to our population. However, with the "Manhood and Responsibility" program, we found the residents were able to relate easily to the topics covered and therefore, learn from the material presented. I have residents and staff alike asking me when the program will be offered again. They were and remain enthusiastic about the program (Aulbach Letter 1997).

These testimonials are helpful in assessing the efficacy and worth of pursuing an approach that attempts to "give the good feeling of standing on the opposite pole," disrupting the rhythm of the machine of prisons. Prisoners can use TO and other deliberative, interactive, community based theatre models to think, rehearse, and imagine difficult problems efficiently, collaboratively and creatively and thus learn tools for growing awareness and self advocacy.

wall with the telephone and this is true in some places. In any case, we do not know enough about the crimes, the desires, the histories of prisoners we work with in regard to touch, especially at the start of a program. Many prisoners are also victims of rape, abuse, or other forms of bodily harm and may also be perpetrators of these crimes on others.

Most volunteers are naïve on this point in the beginning, as I was in my first days at Lorton when we played a classic trust game of passing a body around a circle of hands. She was a willing undergraduate volunteer from Georgetown. For their part, the men in the group had the good sense and grace to treat her appropriately, respectfully and with only the lightest touch. She seemed to float. I would never want to do that again.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERVENTIONS: BREAKING NARRATIVES AND RE-POSITIONING PRISONER IDENTITIES

Patricia O'Connor, the Director of the Friends of Lorton prison program at Georgetown University once asked my theatre class at Lorton (when they were discussing how difficult it is to change things in prison), "What kind of change can you know about in a place like this?" This is the question I am examining in this chapter investigating the TO term "intervention" in order to theorize how TO works and what its limits are in regard to the prison context. As Wole Soyinka has said:

We must not lose sight of the fact that drama, like any other art form, is created and executed within a specific physical environment. It naturally interacts with that environment in turn and acts together with the environment in the larger and more complex history of society...And when we consider art forms from the point of view of survival strategies, the dynamics of cultural interaction with society become even more aesthetically challenging and fulfilling (Soyinka 134).

In Theatre of the Oppressed terminology "intervention" is a technical term for the moment the spect-actor intervenes in the narrative of the Forum Theatre by replacing the protagonist on stage and proposing or attempting a new course of action. As described in the introduction and in the previous chapter, Forum Theatre presents an improvised or rehearsed story of oppression that comes from one of the members of the group or audience and that represents a life experience that the spect-actors or audience members agree is a problem that they "recognize"—it's one they themselves have faced, could face, or with which they could at least sympathize with the plight of the protagonist. In this context, "intervention" means intervening in a life experience based story in order to try out and rehearse different strategies, responses and actions, but these interventions are countered by the nimble improvisation of the spect-actors who are playing the antagonist in the story. Antagonists are instructed to be true to their antagonistic role and to respond to interventions without giving up their power or their character's goals (unless they feel that their character would be "convinced" or

changed by the new action). Thus, even in cases of prepared and rehearsed scripts, Forum Theatre is full of improvised responses. The “forum” aspect of Forum Theatre refers to these interventions by spect-actors that interrupt, revise and replay narratives: a spect-actor may choose to intervene in any part of the story or may suggest additional improvised scenes, such as before or after scenes. Occasionally, spect-actors wish to intervene in how the antagonist is responding in order to make the antagonist more realistic (from their point of view or from their own experience) or because they have a different vision of the antagonist’s responses. TO interventions are dialogic deliberations on alternative behavior, alternative actions or alternative consequences that serve as “suggestions” to the protagonist for prevailing in a difficult given circumstance that originally seemed an intractable problem to the individual who originated the story for the group. It allows for both a depth sounding of a problem and for planning and strategy. The improvised intervention is a Brechtian style interference with the narrative in which “images are to be destroyed and replaced with others (Boal, Rainbow 72). However, the consequences of an intervention, and the unanticipated responses of the antagonists to an intervention, are also very important critical tools that create “disequilibrium that prepares the way for action (72).” Therefore an “intervention” is not the same thing as a solution. It is just as likely as not that an intervention may add to the problem facing the protagonist; however, even if making the problem less easy to solve interventions are “working through” additional critical awareness and insight. Of the spect-actor’s intervention, Boal writes:

In the conventional theatrical relationship the actor acts in my place, but not in my name. In a Theatre of the Oppressed show anyone can intervene. Not intervening is already a form of intervention: I *decide* to go on stage, but I can also *decide* not to; it is I who choose. The people who do go on stage to try their alternatives go there *in my name* and not *in my place*, because,

symbolically, I am there with them. I am—just as they are—a spectator of a new kind: spect-actor. I see and I act. (72)

It is this definition of intervention that is important to investigate in the context of using these techniques in prison where I will be talking about interventions in prisoner generated narratives and stories for the purpose of critical deliberation by prisoners, and not theatre made in their name or in their place.

There is another relevant meaning of “intervention” in TO work that comes from Boal’s development of techniques to deal with internalized oppressions. These “introspective” techniques are collectively known as the “Cops in the Head” and the “Rainbow of Desire” techniques. These introspective techniques are “designed to harness the power of the ‘aesthetic space’ (the stage) to examine individual internalized oppressions and to place them within a larger context (Jackson intro Rainbow xvii).” These techniques are appropriate for examining questions of identity and behavior that do not fit within the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy and cannot be effectively worked through on the model of protagonist vs. antagonist. “Cops in the Head” and “Rainbow of Desire” interventions come in the form of multiple images of the self and of others, presented in a variety of dynamizing formations that spectators can inhabit, enact and realize on behalf of an individual member of the group or audience. This is the TO version of postmodernism: the recognition that there are multiple subject positions (the who, the will and the way of action) that are constituted and re-constituted by coercive social forces and epistemes of knowledge and power. Boal defines the TO version of “catharsis” as the “removal of detrimental blocks (72).” Image theatre interventions that “concretize,” or theatrically perform, the “cops” that are internalized or the “desires” that remain unrealized are a therapeutic mode of intervention, performing positioning and repositioning of identity and subject

power just as the earlier Forum Theatre intervention is a democratic mode for intervening in narratives.

This chapter will draw upon examples from Lorton prison to interrogate these two types of intervention: Intervention in Prisoner narratives and Interventions in Prisoner subject positions.

Interventions in Narration

When a Forum scene, such as the following Lorton example, is interrupted by the Joker's cry of "stop" a spect-actor wants to stop the narrative and try to re-conceive it. This does not constitute a break with the narrative in the sense of ending or replacing the narration. The same story is played again, but the storyline is opened up for another way of doing things that proposes a new response to the original problem the protagonist faced in the story in the first place. The story is repeated for each spect-actor intervention as different problems in the story are demonstrated and revealed and different consequences to each proposal are enacted. The Joker always reminds the antagonist to be tough, not to give in to the intervention unless really convinced from within the role of antagonist and within the moment of the scene that he or she must concede. Occasionally the spect-actors or the Joker will suggest replacing the antagonist if it seems that the antagonist is too weak. In other words sometimes, "stop" is about "I wouldn't be so easy to get past—let me show you why."

Nothing from any of the repetitions in Forum is abandoned. The total collective storyline gets at all of the group's best ideas, successful or not, for changing the outcome for the protagonist and sometimes, as in the father and son scene above, for the antagonist as well. The "rules" of Forum are broken as often as they are kept, except for the one that asks for performance rather than explanation of ideas. What

emerges is a deliberative process for critique that returns control of making meaning to the community members.

Elvin's scenario for a fatherhood forum scene based on his own experience: A man is released from prison. He is especially devoted to the idea of reconnecting with his son who is becoming a teenager. His son has been living with his grandmother in his father's absence. When the man hears that his son's school is holding parent-teacher conferences, he sees the conferences as an opportunity to act as a father should. He eagerly goes to the school to meet his son's teachers and to learn of his son's progress or problems. But the teacher does not welcome him as he expects. Instead, the teacher nervously recommends that he take a trip down the hall to the Principal's office. The man feels some pangs of the irony of "being sent to the Principal's office" as if he is an "offender," but he complies. In the Principal's office he is greeted and asked to sit with cordial formality, but then the Principal buries his face into a file folder for several moments. Finally the Principal emerges from the folder with some rhetorical questions: "Is it true that you were recently incarcerated?" "Are you aware that the boy's grandmother has legal guardianship?" After this positioning, the Principal tells the man that he cannot legally give him access to the teachers or to any school information because the legal guardian (the man's own mother) has given no permission for the access. Our protagonist leaves the school dejected, but heads home to talk to his mother about the situation. At home he gets a real surprise: his mother does not want him to get involved in his son's life. She loves him, she says, but she thinks that he might be a bad influence on the son. She is not ready for the change his homecoming means. She does not believe he can be responsible enough to be more involved with his son, and she wants to shelter her grandson and prevent him from going to prison like his father did.

It is a moving scene, but also one that turned out to be unexpectedly funny. During the rehearsal the men wanted one of our Georgetown volunteers to play the mother just because she was female, but she could not portray the mother effectively because she did not understand the paradigms and signifiers of black culture, but also because she had no life experience as a mother or as an older woman. This failure identifies one of the concerns about identity and the limitations of role-playing in TO, but it didn't stop the effectiveness of the scene at this point. Soon after our GU student began to act, one of the men replaced her with a tougher antagonist: a classic strong black church lady. Most of the interventions into the scene took place after the man left the school to go home to talk with his mother. Each intervention came in the form of a small alternative narrative. One by one, men played the role of the man confronting his mother with various unsuccessful tactics: One man tried flattering her cooking, "What's that I smell in there Moms?" he began. Another tried pleading, "Don't you love me?" A particularly disastrous idea (but very fruitful for our purposes) involved adding the character of the son into the scene. All at once a torrent of accusations of neglect came from the son, as played by one of the men, toward the father. This intervention established that the man had not yet confronted the pain of his absence from his son's life or considered his role as a father from his son's point of view. As performed, the son did not want his involvement either. By this point the scene was a group story and the "character" of the son or how he reacted to his father was not a reflection of Elvin Jr. in reality, but was a collaborative story.

Returning to the main scene: No matter what the men tried the mother character saw right through them. In fact, laughing at the funny mother character allowed the men to understand her refusal of the protagonist's involvement in his son's life to be a balance between her love for her son, and her criticism and distrust of him. Finally, Elvin reentered the scene with an intervention of his own. This time he

offered accountability as a strategy. He offered to prove himself by attending drug rehabilitation programming faithfully and by finding a job, both parts of his parole from prison already. Yet in the scene he was negotiating a second kind of parole—one from his family. The mother character did respond to this idea and promised to allow some increasing involvement if he was successful. This solution, one that Elvin said occurred to him while watching the Forum, led the men into some serious discussions about how much prison would follow them back into the community and back into their own families. One of the men in the group said that he thought the mother could only see her son as a prisoner and not as a father. Another man thought the professional, cordial tone of the Principal in the earlier part of the scene was a way of keeping distance.

Boal insists that all of the social structures and power dynamics of culture are present in stories like this one about the Parent's night. Race, class, gender or prisoner identities do not have to be explicitly spoken to be present. In the scene above, Elvin gets strategies for negotiating his position as father that work, but did the group participate in a deliberation amounting to a social critique of the politics of prisoners returning to society? In one sense the scene validates Foucault's idea that record keeping, classification and the like are determining power relationships in institutions like the school. It is notable that the interventions in the Principal's office fail and that the attention and action in the scene shift home to the mother and son relationship. In a contrasting manner this is a story about what is happening to black men in DC and the cycle that extends prison into families through race relations and politics. Eventually, years later, Elvin Jr. did in fact get in to trouble with the law. How could this story have been about that? What about the larger politics of art in the broader culture? How does this work fit? How does it contrast with traditional staged theatre that claims to engage sociopolitical realities?

Lisa Jo Epstein's book article, *Flexing Images, Changing Visions: The Twin Poles of Contemporary French Theatre* compares the early days of TO work in Paris in the 80's with Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil from a moment of brief alliance between the two, to a separation and a mutual disregard. Epstein points out that both theatres share "...the belief that their form of theatre engages both the personal as well as larger sociopolitical realities that surround them..." (55), but, in her comparative analysis, the two theatres each fail to "learn something about the examination of power from the other" (55). According to Epstein, who spent time working within both theatre companies, "Theatre du Soleil productions want to stimulate audiences to activate their sociopolitical consciousness, while the work of the CTO [Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed—Augusto Boal in Paris] empowers participants to enact their consciousness, partake in the construction of meaning, and, in doing so come to understand the larger political themes inscribed in their individual stories" (62). As a comparison between a traditionally formed, didactic "epic-scaled" (61) theatre such as du Soliel and the CTO, which worked in non traditional spaces, in workshop format, and often with more "teachers, educators, social workers and counselors"(59) than theatre artists, Epstein's work helps to set up important contentions, especially since both theatres build upon a Brechtian heritage, but with entirely different methods. Namely, is TO really theatre at all? And, is it really political? Epstein's conclusion is that these two companies represent "twin poles"(55), i.e. non-opposing poles, in the French theatre community, and she finds value in each method. However, TO's "blending of image theatre and Brecht-like character creation" (67) does not explain why TO is not merely a set of exercises in personal transformation and therapy, nor what political ends it might achieve.

Performing Deliberation in a Forum for Civic Dialogue

My answer to the questions that end the previous section comes, in part, from collaborating with Lani Guinier during the Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue hosted by Anna Deveare Smith at Harvard a few years ago. Lani and I presented an evening of Boal techniques as part of the dialogue series bringing public intellectuals and artists together to consider the role of arts and political participation. The evening began with a presentation of documentary photographs and interviews of prisoners by the artist Dread Scott and the photos were left on the wall as the touchpoint topic for our presentation. Naturally there was something “institutional” about the aspirations of the Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue because it was conceived as putting artists back into the center of political culture.

Many artists are also interested in the relationship of creative arts and political participation. The Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue was an inspired effort to re-imagine the role of creative arts and artists in building vibrant positive models for public conversations. My participation in IACD with Lani Guinier challenged me to define Democratic Theatre in distinction to political theatre, as Boal has done (Legislative 20), and yet it made me aware of the necessity of working with those interested in paradigm shifts in the functions of creative arts for social change. What Lani and I share with IACD is a desire to be cultural animators giving life to Democracy.

However, we are also distinct from the artist-as-central approach of IACD. For us it is the audience that is central. Democratic theatre invites the audience to discover the stage in order to learn how to imagine their collective power. The audience members use the language and power of theatre to become experts in democratic participation, not in theatrical production. This is a use of theatre to spark learning,

communication and critical thinking. It is a pedagogical model that theorizes out of the vernacular of theatre.

We operate in a parallel universe that leaves the world of professional actors and artists intact. Democratic theatre does not invite the audience to supplant or mimic the professional artist; nor does it purport to convert participants into skilled craftspeople. We do not think we are making ordinary people into professional actors or artists; we are not seeking to appropriate the role of the artist. Our project seeks to avoid the split between amateur and professional, because we are not making amateurs into professionals by dedicating larger groups of people to the craft. Indeed, the use of the term *amateur* does not apply because we are divesting some of the skills of theatre and deploying them for making advocates rather than artists.

Democratic theatre can be very controversial to politically active performers because it challenges the professional norms of artists who may view democratic theatre as antithetical to “theatre” – for popularizing theatre in a way that trivializes its aesthetic training. It should be clear, however, that we fit with the Boalian “using performance to make politics” rather than the “political artist” model (an expert leading us to the right topics through their creative interpretations of our world). This is the difference between democratic theatre and political theatre. Political theatre fuses art and politics – it infuses the art with a political message. Democratic theatre, by contrast, positions itself as oppositional to both conventional politics and some conventions of theatre and of public art.

When a new Republican congress cut the budget for the National Endowment of the Arts in the early nineties, nearly ending it, actor and playwright Anna Deveare Smith questioned the place and the purpose of Art in American culture. Clearly the Congress saw Artists and their Art as a cultural and political threat, yet artists working outside of the mainstream popular culture were already marginalized and lacked

support and respect—they felt disempowered. Anna wanted to restore art to the center of culture, making its purpose and importance clearer than ever: the observations and imagination of the Artist should have an active influence on shaping public debate. Like the plays of Václav Havel, serving the change to democracy in Czechoslovakia, art would be openly political and engaged in the most intractable problems of society, and, perhaps like Havel himself, the artist would have a celebrated role at the center of our politics. This move replaces the passive reception of culture through the mainstream media with active listening and viewing—with live contact with the artist and her work. The model called for a new commitment from audiences to attending and seriously discussing art, and the model called for the artist to commit to art that could serve as a catalyst for political dialogue¹⁷.

¹⁷ There are some similarities between what IACD hoped to accomplish by putting artists at the center of civic dialogue and what Jürgen Habermas calls the “...liberal model of the public sphere” (qtd in Public Sphere) in which citizen-participants deliberate on the commonweal free of coercion, persuasion and private interests, through some device. In the IACD model, the artist provides the device as an iconic expression of a social ill put forward to stimulate deliberation — putting the art into the public sphere. Ideally, citizen participants should use their own reactions to the art to identify common interests and potential allies. But, in practice, the IACD focus on the artist’s vision and professional status was too priestly.

One of the animating agendas for the Institute for Art and Civic Dialogue was to provide a public role for artists who were under attack by the NEA. The primary interest was to stimulate public debate and deliberation but the secondary interest was to protect the artist and provide a space to recognize the civic component to the natural and creative artistic process. But in protecting each artist’s unique individual vision, the process can deter collective deliberation. As we have said above, IACD was struggling with the process of artists defining their own public identity, culturally and legally, within a hostile environment. Barbara Hoffman introduces this problem in her article “Law for Art’s Sake in the Public Realm” in which she writes:

Indeed to juxtapose the terms *public* and *art* is a paradox. *Art* is often said to be the individual inquiry of the sculptor or painter, the epitome of self-expression and vision that may challenge conventional wisdom and values. The term public encompasses a reference to the community, the social order, self-negation: hence the paradox of linking the private and the public in a single concept (qtd in Public Sphere 113).

At the IACD the new audience was modeled by the “core audience,” a group of regular audience members who committed to attending many exhibitions, performances and dialogue sessions over the course of three years. And, one of the programming features was called “Grey Matters:” a public performance of a dialogue between a prominent public intellectual and an artist. As the title of the series suggests these were “brainy” sessions in which the two types of experts (artist and non) might encounter each other. The dialogue took place between the featured speakers; after a brief speech about their own work, the speakers then included questions from the loyal core audience and the public in attendance. Yet, there was a conflict between the Brechtian impulse of the IACD (a thinking, motivated audience) and the impulse to restore respect for the artist and intellectual in the center of making meaning (by encouraging listening to, and identifying, with the artist). It turns out that active listening and viewing, even with live contact with an artist, still does not achieve full participation in deliberation. Getting in the way are professionalism, politeness, and the circumstances under which the audience is constituted (are they brought together by common need or for other reasons?).

“Grey Matters” left intact the distance between the aesthetic space and the deliberative potential of audience participation. While the audience was permitted to ask questions, or tell a story within the question and answer frame, the format did not disturb the power dynamic between the expert (who answers the question) and the novice who asks it. Nevertheless, some members of the core IACD audience reported

Hoffman goes on to describe how this paradox of terms has created a problem, in jurisprudence, for control of public art vs. first amendment rights of artists. The struggle for ownership of the unique vision of artists causes an internal contradiction for artists who want to make art for the public, and is also at odds with any ideal project to make art for the “public sphere,” (following Habermas). It is easy to see why it was so important to the IACD ethos and mission to protect the artist and the sanctity of art in this context.

continued meetings around issues of common concern long after: art can trigger multiple conversations, which can lead to social groups that continue to meet.

Those social groups, however, are accidental rather than essential to the process. The individual who is transformed acts alone; the artists provide an isolated rather than collective platform. In other words, the model of civic dialogue hasn't worked out a process for the deliberation that should follow the experience of art because its focus is on inspiration and epiphany. We assume that IACD, because of the quality of its participants and the honesty of its attempted mission will have long term positive ripple effects in the individual lives of the artists and the audience members. Their idea was that the chance to witness the creative process is energizing. This may be right but we will never know for sure because the subsequent process is usually private rather than public. It is personal, even as it brings people together.

Anna always reminded participants to keep their focus on the message and the social implications and consequences of art in terms of social issues rather than on the piece or performance itself—the why, not the how or the what. But in practice this focus was hard to maintain. The art piece is more immediate than the problem under consideration. The artwork is invariably powerful but there is no direct means for sharing of the power of the creative process that works toward solutions. IACD came up with an effective model for doing away with the casual audience, but it retained the aesthetic space as sacred for artists.

Our idea is that the chance to be creative motivates people. Our process is inherently collective both in its collaboration for performance and in the actions to which it may lead. The group comes together, turns themselves into advocates; finds their voice and sees what they have in common; they sometimes even manage to involve people who are the source of their concerns as allies in the process. We seek a different model of facilitation for our kind of civic dialogue. A democratic theatre

facilitator's attitude should be one of exchange; it should be one of invitation; it respects the expertise of the lived experience of those participants who know the problem best. Just because amateurs are coming in to theatre for the first time, does not mean the tools of theatre are not available. The moderator/Joker is the expert of the structure, the theatrical form, and the theatrical language. There is an exchange of expertise¹⁸.

As one of the public intellectuals invited to participate in the IACD Grey Matters dialogue series, Lani chose to apply the lessons of her own theory of learning as an example of alternative moderation of public conversation. By inviting me as her dialogue partner and by putting together a group of facilitators, she hoped to expand the meaning of dialogue to include the audience. Because Image Theatre is so efficient, the audience was so large (300 or so), and because the time slot was so limited, we decided to try basic techniques. We took the idea of dialogue in a TO direction. Instead of two experts (theatre artist and public intellectual) in dialogue with each other, we invited the audience of 300 to participate in Image Theatre with us on the stage and about half of them took us up on it.

My warm up as Joker for the evening started with Boal's "continuous handshake" in the audience in order to encourage people to break the boundary of the seats and turn their attention to each other. This works much like the "peace be with you" moment in a Christian service when all of the attention given to the altar is suddenly diffused across the community. Then we demonstrated the Complete the Image concept on stage with volunteers and invited the audience to become spect-

¹⁸ For example, we admire the "acts of service" proposed by Jonathan Fox and Playback Theatre. In that model the moderator is a "conductor," usually with psychodrama training who can help to draw out the audience participants enough to share their stories, and can draw out the resident company performers enough to honor each of those stories. This is compatible with democratic theatre practice, although we would go beyond the telling of stories to the deliberative, solution seeking stage.

actors in the Image of the Word. Lani's group: Val Batts, Bryonn Bain, Archon Fung, Sheila Warren and Lani herself put themselves on the stage as the "neutral" bodies, inviting participants to step forward to model or manipulate them into body sculptures in response to photographs of prisoners hung in the theatre by an earlier artist.

Afterwards the two experts in discussion moderation, Val Batts and Archon Fung, opened the floor for observations and comments on the images. For example, one of these image exchanges included the following: a hand holding circle was formed all the way around the exhibit of prisoner photos, part of an earlier IACD session involving photo and sound portraits of prisoners, by adding audience members to the neutral bodies on stage. This encirclement could have meant a reversed kind of enclosure—one of caring—around the men, or perhaps an acknowledgment that prisons and prisoners should be in the center of our attention. One of the women in the circle brought the circle forward in order to kiss one of the photos, perhaps disrupting the 'monster' status of prisoners. Later, another participant said (but not in the public discussion) that she had recently served on a jury and she did not like the image of the kiss because it seemed to erase the victim and the crime. One observation came from a person who was in the image circle holding hands with the others, but on the backside of the photo exhibit, essentially "backstage": She said that, despite the circle, she felt cut off back there and unable to see what was happening. She said this was sometimes the feeling of solidarity that one must continue to hold hands even without seeing what was happening. Also, she added, that it showed her how power distribution remains unequal even within a circle of people interested in justice. Observations from the audience included both power critiques and awareness of mass incarceration.

In the final exercise of the evening, I used David Diamond's Boal variation: the Magnetic Image. The entire audience was invited onto the stage and into the aisles to sculpt themselves as an IACD audience. They made themselves into sculptures of

their personal response to the idea of mass incarceration and then grouped themselves with similar sculptures. Their first task was to identify the components and perceptions that drew them together into small groups and then to hold a broader discussion of what they were experiencing or desiring as follow-up. By the end there was a great deal of excitement in the room as people discussed the images in diverse groups that might otherwise not have self selected, but that none-the-less shared some common entry point (reaction) that crossed political lines. This opened the floor to too many exchanges for us to hear, though more than one core audience member said that this was a revelation to her: she felt she had witnessed true civic dialogue.

One of the most memorable moments of this quick sharing of the “dialogue” space came after the session was over from a woman who described herself as a professional actor. She pushed us to rethink the neutral bodies concept. (According to Boal, you don’t forget to see the bodies on stage for who they are: color, gender, nationality, big, small etc. However, because these bodies are in the fictionalizing, aesthetic space of the stage they can also play, just as an actor does. They are neutral in the sense that they are open to being used in the images—neutral, but not neutralized). In fact, frequently I use the term “clay” instead of neutral bodies. However, her point was more specific than this. She recognized all of the bodies on the stage as “powerful.” For example, Lani Guinier is the first black woman on the faculty of the Harvard Law School. Thus, by playing this game we were erasing the power of these bodies by allowing them to be manipulated. She felt strongly that one purpose of IACD was the opposite of this. She felt that the artist and the intellectual need to own their power to influence and wield it, especially because artists and intellectuals (minorities in particular) are under attack, under represented, and under appreciated in our culture and our politics. She saw IACD as a way for such professional bodies to take center stage. By sharing power, or by not speaking, Lani

was not only erasing, or hiding, her power, she might be doing something worse: opening herself up to manipulation and decentralizing the power of the artist to speak to such a degree that it would become dissolute.

We were forced to grant her this point; our IACD neutral bodies were all the experts in facilitation from our discussions leading up to the event. We knew we were limited to a demonstration by the size of the audience and the short time frame. However, the term “neutral bodies” also implicated the point of view of making political art. Her intervention, which took place after the formal “event”, was also an integral part of the dialogic process. We have been more self-conscious about our terminology as a result. We also realized we needed to clarify up front our respect for the craft and expertise of making art, and freedom for the creative vision of the artist as a worthy, but separate concern from creating a truly effective dialogic format.

What is the difference between the rich histories of professional, politically committed art techniques, programs and events and Democratic Theatre? What counts is how the artist, actor or facilitator enters the community. What Legislative Theatre adds to the “stance of intervention in one’s context” called for by Freire, is a further objective — to make a direct move towards advocacy and towards self-representation in the public as well as pedagogical sphere.

Interventions in Identity

The following example of Forum Theatre comes from the *Fatherhood and Family* theatre course sponsored by Georgetown University at Lorton’s medium security central facility. In this case a third definition of “intervention” is applicable when I, fulfilling the role of TO Joker, stopped the scene to suggest changing the focus of spect-actor interventions away from the protagonist and toward the original antagonist in the scene because I felt that violence proposed by a spect-actor towards

the antagonist had shifted the role of “oppressed” person to the antagonist. The scene below shows how gendered roles of fatherhood get mixed up with internalized survival strategies from inside prison. Several identity positions are disrupted, including the roles of father and son in the scene, the functional role of the moderator/Joker and the positions audience members expressed in response to what they observed in the scene as prisoners and as family members (fathers or sons).

The following scene example also demonstrates why “positioning” may be a more dynamic term to use in this context than “role” in considering both the interactions of the characters in the scene and the interactions of the spect-actors and the Joker regarding identity formation.

The term “positioning theory” proposed by sociolinguists Ram Harré and Luk Van Langenhove offers,

A position in a conversation then, is a metaphorical concept through reference to which a person’s ‘moral’ and ‘personal’ attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected. One can position oneself or be positioned as e.g., powerful or powerless, confident or apologetic, dominant or submissive, definitive or tentative, authorized or unauthorized and so on. A ‘position’ can be specified by reference to how a speaker’s contributions are hearable with respect to these and other polarities of character, and sometimes even of role. Positioned as dependent, one’s cry of pain is hearable as a plea for help. But positioned as dominant, a similar cry can be heard as protest or even as a reprimand. It can easily be seen that the social force of an action and the position of the actor and interactors mutually determine one another (17).

Positioning, thus defined, is rich with possibilities for considering what happens in Forum Theatre. The emphasis of positioning on “social force” un-anchors the boundaries of role-playing and identity as each position is offered, proposed or taken up, and then as that position is accepted, rejected or changed by other positions. To me, positions are the actions that take place moment-to-moment, beat-by-beat in a scene. The term “position” is fluid enough to encompass multiple forces shaping and

impacting identity, including the personal motivations, objectives and needs that are strategically expressed in and out of the aesthetic space by spect-actors. The observation that what is “hearable” is also a fluid, strategic positioning is quite important. The mutual determination of positioning is what gets interrupted and changed, repositioned, when a spect-actor proposes a new Forum Theatre intervention. In the following story a man positions himself as a father and a son positions himself as independent. Quickly their positions come into conflict and the group of spect-actors must work to reposition them.

In a Forum scene, a man dreams of his first night home from prison for years. He plans it out in his head: a special welcome home dinner with a happy family gathering around the table. He sees the empty chair at the head of the table—his chair—and he thinks of the moment when he will step over to take a seat. Finally the day comes, and everything is set to happen just as he thought it would. His wife cooks something nice for the occasion. But, as he stands up for the big moment, his son rushes towards the door. Over his shoulder, the son says he is going “out.” “Wait! Where are you going?” the man asks his son. “I’m going out with my friends,” the son replies. The man tells his son “no,” telling him he must stay for the special family dinner and also telling him that he can’t just leave without saying where he is going, with whom and for how long. The boy is a teenager. He gets angry and starts to argue: “You’ve been in prison my whole life, and now you want to tell me what to do? You can’t tell me what to do. I’m going!” He grabs his coat and stomps out of the house to meet his friends waiting outside. The man calls out “Wait!” But the boy is gone.

As originally played, the father is the one in the protagonist position facing the son as antagonist. However, the very first man from the group to replace the father character had a startling intervention: as soon as the son started to argue, the man hit

him hard—with a slap to the face. Right away the room filled with applause. The men sounded unanimous in their approval of this solution. I was very worried about letting this solution stand. I thought this solution was too close to child abuse, although I was careful not to name it as such without learning more. However, as the Joker, I wasn't satisfied with this solution.

I suggested that we try again, but this only led to some feeble interventions in which the “boy” character almost immediately gives in to his father, as if the actor playing the character of the boy were “remembering” getting hit from within the persona of the character. This time I stopped the action to point out that this “giving in” was “magic.” In TO work, “magic” is any proposed solution or intervention that solves the problem in the fictional story in a way that would be almost impossible in reality. For example, if the problem of the scene is poverty and the protagonist finds a lottery ticket: that is a “magic” solution. It might happen; it fixes the fictional story; but it provides no useful deliberation for people facing the situation in their own lives. Another way to say this is that a “magic” intervention provides one individual with a solution that removes him from his problem without addressing the underlying social or systemic concern that caused the problem in the first place. When the men intervening performed a respectful son, who submits to his father's authority without question, I saw that they were avoiding the character who does not give in to his father: therefore it was “magic.”

I do not have the objective distance that traditional scholars strive for in this situation. Even when I turn over the role of Joker to one of the men, as I usually do by the end of the process, I intervene as “difficultator” in situations like this one. I do this even when my own position as a white male academic coming from outside the prison dictates caution, self-awareness and a commitment to the ideal of non-imposition of judgment. In this instance, my dissatisfaction with hitting the son brought up my own

unfamiliarity with a black culture in DC that still believes in “spare the rod and spoil the child” despite the failure and the danger of that idea. This is not the position of the anthropologist or the sociologist, but of the participant-observer.

In his book, *Culture and Truth*, Renato Rosaldo gives a number of compelling examples of subjectivity in social analysis that enhances learning. Rosaldo convincingly works through the observation that communities rarely contain unified subject positions in any case, nor do observers. In fact, according to Rosaldo it is more truthful for the “observer” to act out their own subjectivities by participating in behavior and to learn from the interaction and negotiation of those “positions” as they participate in activities with the communities they are observing. Rosaldo writes: “The social analyst’s multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high” (194). Rosaldo’s proposal that participant-observers have as much or more to teach and learn, and possibly more, than detached observers comes with political implications. That is, the politics and positions of the participant-observer are made clearer to the people being observed when they are not concealed or denied. The observed are then on a more equitable footing of collaboration and interaction with the outsider. The problems of detached observers impacting what they observe, or failing to understand what they observe precisely because they remained detached are well known. In fact, by taking the participant position, an observer also allows for the fact that the “socially subordinate positions”(Rosaldo 194) are also capable critics and observers who are learning from this interaction.

If I were an overbearing, judgmental, foolish Joker the men would figure that out on their own— fast— and decide whether or not to trust me on their own. Over a series of weeks the men at Gossett and Lorton tended to be more open and trusting

with me rather than less. They took rather more risk in sharing their stories than less. And, my outsider position also allowed me to offer some of the knowledge, insight and critical skills that my education has trained me for. Rosaldo calls for participant-observers to use their own “moral imaginations” in interactions (194). This is the type of “working with” I have become interested in. It is the role of the teacher/learner not the role of the anthropologist.

Returning to the Forum: We broke into discussion, and one man explained what he saw. This young man was a threat. He was trying to make a move on his father’s power and authority, threatening his father with disrespect. He needed to be slapped down, to be taught a lesson in accordance with “prison values” of respect and status. Many men in the room signaled recognition and approval of this interpretation—that the boy was like a *man* in prison trying to take status from another *man*. As the participant-observer Joker, I pointed out that once the young man is hit he is no longer in the “oppressor,” antagonist, position. Therefore, my suggestion was to try the scene again, but this time to replace the son—the character who now needed help.

Remarkable scenes ensued, as the men replaced the “son.” Surprisingly, considering the discussion the men had just held, the character of the son was given life with real dimension to his anger and his pain. The “son” character reacted in a variety of ways as we repeated the scene, sometimes accusing his father, sometimes leaving anyway. In every case things got worse between father and son, except for one intervention in which the son brings in his friends from outside before the confrontation. But in the latter case, the men decided in discussion, that this really sidestepped the anger of the son and only deferred it to a later date.

In our group, the seemingly unanimous approval of the initial hitting gave way to more critical views as a few men shared their own experiences as sons and the

troubles they had with their own fathers. Opinions that had been kept silent earlier came out after we replaced the son as the protagonist (I speculate that this is partly because the “hit” made the discussion feel unsafe and partly because the consequences were invisible until performed). Then the talk turned to why some men thought the son was making a power play. I can paraphrase the answers that came up this way: “It’s just like in here.” And, at least one man also defended the idea of corporal punishment by citing his own mother—she used to hit him with an electric cord when he misbehaved. Many men said that they thought being hit, *per se*, did not constitute abuse, but rather a cultural norm that I did not see. I raised that this might be an incident of adolescent rebellion further justified by anger at the father’s absence from the family for a long time but some in the group rejected that idea. Others suggested that violence would only lead to more violence, making use of a common proverb. I posed one final question to the group: what if this were a daughter? Back to unanimity, the group let me know, “that’s different.” Apparently all of them would have approached the problem differently with a daughter. More to the point, none of them saw the daughter as a threat.

The scene presents an example of intervention in prison values because the prison conception of manhood inflected the story and the responses to it. Some men thought the son was positioning himself as an enemy—what they heard (the “hearable”) and saw was a threat from another male that needed dealing with. When the young man became the protagonist, the identity of prisoner as father (and his positioning of himself as if he had never been away from the family) became a key issue. Positions in the audience changed as well: the unanimity of approval was displaced by memories of being a son and by empathy for him. My position changed too by fore fronting my participation and reactions as I chose to make the scene more difficult and to object to the proposed solution that the group had accepted. My

cultural attitudes toward corporal punishment and my distance from the lived experiences of the men in the room were revealed and highlighted to the group. The group began to deliberate about the impact of the prison environment and culture on their families and the less obvious effects of their separation from home by discussing “what gets passed on,” “what is hard to remember,” and particularly their worry that their sons would eventually succumb to choices or forces that would bring them into the prison after their fathers.

Positioning theory is useful in appreciating the dynamic manner in which conflict between discourses manifests in actions between the father and the son in the scene above and open up shifting identifications of personhood or identity—unsettling self enough to learn about the self in the situation. According to Davies and Harré, in “Positioning and Personhood,” positioning theory “explains discontinuities in the production of personhood with reference to the fact of multiple and contradictory discursive practices and the interpretations of those practices that can be brought into being by speakers and hearers as they engage in conversations” (52). Discursive practice in this context refers to the social impact of institutions, conventions and cultural histories on “language and language like sign systems” such as those the father and son were using on each other in their conversation in the scene. The conflict arising in the scene between the father and son is also a conflict arising between prison discursive practices (that position the manhood of the father and the son in potentially violent conflict with each other) and the perception, on the father’s part, of contention over respect and power. There is also a discontinuity between those conflicts and other conflicts over whether or not he can claim or deserve the rights, privileges and status of fatherhood and such other hard to see and hard to hear factors as whether or not he is loved by or loves his son. The son engages all of these conscious and unconscious positions by what he hears and what he accepts or rejects, and, in turn, claims

positions as independent, as grown up, and as having his own social and psychological needs. Davies and Harré argue that such a conversation “unfolds through the joint action of all the participants as they make (or attempt to make) their own and each other’s actions socially determinate” (34). The advantage of this type of analysis is that when the “joint action” is a conflict the focus falls on the strategic nature of subjectivity and identity in the scene. This offers an alternative to thinking in terms of roles or characters: one needs not sort out the baffling, multiple determinants of identity and may instead see the social conflict as an opportunity to engage subjectivity. Davies and Harré write:

As an individual emerges through the process of social interactions, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is, that is, what sort of person one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon positions made available within one’s own and other’s discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others’ lives (35).

This builds, generally, upon feminist poststructuralist theorists who claim that subjectivity is a matter of the social forces of accumulated discourses. The sociolinguists are applying this to conversational analysis. I am interested in how it can be applied to scenes such as the father and son scene that are about shifting, constituting and reconstituting personae that emerge through the dynamic interaction of participation in the story. The conception of conscious and unconscious strategies is not altogether dissimilar to a Stanislavskian actor’s analysis of motivation and objective, but with much more regard to the impact of social discourse on the strategy of what is said and how it is heard.

According to Davies and Harré, perspective on the self emerges from an analysis of a multiplicity of reflexive concepts about self. I will track their

classifications using the father and son scene as an example. “Learning categories:” both the father and the son have lived and learned the social, gendered labels of “father” and “son” and each has his own interpretation of what the expectations and responsibilities of those personae are. “Participating in discursive practices:” both the father and son are trying speech and actions that will determine the identity of the other and of self within the narrative of this scene. Additionally, the spect-actor audience is also participating in discursive practices by taking up positions and by exposing and revealing behaviors that are coming from one discursive context (prison) into another (family). As noted above, my role as difficultator also changed the nature of participation by invoking empathy with the son’s positions and calling for strategies that would help him. “Recognition:” the self locates itself against other persons through interpretations that manifest as hearing. The father heard a man making a threat, not a son asserting independence. The son refused to recognize the claims of the father.

As Difficultator, I was not there to say what was true or not true. The men had the responsibility as a group of prisoners, fathers and sons to act through (used like “think through” or “work through”) their insights in the process of the Forum. The bodies that stepped into the scene were involved in a series of positionings and repositionings that uncovered a whole system of conflicts related to gender, race, class and prisoner status. There was a break, but not the kind of break that leaves the self behind and invents a new identity. Instead this was a critique from within a nexus of identity that was going to go on: prisoners were still prisoners, fathers and sons and they knew this was a challenge not a solution. However, I contend that their agency in responding to the divided subjectivities of father and prisoner was energized.

This is far more room for agency than Foucault’s theories of prison would allow. He proposes that these subjectivities are internalized by the individuals they are

visited upon: “He who is subject to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (202-203). His invocation of the theatre metaphor at this point, “plays both roles,” helps point the way to an opening, or a response, from TO theatre in prisons in regard to the inscription of power on the body.

Philip Auslander describes the effect of TO techniques in a manner that resonates with the metaphors of positioning, agency and subjectivity:

The Boalian body never comes to rest in a neutral state; rather, the point is for the spect-actor to be able to move from one mask to another while retaining a critical distance from all masks. The spect-actor cannot exist outside ideology and doesn't even attempt to, but can only try on different ideological positionings as they are inscribed on the body. The spect-actor is a postmodern subject, divided in itself, fully aware that it cannot escape ideology, that its only choice is amongst different ideological masks. Boal implies, however, that this subject's own interior division becomes a source of the critical distance that enables it to realize, as I once heard Blau say, that even if the only choice we have is a choice of masks, some masks are better than others (131).

In this highly useful excerpt, Auslander's focus on playing out interior divisions as a source for critical distance fits well with the example of the father and son in the Lorton performance. Avoiding “neutral state[s]” is similar to the fluidity of taking positions and repositioning. The term “mask” here stands in for the boundaries of the roles of father or son or prisoner and suggests play is possible even when the body is “inscribed” with all sorts of determinations. There is agency in Blau's choice of masks but not relativism among those choices. Perhaps the most helpful part of Auslander's understanding of the body in TO performances is his assertion that there is no escape from “ideological positioning.” I understand him to be cautioning that the point of TO

practice is not breaking with identity or language or narrative or social contexts, but it is by embracing the fluidity between constructed and impacted identities that agency is possible. Auslander writes, “to put it another way, the hyphen in ‘spect-actor’ is important as a unity born of rupture (127). The duality of that unity is also a reminder that nobody is only a prisoner, nor will they cease to be prisoners when they are fathers and sons.

“The Cops in the Head” refers to both a series of techniques in TO work and a general theory of how TO works against internalized oppression. “I started from the following hypothesis: the cops are in our heads, but their headquarters and barracks must be on the outside. The task was to discover how these cops got into our heads, and to invent ways to dislodge them” (Boal Rainbow 8)¹⁹. The “Cop in the Head” is

¹⁹ In his book, *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal creates parables from his “three theatrical encounters:”

In the first encounter he is working in an agit-prop style theatre in the countryside of Brazil when he met the peasant Virgilio. Virgilio was so inspired by the theatre performance that he invited Boal and his theatre group to take their guns and join him in opposing a local colonel (landowner). Boal sheepishly explains that his guns are just props in the play. So, Virgilio offers to loan them some. With fear and rising panic Boal and his group explain that they are only players or artists—they do not even know how to shoot. Virgilio replies: “So when you *true artists* talk of the blood that must be spilt, this blood you sing about spilling—it’s our blood you mean, not yours, isn’t that so?” From this first theatrical encounter Boal developed simultaneous dramaturgy, a kind of playback theatre that poses a problem and then opens the floor to the audience for suggestions and solutions that the actors of the troupe enact (2-3).

In the second encounter, a woman attending a session of simultaneous dramaturgy cannot make the actors understand her intended solution. After many attempts, in total defeat, Boal invites the woman onto the stage to enact it herself. The result is immediate and clear. “Even more clearly the truth dawned on me: when the herself comes on the stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does so in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it and as no artist can do it in her place. This encounter leads to the development of the spect-actor (Rainbow 4-7).

The third encounter is the epiphany of the cops in the head. However, these three are not the only ones (just the only ones he highlights at the beginning of this book).

similar to Foucault's panoptic effects in that the imaginary cops are like internalized observers that arrest and control behavior. Like Foucault, Boal often develops elaborate categories and classifications to explain how social organization extends power into all aspects of life. The three hypotheses of the Cops in the Head include *osmosis*, *metaxis* and *analogic induction*.

The smallest cells of social organization...and the smallest incidents of our social life...contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of power, all its mechanisms of oppression (40).

Osmosis is the "interpenetration" of domination via social structures into every human interaction. Consider this next explanation of osmosis not only for what it says but for the Foucauldian ring of its rhetoric:

How does osmosis come about? As much by repression as by seduction. Through repulsion, hatred, fear, violence, constraint, or, by contrast through attraction, love, desire, promises, dependencies, etc. (41).

Osmosis is a metaphor that explains the transfer of oppression from social structures to self. Boal means to suggest that no matter is too small to consider. That every interaction that can be played in the theatre is already inscribed or overdetermined by internalized social forces. Metaxis describes the relationship between these social forces and the aesthetic playing space of images and symbolic gestures in the theatre, "the image of reality and the reality of the image,"(43).

The oppressed-artist produces a world of art. She creates images of her real life, of her real oppressions. This world of images contains, *aesthetically transubstantiated*, the same oppressions that exist in the real world that prompted these images...she belongs to both these worlds utterly and completely, not merely 'vicariously' (43).

I'm willing to overlook the fact that "real life" and "real oppression" contradict the acknowledgement of the constructed and "interpenetrated" self contained with the concept of Osmosis, in order to embrace "aesthetically transubstantiated" as a brilliant invocation of a nexus of connotations. First, the world of representation and "art," — the fictional— are not separated from their phenomenal bases, but instead participate in a transitive communion with them. Second, there are the aesthetic qualities of restoring behavior (ceremony, ritual). Third, that Metaxis assumes that one acts in faith that the transformation of a lived experience into a story, image, or even an abstraction, is still alive with its own truth (a tricky way around the problem of essentialism, as long as oppression appears on both sides of the equation). Fourth, that there is nothing "vicarious" or "virtual" about this process—it does not stand in for anyone or anything. The latter almost topples the apple cart of "doubleness" that is a hallmark of performance; for, the doubleness has always carried the taint of duplicity—acting as faking. But here, instead, Boal chooses to emphasize how close, rather than how far apart, performer and performed are.

The third hypotheses are called analogic induction.

The Theatre of the Oppressed is the theatre of the first person plural. It is absolutely vital to begin with an individual account, but if it does not pluralize of its own accord we must go beyond it by means of analogical induction, so that it may be studied by all of the participants (Boal, Rainbow 46)[his italics].

This means all of the individual starting points (stories for scenes or images) amount to proposed analogies. I suggest that they are actually metonymic in nature rather than analogies, because in practice, Images tend to present an aspect, attribute or moment of a problem. Either way, new, detached scenes or images can be created by "induction." How is this done in practice?

Here is an example from the Lorton Fatherhood and Family group of how multiple points of reference can emerge through osmosis, metaxis and analogic induction, in which the spect-actors never reveal the originating story. The technique is called Image and Counter Image, though I prefer to refer to it as “pilot and co-pilot” for reasons that will soon be apparent. To save explanation, I will summarize, in order, the steps involved and integrate the example from Lorton:

Step One:

Two men meet in a corner out of earshot of the rest of the group. One man tells a true story of a “family problem,” the other listens with his eyes closed—he may ask as many questions as he likes, though the man telling the story is not obliged to answer them if they seem too personal. The storyteller is the “pilot;” the listener is the co-pilot. Both are asked to get a clear image in their heads “of” the story.

Step Two:

Both men form images, back to back (they are not supposed to peek at each other’s work). Spect-actors are invited up by the men to take positions in the image as necessary. They place themselves in the image last as the protagonist. When the images are “set,” they are rotated so that they face front side by side. On the left, the pilot has constructed a man running, pushing through a crowd, carrying something, behind and to the side is a woman looking for him. On the right, the co-pilot has a body down on the ground, struggling to get up, holding up something in his hands towards the sky while others sit on his back or hold him down.

Step Three:

Observation. The remaining spect-actors walk around and make comments on what they see. They note the differences between the two images of the same story (which has not been revealed). One man points out that one scene is hopeful (he could get away), the other is hopeless. Another observation recorded by one of the student volunteers from GU notes the presence of the woman in the background of the pilot's image and the assumption that she is where the man is running. What could her absence from the other image mean? My observation: one man plunges through neutral bodies; the other has violent antagonists.

Step Four:

Dynamization. We try three wishes (three moves allowed to make the scene "better or more ideal." In the pilot's image the protagonist makes it to the woman with an offering; in the co-pilot image, the man on the ground moves a few of the bodies holding him down (not enough to make his position markedly better). We discuss the changes. We try interior monologues (the spect-actors "in place," within the image, spout words off the top of their heads (that they think someone holding their position would say) – this is done simultaneously, so I could not record what was said.

Step Five:

Pilot and Co-pilot swap images. We try three wishes again, but there are no different results. We ask how things feel in the "other image." The pilot says that the co-pilots image is better than his because it captured how he felt, whereas his portrayed a moment without revealing how it felt.

Step Six:

Brought to life. The pilot and co-pilot are replaced so that no one is left in the images knowing the original story. Each image becomes its own scene improv. The pilot's image turns into a story about a man who needs to please his wife. When he can't pay the rent, the protagonist tries to make it up to her by stealing a fur coat and giving it to her. He barely gets away with the theft. In the co-pilot's image a gang of men grab the brother of a man who killed one of their friends, and they start to retaliate on him.

Step Seven:

Discussion. Rapid, so my notes are paraphrases rather than quotes. The discussion begins with the suggestion that economic hardship can drive you crazy; that economic pressure comes from the family sometimes. The image on the left (which became the fur coat story) is seen as an example of this, while the other image represents how it feels to have financial trouble (like a gang is holding you down). Followed by a candid discussion of just how much money motivates what people do with their lives.

The oppressed creates images of his reality. Then, he must play with the reality of these images. The oppressions remain the same, but they are presented in transubstantiated form. [...] He practices in the second world (the aesthetic), in order to modify the first (the social) (Boal, Rainbow 44).

This is a concise summary of the process Boal is trying to explain that I consider key to understanding what difference aesthetics makes in developing critical deliberation. This kind of playing and practicing requires imagination, which in turn requires observation and perspective, which in turn requires a safe space to play where the consequences of action can be safely rehearsed—thus, theatre, in my view of this

work, becomes very like a “think tank”. It is removed, but not removed from lived experience. It requires a distancing effect, but only in order to get closer to the problem. Its strength, if and when it works, is the ability of its participants to construct social identities and new social forms by examining their own existing paradigms. It is all about “modification” and “manipulation” of the self, but not by an outside power, but by the self and its closest community.

In a Forum scene interventions are made by spect-actors who are asked to recognize something in the scene from their own experiences, but they are also asked to make it their own and to *offer whatever they think is missing* from their own point of view. The men who played the son after he was in the oppressed position in the Lorton scene offered their own experiences as sons and they performed what was missing in the son’s response to the father.

One of the key considerations that were missing from the father and son scene was an engagement of gender. Here is where the concept of osmosis breaks down because, although it is true that the men carried their gendered selves into the scene, they all agreed in the end that if it had been a daughter it would have been different. Yet they managed to dodge any critical reflection of gender, as it is in families or in prisons in the entire process of enacting and considering the scene. They did reveal a “prison in the head” to themselves, but the group of men found no way to see what effect gender might have on the outcome of the scene, even though the son was originally thought to be acting like a man threatening another man’s power.

Gender and Identity in Prison

Gender is a dangerous topic in prisons. Since most of the examples in the previous chapter and in this chapter call for a critical view of masculinity in prison, but do not get engaged in any issues that might add important considerations of

gender and identity, some explanation of why it is so difficult to engage is needed here. One young man wrote an account of his introduction to prison that shows what is at stake:

Fortunately for me, I was initially sent to the Washington Correction Center (WCC) in Shelton. WCC was and still is the softest of the medium security prisons in the state. So my uncle's warning notwithstanding, (and scared shitless though I was), nothing terrible happened to me my first day in prison. No group of hairy bikers stood me in the middle of a stainless steel table, me being lone poker chip in a game of five card low in the hole. Nobody tried to rape me, kill me, or even beat me up. *It is true that my first day in prison, a dude in a few cells down cut off his testicles with a razor blade and threw them out onto the tier.* But that sort of event, I quickly learned, just came with the prison territory [My Italics] (Collins 14).

The quote above is the beginning of a personal account of prison survival entitled "Seventeen Fights Later," by Michael Collins. Collins' story is about how he had to protect himself from the "bootie bandits" by getting involved in seventeen fights that frequently landed him in solitary confinement—all before he turned 20 years old. He needed to fight every time he was transferred around the prison system because he had to establish his reputation over and over. "...I am not ashamed, either. The alternative to fighting was to turn into someone's punk, and that was unacceptable to me (17)." His story is a common one, but the uncommon, striking aspect of the story is his witnessing of the self-castration of another man. The extremity of that act, more grotesque than a suicide attempt, is a memorable keynote for thinking about gender in prisons.

When the men of Lorton used the phrase "to be a *man*," they usually meant, in paraphrase, "not to be a punk" or "not to be a sex slave," and they usually implied (or patiently explained to me) that being a man was a choice. They make a distinction that separates gender from sexuality. Of all the markers of masculinity, the most important marker in prison is the choice to draw the line and fight off all threats. It affects how a

prisoner walks and talks and presents himself as masculine. These facts are no surprise to the average American. Typically, the very first type of joke a comedian will make about prison is about anal rape—the “better not bend over” formula joke— or about gay sex. Recently, when Martha Stewart was imprisoned in a minimum security prison, Saturday Night Live produced a sketch in which the comedian David Spade dressed up as Martha with a deep voice and stubble (also evoking her “masculinity” as a successful business woman) and wearing a shawl supposedly crocheted for her by her cellmate. The sketch implied a lesbian relationship. Congress also knows about prison rape and sexual slavery: the new Prison Rape Elimination Act acknowledges that, “by a conservative estimate, 13 % of inmates are sexually assaulted in prison. The law calls for research into the problem by the Justice Department, which will recommend policy changes based on the studies” (NYT Oct. 2004). It’s a safe bet that 13%, based upon officially recorded incidents, doesn’t come close to the real number.

Gay prisoners are in double jeopardy if they cannot disguise themselves well. “The Crips already had a homosexual that was with them. The Gangster Disciples, from what I understand, hadn’t had a homosexual under them in a while. So that’s why I was automatically, like, given to them,” reports Roderick Johnson, a gay man from Texas who brought suit against the Texas justice system for not protecting him from sexual slavery. In Johnson’s interview for the New York Times, he describes being bought, sold and rented for sex acts and sex shows (NYT Oct. 2004) for rates from \$5 to \$10. According to Human Right’s Watch sexual slavery is “commonplace in the system’s most dangerous units” (2001).

The threat of rape or sexual slavery varies from place to place and prison to prison. However, even in low risk environments, the pervasive awareness of the risk in the system as a whole has sustained a culture of masculinity that underpins complex social hierarchies and extends back out into the street. Elvin’s assessment of the young

men at Gossett learning “prison values” of survival on the street from relatives who have served time has a violent gendered aspect “what you will and what you won’t go for.” Gang displays of power are also proving grounds for becoming men. In my opinion, this is one of the most open ways in which prisoners add punishment into the prison. They own this danger and sustain it. One of the most dreaded aspects of prisons, the threat of becoming a punk (sexually or not), drives a hyper masculinity. What happens in Theatre in Prisons, or any programming or education inside, is limited by the ongoing battle for status and safety that the men inside need.

In “The Sexual Jungle,” Wilbert Rideau, the celebrated editor of the nation’s only uncensored in prison news service, *The Angolite*, at Angola prison in Louisiana, claims:

But rape and other sexual violence in prison has little to do with “heterosexuality” or “homosexuality” and is generally not the work of sex-crazed perverts. And, despite the humorous references to it, rape is a deadly serious affair in the pained world behind bars, almost always a matter of power and control—and often of life and death (Life Sentences 74).

Rideau goes on to describe the Louisiana version of “turning out” an inmate as an emasculation that is about “stripping the male victim of his status as ‘man.’ The act [rape] *redefines him as a ‘female’* in this perverse subculture, and he must assume that role as the *‘property’* of his conqueror or whoever claimed him and arranged his emasculation. He becomes a slave in the fullest sense of the term” [my italics] (75). Rideau’s theory, that “turning out” has more to do with power and property than with sexual preference fits well with many claims by feminists, women’s’ rights activists and gender studies scholars, who also define gender roles as artificial, performative constructs for power and property rights. Rideau’s reporting from Angola reveals an entire system of patriarchal hierarchy divorced from biological gender—a culture of

assigning gender through coercion. Therefore, the prison world mimics the least progressive, most conservative culture of gender inequity outside. In the absence of the opposite sex, the status of many prisoners is upheld over others by the projection of an opposite sex, a substitution. Weakness, passivity, effeminacy —exploitation— are all “female” in many men’s prisons such as Lorton and Gossett. Rideau reports that administrators and guards also believe in the hierarchy, often calming and controlling potentially violent men by allowing them to take a “wife” or arranging for “marriage counseling” if there is a problem (85). Men in a man-wife arrangement also serve as housewives by cleaning, making beds, preparing meals, and other domestic chores. Rideau also reports a twist on these hetero-mimic arrangements, as gay men are often locked down or placed in solitary confinement for their “protection,” an extra, discriminatory punishment for them.

Of course there are other factors that determine power and social status in prison: the type of crime and nature of a man’s sentence matters in the pecking order. I think, from listening closely, that temperament also helps or hurts, as it does for sailors serving in a submarine. Rideau also misses another important form of mimicry and substitution of the outside world: the re-creation of domestic violence. Rideau writes, “Few female rape victims in society must repay their rapist for the violence he has inflicted upon them by devoting their existence to servicing his every need for years after—but rape victims in the world of prison must” (77). Rideau is making a distinction between a rape crime that may be a single occasion and ongoing abuse. Though a compelling description, Rideau’s assumption is inaccurate. In fact, millions of women do have to repay domestic violence in this way, though the violence may or may not take the form of rape. The templates, structures and consequences of domestic abuse also seek an outlet in prison and are replayed through the relationships between prisoners.

Sexual needs in a radically single sex environment, psychic needs in a place of segregation, and all kinds of internalized social realities and assumptions seek expression through gender, just as they do outside the prison. What can Theatre in Prisons do to challenge such deeply entrenched inequities? What right do practitioners have to even try when these paradigms are rooted in daily survival? In the Lorton example above, of the young man who is hit by a father who has recently returned to the family from years in prison (for defying an order to stay home), I was able to turn the tables, as Joker, on the men who assumed that the young man deserved his treatment (for making a power play on his father) by asking the men to replace the young man in the forum. Doing so enabled the voices of those who disagreed with hitting the boy, those who had experienced something similar from their own fathers, to come forward.

I have used TO work as part of a tool chest of interactive techniques to pose practical problems that require critical skills from the experiences of men and boys in prisons. However, when it comes to gender awareness, the men have generally confirmed themselves in the truth of their own sexism by what they choose and select to perform. Their representation of women is as flat, stock characters even in Forum or Image Theatre. Because “female” is the low status position of prisoners nobody can afford to align themselves with effeminacy, even in fictional forms: as this continues—sexism flourishes. Yet I find that once the site of oppression is moved to the female characters (which the men must obviously act out themselves) the depth and soul of the woman character is restored and a natural sympathy between men who struggle to be fathers and sons from behind bars and the struggles of women as women is evoked.

TO practice with women prisoners has also focused on interventions that reposition prisoner identity. For example, Lisa Jo Epstein reports on TO work with

women prisoners in Paris. In her example “Charpail” is a woman member of the Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Paris who serves as Joker for an Image Theatre exercise:

Charpail’s work in a detention center for women, many of whom were drug addicts between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, is an example of TO work conducted in places not normally considered theatrical. Charpail always applies her formal theatre training to her TO work with “excluded” populations and so demonstrates the power of handing the mode of theatrical production—the means of theatrical expression via image theatre and forum techniques—to participants physically and mentally trapped and living in oppressive mental and physical places. Through the course of one workshop, the women learned to imagistically analyze their everyday rituals with new perspectives. However, when the women became fed up with talking about “their crappy lives” (their words), Charpail introduced exercises with a neutral mask and asked them to make an effort “*to be* beyond all personality, all stories, without moving forward, without retreating, without stopping, without a future, without memory, an effort *to be*, short of any form-ulation, *without a name*.” [qtd. in Epstein 67] In combination with the TO exercises, the women realized their capabilities to reconstruct identities without falling into their customary performances of “prisoner,” to push at the margins of what it means to be in prison, and to mobilize aspects of themselves that had been forced to be dormant (67).

While this example provides testimonial support for a reconstruction of agency as an important part of this work in prisons, this example does not explain how this empowering transformation takes place. The neutral mask experiment that calls for being “without” (as “without a name” among others) comes across as a mystical process that relies most on Charpail’s ability to seize the moment to demonstrate the liminal quality of masking. Following Auslander’s insight into inscribed bodies quoted above, it is hard to imagine what a “neutral mask” could ever be, unless it is merely a technical term as in the “clay” bodies in the Image of the Word Respect in the Gossett center —a term that allows the bodies in the center to be sculpted by others. And yet, Epstein, as witness, claims that the women have broken with a form

of paralysis: they are now able to see their own “capabilities” while avoiding the trap of reinscribing their previous identities. How, exactly, does this “mobilizing” effect occur (65)?

CHAPTER FOUR

FURTHER EXAMPLES: HOW TO VALUE PERFORMANCES WITHIN A PRISON

Three of the men of the Lorton TO class approached me to give their feedback in person at the end of our sessions together. They wanted me to know why they had joined the class in the first place, what they were taking away from it, and their plan for carrying forward the spirit of our group after I left. To accomplish all this they told me the story of the Lorton Father's Support group. These men were members and leaders in an existing, weekly support group for fathers at Lorton. When one of them saw the title of our Theatre class for that year was to be *Fatherhood and Family* he decided to check us out. After the first class he returned to his support group and encouraged as many of the guys as possible to join our GU theatre class. His reasoning was that he thought we were doing something that was missing in the support group. By the end of the year he and his fellow father's group members figured out what was missing. The support group met weekly for reflection and prayer. The biggest concern, expressed time and again, was the example they set for their children as prisoners. He explained that in the support group the men tell each other of the pain they feel over separation from family and the difficulty of managing their roles as fathers from within prison. Basically, all the talk in the group was about how they could be examples to their children of "how not to come here," and "don't be like me." I recognized what he meant because a videotape message from my previous group in Max that was intended as an exchange between theatre classes (the one in Lorton and the other at Wilson Public High School) was full of messages like that, "you don't want to come here," "make better choices than we did," etc. The men clearly thought of themselves as anti-role models.

The fathers continued their explanation to me: they were no longer satisfied with the support group because they wanted to begin to think and plan strategies for positive engagement with their families like we were doing in the theatre class. Their

plan was to intervene in the support group and change its mission to match what they saw happening in the theatre class.

This change from testimonial support group to strategic deliberation is the kind of change that can happen in a place like prison (part of an answer to Patricia O'Connor's question quoted in the introduction to the previous chapter). This is an intervention in the impact of a total institution, but not a broad social change of mass incarceration. To many prisoners the larger change has to come on the outside. One evening, after the very first Forum Theatre experiment at Lorton, in my 1992 GU intro to drama course, Ralph Slaughter said:

...a lot of us I see that we're not there and that[s] one part, that[s] one problem. We're not there to try and change a lot of things. We're there a lot of times if we want to change a lot of things with each other. But, as far as challenging the system we're not there at all. Letters can get things done, but letters that you send those are the ones that'll knock on the door. Whereas, we can't knock on the door. That's what we need, someone that going to go down there and knock on the door and say "heh we got this letter from these inmates and they're saying these conditions are here and they need to be changed. Only they can be changed if your eyes are open to what we are having or trying to do. That's something that you want to think about. Thank you (Mitchell 28).

Even one night of Forum, which I remember as jarring because every scene ended in frustration and "guns drawn," got the inmates talking about change. And, Ralph has a serious point about the limits of change that prisoners can make for themselves. The work of intervention can be done inside and can lead, as it did for the Lorton fathers, into new paradigms for self-advocacy and critical deliberation; the work of social change and justice— seeking to end mass incarceration— must be done outside.

Intervention in the Institution

Elvin's story of two pancakes is the story of an intervention in a total institution. He tells the story, about an incident in one of Patricia O'Connor's Lorton

literature classes, in which a dangerous split among the men is caused by a new administrative policy on breakfast. In this example the men are successful in uniting against the policy and petitioning for remedy because they work through their anger and dramatize their stories in a play. The development of their play uses a Forum like improvisational process that has men on each side of the dispute enacting their versions of what is going on and intervening in each other's accounts.

Although this example is an intervention in the institution—an actual policy is changed— this is also a story of the limits of intervening in an institution. The men develop empathy, understanding and identification with each other, but they do not question or seek to understand why the administration imposed the policy in the first place. Further, the fact that Lorton had an appeal process available, an Administrative Remedy form (ARP), allowed for an institutional structure of complaint that might not have been open otherwise or in other places. In recent years some prison systems such as the Correctional Adjustment Center in Baltimore Maryland have started serving a “prison loaf,” or “special management meal” to some inmates consisting of a bland vegetarian block of nutrition for every meal: “Let's just say the inmates don't like ‘prison loaf.’ And that's the whole idea. It's all part of a wider effort to ‘discourage negative inmate behavior,’ Warden Thomas Corcoran tells Scott Simon on *Weekend Edition Saturday*” (NPR 2002). In the time since Lorton closed, prisons have continued to seek harsher conditions and extra punishments. It's not clear how the story of the two pancakes would succeed today.

At Lorton, breakfast was served in the early morning around 3:00 or 4:00am. On pancake days each man was usually served three or four pancakes by “detail” men—prisoners who serve as trustees and hold the job of delivering meals to the cells in maximum security. Sometimes there are even extra pancakes left over and “if someone ask for an extra one we would give them one,” Elvin who held the job

explains. But one day a letter came from the administration with a new policy: only two pancakes per man. The detail men were worried that if they didn't follow the policy they might run out of food before they got to the end of the line, so they limited each man to two pancakes. Elvin says, "It started a lot of animosity between the detail men and the regular population." The men in the block blamed the detail men for "cutting the pancakes," "holding back food," and for being "hot" (meaning too close to the administration)—they were arguing and they were angry. In the Georgetown program meeting that evening things came to a boiling point. "It's ten of us in the class...I think it was six of us was trustees and four were non-trustees," Elvin describes. At the time they were studying *Native Son*, but on the evening in question the men attacked each other: "yeah...you don't know what you are talking about...that point of view you are making, man I don't even see it in the book." "Man you didn't even read the story...you need to learn how to read," and so on.

Patricia O'Connor, the instructor, could tell that something was wrong in the class right away. She caught some muttering about pancakes but did not know about the split among the men. She suggested that the class try to write something about pancakes, possibly a short story. According to Elvin she took the class by surprise and when she said the word "pancakes" the entire room erupted in chaos. They couldn't work together on a short story or agree in any way. Then Patricia had a brainstorm. She suggested that the men write a play. Somehow this suggestion worked for them. Elvin reports that they started improvising the pancake scene from that morning. The trustees did their version and the non-trustees did theirs. Then all of the men on both sides of the issue started getting involved in each other's scenes to make corrections. This natural unfolding of events was like Forum Theatre, which the men knew nothing about and had never heard of, in that everyone in the room jumped in to perform the scenes together, often revising and proposing as they did so. Elvin says,

And so we started working on the issue of writing this play about two pancakes, you know, and we started thinking about different ways to write this play and we still had animosity. As we began to think about different ways to write this play and different ways to attack it and what to do to solve it and how we should portray it and everything, you know, the tension started dying out as we were working on it. And guys started laughing and we began joking and the atmosphere begins to feel back “in the class.” This was our college class and this was real important to our college [studies]. But the most important thing: it brought together the strong detail men and the strong population men together...that we really don’t have a problem with each other. *It’s the administration that really took away the pancakes* [my italics] (Taped Conversation March 7 2000).

In the end, through working on the play, the men decided to band together and submit an Administration Remedy form (ARP). They worked on an argument for the form based on their experience that two pancakes are not enough for breakfast for grown men. The form worked and the administration restored the men’s pancake ration.

While waiting for the results of the ARP request, the men completed the play together by writing out a scripted text and performing it. In the performance one inmate, William Lawson, played the “hothead” because he was the one who had actually yelled at the detail men the most. “We all chose our own parts and we kinda like gave Tee [Lawson] his part. Because we were like, ‘yeah, that fit you Tee, that fit you because you were the one doing all of the hollering this morning.’ He was like ‘yeah, Ok, I got this one.’ He accepted it well. He really enjoyed it and laughed about it and everything” (Elvin Johnson Taped Conversation March 7 2000). Finally, Elvin explains, “The play was great. We actually wrote it, we revised it and we gave characters to each other and we built the characters up and things, you know, and that gave us a chance to work on the anger...It was like ‘how angry is this dude? Why is he angry? If he’s angry, what would he do? What made him so angry?’ And, as we are working on this...it actually gave us the chance to process.”

For Elvin's audiences, this story always evokes smiles and laughs, the thought of pancakes causing such a rift is almost absurd; in fact, it is actually deadly serious. Elvin explains, " I mean it was at the point that if she [Patricia O'Connor] didn't come that night maybe in the morning it would have been a riot and the war would have been going with population and detail fighting and stuff about the breakfast pancake thing" (Taped Conversation March 7 2000).

Elvin tells the story of the play "Two Pancakes" in order to make the point that educational programs in general can often provide the basis for a community of activated learners who can cross divisions and cliques and work together. The performance of "two pancakes" captured the hunger of the 3am breakfast and the physical frustrations of delivering and receiving breakfast in the cellblock, as well as revealing the tension and fragility of the trustee system. (Lorton's trustee systems mimicked the social structure of slavery, and of plantation life, by continuing a divide and conquer strategy that tends to pit the men against each other by granting petty power and, more importantly, status to inmates like Elvin who were otherwise trying to avoid violence.) In addition, I propose that this story supports my conclusions from the previous chapter. The men were able to critically reframe the conflict by performing the problem in a form instinctively close to Forum Theatre. They drew directly upon their knowledge of the environment (trustees with freedom to move and non-trustees restricted to cells), as well as the physical and emotional experiences of the mornings' events. Yet they were able to participate within each other's portrayals by replacing characters and proposing alternative interpretations of "characters." Eventually they developed a written script, but mostly as a recapitulation and celebration of the deliberative "processing" and the resulting alliance they had already achieved.

Their critical deliberation led to a social critique of the division between trustees and population men. That division had distracted the men from the administration's exercise of power and control. The men in Elvin's story gained an appreciation and empathy for each other that extended far enough to reshape their conflict. James Gilligan, former Massachusetts prison psychiatrist who studied violence in prisons and among prisoners writes, "A lack of empathy sets anyone on the path to violence" (183). Empathy tends to oppose violence, so "Two Pancakes" was not just "role-playing" the perspective of the other. In their play the men took up each other's positions. Their entire deliberation occurred in a dangerous place filled with the risk of imminent violence. Nor was their eventual plan to protest to the administration, though successful, free from risk.

Aristotle's poetics speaks of characters as being agents of moral choice who "demonstrate something or declare their views" (53). One might assume in Prison Theatre that "moral choice" is a compelling description of potential. Yet it is the "agency" of characters to gain operative knowledge of next steps that is at issue. The story of the play "Two Pancakes" is a story of misplaced agency: what the men can and cannot do for themselves and what they can and cannot do to speak or act for themselves, or as a group.

The "prison values" identified by the young men of the Gossett Center, with the help of former Lorton inmate Elvin Johnson, fit with other critiques of the social impact of prison as a total institution. Young men like those at the Gossett and MacCormack centers are impacted by prison life whether they are inside or outside of prison. Erving Goffman describes a "total institution" as one that is organized by "handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people—whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization" (6). Goffman's category is broad enough to be applied to any large institution that, like

prison, regulates a day and provides meals, medicine, lodging and staffing, however brutally. Goffman's example is the asylum. The term "total institution" is valuable for thinking about prison because it highlights the prison's intention of providing a total environment administered by a bureaucracy.

However, prisons fail to be "total" all the time and in many ways. State systems, federal systems, different tiers of security and prisons in different regions of the country succeed or fail to be total in multiple, erratic ways making matters more complex. Yet, there is a remarkably common experience of violence that is formative on prisoner identity. Jack Henry Abbott, made famous and then infamous by the attentions of Norman Mailer, called prisons gladiator schools, "It is no accident that convicts speak of penal institutions for young men as *gladiator schools*. In such places, circumstances teach men *how* to kill one another. They are taught the way the *bull* is taught—through torment" (74). The bull in the ring is an evocative metaphor that Abbott unfortunately demonstrated with his own life when he stabbed a waiter at a New York City restaurant only six weeks after being granted parole. The waiter died and Abbott returned to prison a murderer, eventually dying inside in 2002. To my mind, Abbott may be an extreme example of "prison values" that he internalized and that lead him to strike out at the waiter over a perceived slight, though that is only speculation. More certain is the fact that too many young men who serve time at Gossett later return to adult prisons. The testimonial of the Gossett Youth Advisor who recognized too many faces and names of former Gossett youth on his tour of an adult prison in New York is more compelling on this point than recidivism statistics.

Foucault and Boal address the same phenomenon of internalized oppression, though from radically different origins and with different agendas. These are not theorists or practitioners who speak to each other, but by bringing them into comparison I can draw upon both for insight into the aesthetics of power in prisons

and examine why it is that transformation inside a total institution is so difficult and why prison's effects on prisoners and society will be so hard to dislodge.

Foucault's usefully proposes the productive power of prisons, fitting well with Abbott's gladiator schools or with "prison values." Furthermore, his intuition of the aesthetic power of the prison, as it plays out on bodies and in minds, is comparable to Boal's conception of the aesthetics of oppression that I will describe below. Foucault's shows how the birth of the prison is an ultimate example of a larger trend of industrialization that imposes power and control over workers, soldiers and students as well as prisoners. Foucault asks, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228). The resemblance he refers to is the process of turning record keeping and knowledge of the individual into a discipline of the individual, amounting to a control that divides a worker or student from his or her own self interests and creates classes of criminals and patients to be punished or cured. He goes a step beyond Goffman in identifying the social impact of total institutions: Foucault calls the prison a "complete and austere institution" (231). He writes:

[Prison] had already been constituted outside the legal apparatus when, throughout the social body, procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and forces, training their bodies, coding their continuous behavior, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting on them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralized (231).

What is useful in this account of the complete institution is that the power the institution is diffuse, throughout society, despite his claim that it is centralized. His use of the word "accumulated" here suggests an unstated economic imperative to transfer the excess power of discipline, as capital, to somewhere or someone—not to those

being classified and observed at least. This view of the total institution is too perfectly efficient, however, (i.e. “perfect visibility”). It’s not accurate to think of a prison “apparatus” as all seeing, all knowing despite being pervasive. Foucault’s focus on what he calls the “physics of power” (208) is interesting in that he captures something important about the institutionalization of power dynamics that is useful to understand, but at the same time the metaphor is disturbing because the power to control and command is compared to natural laws of the universe.

In his critique of Foucault entitled, “What would it matter if everything Foucault said about prison were wrong? *Discipline and Punish After Twenty Years*,” C. Fred Alford proposes that Foucault “has systematically mistaken an ideology for a practice. This affects not just his [Foucault’s] view of prison but also of power” (134). Alford joins many critics and historians who observe that Foucault is inaccurate in considering prisons to be disciplined and productive in practice when they are often chaotic and, at the same time, full of idleness. He writes, “Not the excess of supervision and categorization, but their absence, is the almost universal criticism of American prisons, and it has been for some time” (127)²⁰. Interestingly, for this study, one of Alford’s key examples is the lack of surveillance within the dormitories at Lorton prison.

I can add that Lorton was organized around a different model than the factories of penitence that Foucault pays attention to in the Northeast; it was organized around

²⁰ This is a telling criticism that Alford also uses to propose an alternative metaphor of power, based on prison architecture (the tunnels of the administrative segregation unit at Patuxent Institution in Jessup, Maryland that carry inmates from the cellblocks to the administration building). For Alford: “the power is in the tunnels themselves. Seeing it this way disrupts the distinction between the center and the margin, and that is the point” (141). This alternative metaphor allows Alford to point to the “brute, physical coercion” that “may not seem quite so metaphorical” (141) and that may appear anywhere. More interestingly, Alford’s critique points out that Foucault focuses on the mechanism of power, inaccurately at best, to the exclusion of examining the political and cultural dimensions of prison and of power.

the model of the slave plantation. Some of the trappings of the plantation, the prison farm for example, dropped away as Lorton grew older (before it was closed when DC ceded its' power to punish to the federal government). Still, the dormitories of the central facility were not set up as panopticons (the ability of one guard to see many cells and the threat of constant watching), as Alford observes, "Although it is constructed around dormitories, not cells, Lorton is a maximum security prison. What it is not is a panopticon. Not just because officer's don't look, but because offenders are not categorized, don't work and don't follow a time table" (127). Actually, the maximum security blocks were in fact set up in tiers of cells and eventually joined the nationwide trend to 23 hour a day lockdowns, but in his larger point Alford is right that internal surveillance was not the controlling factor at Lorton where the corruption of the guards is also infamous. In fact, even in the cases of the extreme measures of control applied by the trend in Supermax prisons, the panopticon is irrelevant or obsolete. There is no need for the panning gaze in a Supermax, which is nothing more than an extension of "the hole," solitary confinement, to the whole prison.

Foucault relies upon Bentham's prison design —the panopticon, a circular prison with the central guard tower— as an extended metaphor for internalized repression. What he captures is a compelling aesthetic of power playing out in the formation of identity. The prison invents an aesthetic of paternal correction that infantilizes its' objects. Critics of Foucault like Alford point out that all prisons are not panopticons, and even those that try to be panoptic do not function well. Alford calls them "nonopticons" pointing out that at Stateville prison, the only prison ever built in the manner of the Jeremy Bentham's design, inmates hang sheets and towels over their

cells with impunity, obscuring the view of the tower guards. The prisoners create a space free from administrative gazing (131)²¹.

Ted Conover's book, *New Jack*, about his time as an undercover journalist at Sing Sing chronicles numerous occasions of inmates throwing feces and urine at guards that got too close to cells.

New technologies may be returning some value to the concept of the panopticon: I took a public tour of Five Points Prison in Romulus NY the day before it opened in 2000. The striking feature was the "bubble." It looked a lot like an air traffic control center. Cameras were pointed all over the institution and live feeds came back to the bubble that also had the ability to monitor sound in the prison and to coordinate communication among the staff. While older prisons like Stateville fail to "watch," newer prisons like Five Points have moved along with many other areas of American life into a new era of video surveillance. The impact of this era on privacy theory or policy has not caught up with the digital age. Perhaps this trend will reinvent the panopticon after all. In such a case, the power of the gaze is not over.

The contrast between the panopticon and the theatre as competing metaphors of watching and power is one that Foucault invokes intentionally:

We are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring upon ourselves since we are part of its mechanism (217).

In this passage, in the panopticon one sees many, in the theatre many see one, or a few. An ancient Greek drama festival is not so free of power dynamics or equality as this quote implies of course. Nevertheless, Foucault's placement of the theatre as the

²¹ The deprivation of work and activity may, as Alford suggests, mean that prisoners must live not on timetables but in "sacred time, all the time in the world, time out of mind" (132).

opposite of the panopticon is important, but he doesn't do this consistently. Foucault also deploys the theatre metaphor to describe the panopticon itself in prisons where cells are "so many small theatres" (200).

This is a concern of all arts in prisons. Buzz Alexander of the Prison Creative Arts Program calls it a "clearing of space" (Teaching Arts ix). Douglas Paterson, visiting the Gossett program, observed that the group had created "sacred space" and Elvin Johnson proposed that all cliques and tensions between factions at Gossett were left at the door when the young men created their own theatre space. In this manner there is the potential for theatre to serve as the anti-panopticon by reversing Foucault's pronouncement that prisoners bodies are "...an object of information, never a subject in communication" (200)²².

²² Gain and loss, fragmentation and centralization, and circularity in his prose (which I have read only in English translation) suggest that history is finding ways not to progress. The knots come in waves of romantic nostalgia on the one hand and totalizing speculation on the other. For example, in keeping with his idea that we have tragically lost the theatricality of fantastic and warm ancient public events in favor of the cold, mechanical modern age and its panoptic impulse, he writes:

With spectacle there was the predominance of public life, the intensity of festivals, sensual proximity. In these rituals in which the blood flowed, society found new vigor and formed for a moment a single great body. The modern age poses the opposite problem: to procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude (216).

Foucault's "opposite problem" positions theatre as the opposite of the prison at least in regard to public punishment as performance. It is the collective, participatory, expressive nature of theatre that is left behind—the opposite of prison in Foucault's logic. But this opposite also comes with a very different aesthetic sensibility, especially in comparison to the sight lines of the amphitheatre or the vicarious thrills of the spectacle. The function of Foucault's lyricism, and his tragic impulses, highlight something that Boal notices about oppression too—that there is a poetics of oppression that operates within any dynamic of power (Boal, Games 116):

Escape

Escape is a powerful part of the work, however. It is an uncomfortable claim to make because none of the prisoners gets to leave during or after the theatre group meeting or class. Yet time and again the men of Lorton have used the language of escapism: some have said it is like “time off,” a “relief,” “something different” and even an “escape.” Outsiders often dismiss these sentiments; however, I believe they are evidence for the transformation of the prison space into PCAP’s “cleared space” referenced above. Carol Becker calls it a “demilitarized zone, a place of safety” (qtd. in Alexander, Teaching Arts ix), however this is farther than I would go because, as safe as it may feel, everything that happens in the group is still happening inside prison and may impact life long after the theatre practitioner leaves.

Yet the concept of “demilitarizing” is attractive and I do think that the men project an alternative aesthetic that intervenes in the space through any Arts behind Bars programming, not only theatre. In the first few years of going to Maximum Security at Lorton I met with men in a small room next to the guard post that could

We tried to show in practice how the theatre could be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts.

In order to understand the poetics of the oppressed one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people— “spect-actors,” passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon— into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action. (Boal, Theatre 122)

Many prisoners, especially the young men at Gossett, tell me that the most powerful aspect of TO work is the opportunity to think about what they *can do*. For these men the idea of change, options, decisions, or “chances” must all emerge from the “willing suspension of disbelief” in their own agency, akin to the function of theatre that Oscar Brockett claims is an essential quality of theatre working in tandem with the “purposeful manipulation of imagination” (12). What encourages such suspension of disbelief and manipulation of the imagination to become effective deliberation and social critique under the extreme environmental and cultural circumstances of prison?

best be described as a large booth. It was tiled and every sound reverberated; in fact, the clamoring sounds of the tier were barely deadened by the scratched glass window next to the guard post. The radiator clanked and, if it was hot, the fan added to the cacophony. It was a tight fit for a group of 15 men, 2 or 3 volunteers and me. The men would arrive in handcuffs or ankle chains if an unsympathetic guard were on duty. Despite all of the handicaps of this space, the comments about escape came mostly from this time in max.

Boal has theorized this kind of transformation of space as the power theatre has to transport time, space and memory. He defines several “properties” of aesthetic space that serve to outline his theory of the function of theatre. The aesthetic space is plastic, dichotomic, and telemicroscopic²³.

²³ For lecture or demonstration audiences Boal explains the aesthetic space through a short demonstration (or he tells the story of the demonstration). He arrives early and walks around the room or the audience space casually brushing his hair. No one notices. Then the lights are dimmed. A spotlight comes onto the stage. He walks deliberately into the spotlight, takes out his comb and brushes his hair. He stops, and sometimes there is polite applause. During the time he is on stage there is silence; every eye is on him. Then he asks if anybody in the audience noticed him brushing his hair before he came on stage. Usually the answer is “no.” Then he points out that everyone was talking to each other before, but that they are all silent now—why? He asks. The answer is that he has invoked the conventions of the stage and the theatre. But, more importantly, they have given him the power of their attention. They have given him the power of their observation. He then goes on to explain the theory of the spect-actor as the use of that power of the aesthetic space, but by all of them rather than by one guest lecturer or actor.

It happens that this little anecdote, or demonstration, also illustrates another way in which Foucault and Boal agree. They both see the power of observation as an important force in power dynamics. Interestingly, a further comparison with Laura Mulvey’s original conception of the power of the male gaze in film studies adds something to this similarity. The power of a gaze is like the power of the audience or the power of surveillance, but it also contains a socially constructed origin in patriarchy that neither of the other theories grapples with. It may be problematic for Boal to assume that an audience will be able to see together, or that they can escape their own internalized ways of seeing, even if a spect-actor steps out into that space.

By *plastic*, Boal means that the aesthetic space can be manipulated through its fiction (Rainbow 20). Time is the key quality that can be imagined into any direction (past, present, future), and anything in the aesthetic space can be given any meaning imaginable (old chairs can become thrones etc.). Boal writes, “The aesthetic space is endowed with the same plasticity as dreams and possesses the same substantiality of physical dimensions and solidity of volumes” (Rainbow 21). This dream like ability is very important to understand for its potential: to liberate memory and imagination. Boal considers memory and imagination to be the same process, and the aesthetic space as a blank that gets filled with all of the significations, unconscious as well as conscious, that can be thought up from lived experience (Rainbow 22). It’s a space for emotions, but also for a creative account of what is. It achieves its responsive characteristics from the ability of abstraction, but is therefore subject to the will. This suggests a certain impressionistic composition of space, but, in Boal’s practice, the centrality of the body and the acknowledgement that the body is affected by osmosis, retains for the aesthetic space a grounding in reality (a kind of hyper-reality), if that reality is oppression. The point is that Boal’s insistence on the “affective dimension and the oneric dimension” (Rainbow 21) may be less important than the fact that imagination rules. This is the opposite of a prison space, which is in no way plastic. The prison is, in fact, a great example of non-plasticity. For Foucault, discipline effectively abandons plasticity, not only for the body, but also for the machine around it; the body is trained in repetition and held to account to prevent variance.

By dichotomic, Boal means the same thing as metaxis, the adherence to two “worlds” at once. This is at once the ancient split between actor and character, and also the basis of his therapeutic model, since “all therapy, before proposing the exercise of a choice, must consist of an inventory of possible alternatives” (Rainbow 25). In other words, the aesthetic space, by its nature, creates a distancing effect that

Auslander noted in the excerpt quoted above. Boal means this distance as a chance for stepping aside of the self in order to engage the self. The other spect-actors, then, take on the positions and problems of the analyst. This is dangerous ground for Boal, who must explain why a “subject aesthetically reified” (Rainbow 26) is really taking control of a situation with the help of the spect-actors.

Boal asks for an “ascetic” training, or exercise, that is supposed to be capable of moving from the specific occurrence to the larger “law” (26). So that the story is not of personal suffering, but is of “gender,” for example. Yet this is where I have noted a breakdown above. Boal is right to see the dichotomic as an important quality of performance and of the aesthetic space, but this also reveals several complications with the therapy model. Nevertheless, dichotomy fits well with a postmodern subject. It is the invocation of the subject/object split (25). As for the prison, cellular space is object oriented—prisoner “objects” know where they “lock” (C 5, for example) and are identified by their ID number.

By *telemicroscopic*, Boal means the ability to magnify. “All gestures, all words, spoken there, become larger, clearer, more emphatic. On stage it is difficult, almost impossible, to hide” (Rainbow 27). And this is one of the most insightful ways to think of a “distancing” effect, that it is just as important to get closer in order to achieve perspective, as it is to step back. Boal’s metaphor is a virus, present but invisible, that the microscope presents to the eye. Perhaps this is the most important function of the aesthetic space for the prisoner who must confront the self within any social formation. Finally, the crucial difference between a body in the TO aesthetic space and the body in prison is the ability of prisoners to control making meaning with their own bodies and thereby communicate and theorize their own agency.

Foucault writes that the body is “...an object of information, never a subject in communication” (200). Plasticity, dichotomy, telemicroscopy, and the three principles

of the “cops in the head” all are ways of thinking about how the theatre can provide a warm space for subjects in communication. Boal likes to think of the problems that are posed in that space as “Chinese crisis,” containing both danger and opportunity (Rainbow 59). The danger that Foucault makes clear can also be an opportunity, if we can invoke the opposite of the prison space.

Interventions that Fail

Here are two Lorton Forum scenes that failed and why they failed:

In the visitor’s room a man waits at a table for his wife to arrive. He sits on one side and she takes a seat on the other side. After a brief greeting she gets down to the purpose of her visit. She reminds him that it has been hard to pay the bills in his absence and that the children need a father at home. Then she reveals that she has a new man in her life. Once this news is out she tells him that she brought the new man with her so that he can meet him. She wants no misunderstandings. The new man joins her at the table. What is the prisoner protagonist to do?

This painful scene had only one intervention proposed. The scene unfolded as before until the end and then the prisoner asked his wife to leave him with the new man for a few minutes. Then the prisoner asked the new man to take good care of her and asked if he would also do right in keeping him involved in his children’s life. The new man agrees—end of scene. In the heartbreaking silence that followed nobody wanted to make any other interventions, nor did the group want to talk through the scene. This was not a surprise to me. I was interested in the fact that the prisoner felt he had to negotiate man to man rather than with his wife. I thought that it could be partly about gendered power dynamics. However, I will never know how that discussion might have turned out because I needed to be sensitive to the mood of the group: there was clearly no will to continue with the scene. There was no

psychological safety net for continuing the scene, and I assume that there was no way forward without making the men in the room relive various traumas from their own visitation day experiences. I could not facilitate them myself without training in therapy.

In addition this is a scene that happens after the fact of the decision. There is not much point in rehearsing responses that wish the new man away or wish the prisoner released. The one intervention, negotiate for terms, was a wise and measured response that was played with remarkable emotional control. The man playing the prisoner was quiet and dignified in his requests rather than confrontational or histrionic. I consider it a “failed” scene because there was nowhere we could go with it, but that is just my opinion. I do not know if the scene served the person who proposed it in the first place, nor do I know if the wise intervention was a kind of lesson for that person. After all, the scene was presented as “what should he do?”

My bias is to consider such scenes “failures” because they tend to highlight what cannot be done more than what can be done. That does not mean that they do not have a place in the social critique of fatherhood and family as the prisoners were conceiving and re-conceiving the entire valence of issues related to those topics. I am suspicious, however, of anything that makes participants feel more hopeless, more depressed or that could be described, as one Gossett youth put it, as “that’s just the way it is.” TO should not be a theatre of punishment. The balancing act comes in the form of this question: what is uncomfortable in a useful way versus uncomfortable in a harmful way?

One night I didn’t introduce Forum Theatre very well by not providing an example and the first scene was simply a reenactment of anguish. I don’t remember why I didn’t see this coming.

A judge sits at his bench. He asks a defendant to rise for sentencing. A long sentence is pronounced. The man wants to make some kind of statement, but the time for statements is passed. No interventions are proposed because none are possible at this point.

This is another “fated” scene in which the point of entry in the scene is too late in the story for any intervention. Boal says that TO work cannot confront direct *aggression*; it makes sense that once a gun is pulled Forum Theatre is not the appropriate or most useful response, for example. That is true even in an aesthetic space. However, the courtroom scene is not that kind of aggression. The scene failed because there is no power sharing, no removal of blocks, no repositioning available and there are no cops in the head, just bailiffs in the courtroom. A breaking open of the narrative is still possible, but not advisable if this is based on the actual story of someone in the group (as TO narratives are). For example, a new script about mandatory sentencing in the US might be interesting, but that would require a different approach and different ground rules. It might be necessary, in that case, to ask what the crime was before deciding if another alternative is workable.

Beyond TO practice there are challenges that any art behind bars or other outside programming face from time to time: unannounced transfers, changing privileges, changing staff, and tensions related to bad days inside and incidents of all sorts. Once, during the Gossett program I invited former prisoner and artist Tony Papa to visit as a guest lecturer with his art. Tony’s story is amazing and inspirational. He literally painted his way out of prison. His art appeared in prison magazines and other venues until eventually being selected by the Whitney Museum in New York for a special exhibit. Through his art, and because he was serving up to 15 years for a non-violent, drug possession, first offence, he was granted the only clemency Governor George Pataki approved. Once released, Tony became a paralegal and continued to

paint. He is also an activist against mandatory minimum sentencing in NY and elsewhere. When we arrived at the Gossett Center there was no group waiting. While the members of our group were being picked up from other activities (eventually about half were rounded up by staff) we discovered that the slide projector that we had reserved was missing a bulb. Tony resorted to passing his slides around the room so that the young men could hold them up to the light. They didn't quite get what it was all about. On the way out of the Center I wanted Tony to meet the Director of Residential Life to promote what we were doing, but once we were in the room with her she was clearly harried and she was seemingly unaware of who Tony was (though I had gone through her office for the arrangements and explained Tony's status as a former prisoner). I had a moment of panic when I suddenly wondered if she was aware that Tony was a former prisoner in New York State. There are many access rules in youth facilities that do not apply in adult prisons and I also did not want to step on some provision of Tony's clemency that I might not know about. I suddenly tried to get out of the conversation. Even worse, on the way out, Tony asked me about my obvious discomfort. He wondered if I had told them his status as a former prisoner. I told him that I had indeed done so and that we had never had trouble with Elvin's visits either. Tony was relieved, but he said that he saw the Director and her staff as "burned out." He recognized the look, he said. I think it was a bad day. Something was happening that I would never know about.

Conclusion

In his book article, "Pathologies of Hope," Baz Kershaw proposes a framework for valuing performances that occur within circumstances that seem hopelessly co-opted by the "performative quality of power" that he asserts exists in all socio-political domains. Kershaw's article starts by looking at the state of "political theatre" as a

theatre in crisis that is “compromised” and whose “potential for radicalism is subject to doubt (5).” Kershaw is one of many who note that Brechtian theatrical devices, for example, are separated from their ideological roots in contemporary global media culture, and epic style interventions in acting or narration proposed by Brecht are now dispersed throughout the performance of everyday life in such a way that entire generations do not respond to Brecht-inspired theatricality as radical, nor do multiplicity, distancing, or theatricality necessarily engender critical awareness in an audience. Elizabeth Wright has “re-presented” Brecht in order to recover a “postmodern Brecht” with a similar concern to Kershaw’s about the fate of the modernist Brecht²⁴.

²⁴ Jameson’s reflection on “dissolving the multiple paralyses in which we are now historically seized...,” (29) in order to triangulate a method to break these paralyses in his consideration of Brecht is an interesting tangent here.

Jameson explores how his theory and criticism centered approach can take inspiration and guidance from the socially critical theatre of Bertolt Brecht. In his 1998 book, *Brecht and Method*, Jameson attempts to “rescue Brecht from a now conventional notion of modernism” (21). The quintessence of his de-centered presentation of Brecht in the book is twofold: Brecht’s theatre theories are a more valid form of postmodernism than postmodernism itself, and the Brechtian attitude is the proper attitude for future theorizing. Both of these are primarily true because of Brecht’s “usefulness” (1) in pushing through “a keen sense of the impossibility of *praxis*” (29) to reach political efficacy. Jameson writes:

In any case, what I have wanted to show here is something rather different: that contemporary theoretical struggles, ostensibly waged around aesthetics (political versus autonomous, text versus work) and even around abstract philosophical issues (the totality as such) are finally, from an allegorical standpoint, not the ultimate ones, and do not identify the political issues that are finally at stake here (79).

In terms of the discussion of aesthetics in this chapter, this same concern is my motivation for focusing on the effects of aesthetics, and on the rather differently conceived “aesthetic space,” of prison— carefully avoiding an opposition that would rest in aesthetics alone. However, it is clear that what Jameson seeks in Brecht is a method for moving out of his own discourse. His use of the word “ostensibly,” above indicates his belief in a hidden agenda within abstraction itself, and Brecht offers him the prospect of a purer social criticism, one that has its feet on the ground (a la Popular

According to Wright:

The postmodern Brecht is different from the modernist Brecht who produced the split subjects of the 'great plays' and who attributed this split to the divisive nature of bourgeois capitalism. In this other Brecht of the earlier plays the performative mode appears instead of the denotative mode of the later ones, with the result that accidental meaning subverts any didactic intention (97).

Mechanics), and one whose chief devices unfold in the collective processes of theatre. The passage concludes:

In fact, the third term —the collective—does not mark a return to the centered subject after its opposite number, the decentered one; but rather, the transcendence of both towards something else (79).

And, transcendence is what Jameson wants. Is it possible to embrace a method that tries to simultaneously “see” the postmodern point and yet enable the next move beyond it? Jameson can only concede, in the end, that Brecht is the best bet for resisting reification, partly through the potential of theatre as a metaphor for collaboration and collectivity. He does not solve his ultimate problem—the search for the praxis that can still be valid under massive duress. Brecht is only his compass.

The well-made production is one from which the traces of its rehearsals have been removed (just as from the successfully reified commodity the traces of production itself have been made to disappear): Brecht opens up this surface, and allows us to see back down into the alternative gestures and postures of the actors trying out their roles: so it is that aesthetic experimentation generally – which has so often been understood as generating the new and the hitherto unexperienced, the radical innovation – might just as well be grasped as the ‘experimental’ attempt to ward off reification (something the other arts, from novels and films to poetry, painting, and musical performance, even aleatory performance, are structurally and materially less qualified to do) (12).

This passage is worth examination because questions about postmodern critique emerge. First, according to Jameson, theatre as a figure, as a potential process, that resists reification better than any other form of artistic expression, offers a chance to achieve “radical innovation” because it is an alternative process for collective expression. Second, Brecht’s theatre successfully reveals all of the artifice of representation in order to forefront alterity itself, and this alterity indicates the potential for change. Third, it is a theatre of rehearsal; a theatre “of trying out...roles” that thereby avoids totalizing gestures. Thus, a Brechtian theatre is one that promises to solve several of Jameson’s key conundrums.

Kershaw's "pathology of hope" is to place the future and current efficacy of radical theatre in a postmodernist performative mode similar to the one Wright wishes to recover for Brecht. Kershaw claims that "Currently, the greatest radical turbulence can be found in performance where modernist and postmodernist versions of the world collide (7)." One of the places such collisions occur is in performances in "prison drama" among other places.

In conclusion, TO techniques are democratic, but also postmodern. They attempt to "break the oppression" or "break the paralysis" of internalized and interpolated subject positions from inside an already co-opted position within the total institution of prison in an age of mass incarceration. The "pathology of hope" under such circumstances does not reach to critical resistance of incarceration, but rests on restoring the behavior of democratic deliberation in a performative mode. The type of intervention that is appropriate is the intervention that offers no easy solutions, but invites all kinds of improvised, speculative alternative solutions to intractable, compromised positions. This is the proper role of a theatre of liberation in confinement.

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