

Are There Any Histories That Are Off Limits?: Performing History and Autobiography in Progress with Incarcerated Students, Returning Citizens, Police Officers, and More

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Abstract

This article offers a descriptive case study of an ongoing community-engaged dialogic learning experience that emphasizes human connection and the evolution of self-narratives within criminal justice contexts. The course in question, Performing History/Autobiography in Progress, is facilitated online as a variation of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. It has been designed to build upon a program where police officers and academy recruits enter a carceral setting to study as peers with incarcerated citizens in a three-credit seminar on criminal justice policy. Primarily, the course focuses on public safety and restorative justice. An important secondary benefit is that the course provides an opportunity for its participants to see the humanity in people previously only recognized as adversaries. Performing History/Autobiography in Progress was designed to follow the Inside-Out course and expands on those gains, using writing and performance to explore further intersections of self and society—the personal and the political—as observed, at least partially, through the prisms of prison and policing. The hope is that this course’s arts-based curriculum will push participants to authentically incorporate the voice of *the other* into their own self-narratives so that they might better see all, including themselves, as people with vested interests in their communities

and nation. Through participant observation and interviews with the course's instructors, this article shares what has been learned about how notions of self can evolve in a collaborative, humanities-based learning environment.

Keywords: destigmatization, dialogue, normalization, self, theatre, dramaturgical analysis

Introduction

This article is offered as a descriptive case study of an ongoing community-engaged dialogic learning experience that emphasizes human connection and the evolution of self-narratives within criminal justice contexts. In practice, *Performing History/Autobiography in Progress* is a collaboration between professional artists—writers and performers—and both currently and formerly incarcerated persons—the latter referred to throughout this paper as returning citizens, as well as police officers, activists, professors, and, in some instances, family members. This work began with an iteration of Roger Guenveur Smith’s Phi Beta Kappa course, of the same name, reimagined in dynamic partnership with Susan Stein and offered through Zoom sessions since the Spring Semester of 2021. As of the writing of this article (i.e., Fall 2025) the course is in its thirteenth semester. Two of the more recent iterations have included justice-involved youth. The current version includes men incarcerated at the Allegheny County Jail, in Pittsburgh, PA.

Late in the Fall 2021 semester and into Spring 2022, eleven men incarcerated within a state-run prison in Pennsylvania joined the class. As a result of institutional constraints, this group shared a single screen. This was, in one sense, limiting. In another sense, however, this was a remarkable degree of access and the way in which the camera was situated, framed the men as if the long conference table they were seated at was a stage where they could perform together. While the course can only be taken for college credit once, all alums are invited to continue participating as members of what we call the Social Living Collective. Members of the Social Living Collective who helped bring this article to press include Emma Alaquiva, Colleen Bristow, Leon Ford, Rick McCown, Jacqueline Roebuck Sakho, Roger Guenveur Smith, Susan Stein, and Robert Faruq Wideman. To date, we have offered only one public performance, however many of our weekly class sessions, with performances both scripted and improvised, could easily constitute plays. On November 8th, 2022, members of the Social Living Collective came together at the Duquesne University Student Union Ballroom for an audience inclusive performance. A video of this event can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpFpaEP39qg&t=1271s>.

Problem Statement

The issue that this research seeks to address is the potential for and impact of dialogue between oppositional groups within a democracy. John Dewey, the American philosopher, educational reformer, and political activist, defined democracy as “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1922, p. 93). His perspective was that, in order for democracy to function properly, individuals need to think beyond their own positions, and consider the actions and interests of others as well as their own. Dewey believed that achieving this consciousness requires dialogue between diverse groups that reveal a common purpose (Innes, Gilchrist, Friedman, and Tompkins 2016, p. 34). However, in a

multicultural society with diverse views and backgrounds, it is often challenging for groups to reach consensus. Therefore, Dewey promoted the formation of dialogic communities to establish common ground within a democracy.

In consonance with Dewey, Garrison (1996) emphasizes that, “Pluralistic conversations are political acts that create the conditions of free and liberal thought and action, but the first stirrings of democratic freedom lie deep within” (1996, p. 48). He emphasizes the importance of democratic listening because in circumstances where conflict exists, the oppressed are the most likely to go unheard as they are forced into listening to those in power (Garrison, 1996, p. 429). Moreover, listening is essential for building relationships, sharing disparate understandings, developing reciprocity, and empathy (Dobson, 2012). For Garrison (1996), dialogue safeguards citizens from manipulation and allows for growth or cultivation beyond flawed ideologies. The alternative is an isolated society where freedom is at risk because people have placed their welfare in the hands of a few powerful individuals that are motivated to serve their own interests.

Dewey recognized barriers to open communication when he noted, “Prejudices of economic status, of race, of religion, imperil democracy because they set up barriers to communication, or deflect or distort its operation” (1942, pp. 443–444). In order to overcome these obstacles to authentic communication, Garrison (1996) proffers a theory of active listening that acknowledges our “historically and culturally conditioned prejudices” that constitute our identity (Garrison, 1996, p. 434). He explains that when we risk admitting our prejudices, we begin to disrupt how we interpret others’ experiences. Specifically, he reminds us that “while unconsciously under the influence of a prejudice, it is impossible for us fully to recognize them, and if we cannot identify the prejudices that constitute our personal identities, then in some sense we cannot even know ourselves, much less understand somebody different” (1996, p. 434). Garrison does not expect us to shed all of our prejudices and become completely objective listeners. However, in the discomfort of transparency we are more likely to question our prejudices and most importantly experience personal growth.

Line of Inquiry

Anchored in a Deweyan approach to democracy, this research focuses on identifying the essential characteristics of a community-engaged course that brings adversarial groups together in a dialogic learning experience. As such, it involves understanding the mechanisms at the heart of this project and the institutional barriers that are confronted. The work presented here is offered in support of the notion that operating within a democratic framework of community engagement can catalyze both personal and intellectual development that, in turn, can establish democracy as a way of living rather than just a political system (Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton, 2009; McGowan, Bonefas, and Siracusa, 2013). To support the development and growth of an engaged democracy, academics and community partners must engage adversarial groups in

creative opportunities for "collaborative knowledge construction" (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 9). By cultivating a capacity to engage across differences, we develop an ever-deepening understanding of self and society. As we grow to understand ourselves and social issues better, we are experiencing a socialization "into an interpretively competent ethos of interaction in which the opinions and interests of others are respected, grappled with, internalized, and responded to through practice" (McGowan et al., 2013, p. 176).

Perhaps most importantly, the program under analysis is offered as an exemplar of how universities can cultivate this ethos of interaction as they attempt to shift from the traditional structures of civic engagement toward democratic engagement where "students learn about democracy by acting democratically" within an "ecosystem of knowledge" that "seeks the public good with the public not merely for the public" (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, pp. 9–11).

Research Question

Although in-prison educational programming is recognized as a transformative component of successful reentry (Wheelock, Tobin, & Smith, 2025), how community-engaged dialogic learning programs, like Performing History/Autobiography in Progress, affect students' conceptions of self and their views of others, remains understudied. Stated most directly, the goal of this study is to describe what has been accomplished thus far in a unique, humanities- and performative-arts-based curriculum, thereby illustrating how such a curriculum can facilitate destigmatization among a diverse array of participants, including people who are justice-involved, law enforcement, and traditional students. This article does not make any effort to point out the numerous inequities within our criminal justice system. Rather, it assumes the reader is well aware of the dysfunction at the core of a system perfectly, if not intentionally, designed to produce disparate outcomes and inequality (Kurlychek & Johnson, 2019). Given this assumption, this work interrogates the most basic concepts of self and society in order to identify essential mechanisms or processes that can free people from the isolation of the social categorizations by which they are constrained. Moreover, given the focus on stigma and how stigma is related in part to group identities and power disparities (see Goffman, 1963), this work considers, while simultaneously attempting to transcend, specific power structures and identity politics.

This article begins with a discussion of how the course Performing History/Autobiography in Progress emerged from ongoing efforts at destigmatization within the criminal justice system. Specifically, it considers a program called Police Training Inside-Out where police officers and academy recruits come together with incarcerated citizens to study as peers and, hopefully, move past the animosity inherent in their statuses. From there, the focus shifts to a series of fortuitous events that set the stage for the first iteration of Performing History/Autobiography in Progress.

This background is followed by a theory section that functions both as it would be expected to in a standard research article, while also offering a theoretical justification and goal for the course. After this, we offer an explanation of our methodological approach, followed by the analysis itself. Here we present fairly extended sections of interviews with Ms. Stein and Mr. Smith that address the form and function of the course as well as the underlying sentiment that is driving it. We conclude this section by situating the studied course within a harsh and often brutal carceral environment, and demonstrate this unique curriculum's potential for—and the institutional resistance to—tearing down the walls separating seemingly disparate and frequently marginalized subpopulations, such as incarcerated men, and the larger society, including its police officers. Finally, we offer a conclusion that summarizes the work in total and offers implications for practice.

Background

Our work in the Social Living Collective has grown out of a decade-long partnership between the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, Duquesne University, and the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections that brings police recruits together with incarcerated men to study as peers in a three-credit course behind prison walls. We call this seminar Police Training Inside-Out (PTI-O), and it proceeds as a weekly meeting, where “outside students” (i.e., police officers and/or recruits) and an equal number of “inside students” (i.e., incarcerated citizens) attend class together inside a prison (Conti, Wozniak, Burston, and Frantz 2020). The addition of an innovative experiential learning curriculum to traditional academy training provides recruits with an opportunity to develop a more nuanced professional vision during their initial socialization. For the incarcerated citizens, the coursework holds the secondary benefit of empowering them to see the humanity in a group of people (i.e., the police), whom up to that point they had recognized only as adversaries.

While the curriculum maintains a public safety focus with an emphasis on restorative justice, perhaps even more importantly, it functions as a dialogic space where the two groups can come to see each other—and themselves—as people with vested interests in their shared communities. As part of their course evaluations, officers have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak openly, a sense that the experience challenges stereotypes, as well as a desire for more opportunities like PTI-O. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced both the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the Pittsburgh Police Academy to close their doors to outside visitors. In response to those circumstances, as well as the aforementioned desire among participants for additional programming, we implemented Performing History/Autobiography in Progress as an ongoing dialogical experience for both sets of course alumni (i.e., active police officers and returning citizens) as well as community members. To view a recorded session of one of the courses see: https://youtu.be/pqf_R-dZyFA.

Performing History/Autobiography in Progress

The Performing History/Autobiography in Progress course evolved from an informal writing seminar for returning citizens, faculty, and friends hosted by Susan Stein early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Ms. Stein is an actor, playwright, and teaching artist most known for her one-woman show *Etty*, which examines the consequences and dangers of antisemitism, discrimination, and racism in the context of the Holocaust. Ms. Stein has performed *Etty* in theaters, universities, schools, and prisons around the world, as well as leading accompanying educational workshops for over a decade. For more about the *Etty* play, please visit: <https://ettyproject.org>.

With their incarcerated colleagues locked in their cells most of the day and the rest of the world dealing with a lockdown of its own, a group of returning citizens, police officers, academic faculty, undergraduate students, and chosen family began writing together every Monday at 11 am. Ms. Stein would begin each session with a prompt, something like: “that song”, “the table”, “the door,” or “a window”. Based upon the prompts, participants would write for three to five minutes and then read their pieces to the group. This became an important moment of community strength and vulnerability for a diverse group of people struggling with isolation and uncertainty. Some participants described it as “starting your day out at the gym, a workout that can help you to find the strength to face what is in front of you, break a sweat and let go of some of the stress that had accumulated since the last session.”

Serendipitously, in the Fall of 2020, Norman Conti, the original facilitator of Police Training Inside-Out, had the opportunity to host an online conversation with actor/writer/director Roger Guenveur Smith following a showing of his film *Rodney King* in Conti’s Police and Society course. Sergeant Colleen Bristow, an original PTI-O alumna who continually champions the program within the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, was in attendance, so Conti introduced her as a friend and advocate for their work within the police department. Additionally, he recognized her as the survivor of a terrible act of violence in her career as a police officer. Colleen explained how powerful Roger’s piece was for her noting that it spurs an anxiety within her that leads to self-reflection and reflection on her role in training Pittsburgh police officers. She went on to ask Roger if he would have ever imagined his work being shown in a police academy and how he felt about that. He responded:

Well, you know, when Rodney King passed, it was Father's Day, June 2012. The Chief of Police made a remark and said that Rodney King had changed the culture of policing in Los Angeles, which I thought was a very inappropriate comment. For one thing, there was no remark of condolence to Mr. King's family, in terms of his loss, and it also placed Rodney King in that strange inhuman position of being simply the symbol of something or the catalyst for something and I think the great challenge of my work is to rehumanize Rodney King who was seen as the butt of a joke, as a human piñata. The symbol of police

brutality. The symbol of drunk driving, if you will. So, if there is a process of re-humanization that your recruits in the academy can access, then I'm certainly happy to share with them this piece which I've shared with the entire world, but hopefully they will be able to see it with fresh eyes and hopefully it will illuminate the humanity that is on the street. (The video of this exchange is available at: <https://youtu.be/kQtVzCMN9-o>.)

Mr. Smith, himself a Phi Beta Kappa BA graduate of Occidental College and the Yale School of Drama (MFA), had been offering a Phi Beta Kappa course called the Performing History/Autobiography in Progress workshop at universities and arts centers around the country for almost two decades. For excerpts from one of these original workshops visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAPcpUWG_QE. Dr. Conti was hoping to enlist him in further discussions around his work with police and returning citizens.

In the spring of 2021, with the pandemic raging on and Dr. Conti locked out of both the prison and the police academy, he asked Mr. Smith and Ms. Stein if they would be interested in doing a class with police, returning citizens, and Leon Ford, a man shot by a Pittsburgh Police officer and paralyzed at the age of nineteen. To learn more about Leon Ford see his memoir *An Unspeakable Hope: Brutality, Forgiveness and Building a Better World for my Son* and his short film at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2020/05/leon-ford/611671/>. They agreed and as an aficionado on the Reggae music of Burning Spear, Mr. Smith suggested calling the first iteration of the course Social Living. The philosophy and values underpinning the course are rooted in the performing arts and humanities. Its in-class dialogues were designed to facilitate understanding between and within the various student groups, while also producing written or theatrical pieces that help a broader audience to understand more of the fundamental humanity both in policing and in the community.

Theory

This portion of the article serves doubly as a description of the theoretical underpinning of its analysis, as well as a theoretical justification for its writing- and dramatic performance-based curriculum, a curriculum that inspired an artistic collective as a course in sociology. The core of that reasoning is found at the intersection of the work of C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman. Mills is best known for *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), a book whose title is based on his notion that sociology is fundamentally about recognizing the intersection of history and biography, the self and society. Even among those of us who are less familiar with the concept, it is not difficult to understand that capturing this nexus is at the core of meaningful social inquiry, or as Mills puts it, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (1959, 3).

Mills goes on to pat himself and his perspicacious yet pretentious colleagues on the back with a strident description of how learned sociologists better understand the relationship between historical change and the lives of “ordinary” members of society:

[P]eople do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary people do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of people they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them (1959, 4).

Perhaps, but in the spring of 2021, Mills and his colleagues might have been surprised by how most people were quite highly attuned to how history and social institutions had evolved and were presently affecting their lives. Most folks could not avoid embracing the quality of mind necessary for understanding how structural inequalities, particularly regarding such pervasive and long-standing problems, such as crime and access to healthcare and quality schools, were resulting in demonstrable harm. It is notable, that from the perspective of Mills, people are trapped in a world that is moving too quickly for them to find a vantage that would allow them to accurately make sense of the forces affecting their lives; people, according to Mills (1959), are locked in moral stasis. Then, “in defense of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private individuals,” forcibly disconnected in perpetuity from others (Mills, 1959, p. 5), *unless things get so bad that they have no choice to come together*, or what he refers to as “earthquakes of change” (1959, p. 4). Arguably, the seismic shifts of the early twenty-first century—wars, pandemics, and social upheaval—were enough to bring at least some of us together.

Fundamentally, the selfhood to which Mills is referring is a relational phenomenon shaped through interaction where individuals replicate the distinctive behaviors and attitudes of their reference group while differentiating themselves from others in that group (Blumer, 1969). Aboulafia (1986) described it as a “phenomenon of reflection dependent upon the significant symbol, upon sociality, upon being able to take the role of other” (p. 10). She notes that selves are cultivated through a process of reflexive appropriation where individuals recognize themselves as social objects eliciting responses from others. The process begins in face-to-face interactions that generate habitual patterns of self-awareness. These patterns integrate the fact of the other, as well as their attitudes, so deeply into the framework of self—in the form of a generalized other—that they impact behavior even when those others are absent (Blumer, 1969;

Mead, 1967). From this perspective the self is not recognized as an object, but rather “the immediate, iterative, and symbolic experience of *relationship with* oneself and, implicitly, *separation from* the other” (Bruder, 1998, p. 89).

Therefore, the self is permeated by otherness and emerges in scenarios of dialogical action. These conversations necessitate people shift between *separating from* and *taking the roles of* others. This understanding of self as a locus of dialogue is bolstered by Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of an internal discourse between a number of voices maintaining different degrees of authority, reflecting the dialogue that makes up the larger culture. He explains that the self is formed by first internalizing this dialogue and then joining it. This model fits neatly with the notion of reflexive appropriation and Bakhtin’s “double-voiced discourse,” which parallels Mead’s (1967) concept of the generalized other. Moreover, Bakhtin notes a polyphony in this double-voiced discourse, so the self is recognized as a multiplicity of voices that operate similarly to characters in a narrative structure.

Bochner & Ellis (2016) expand on these notions of self and help us to better understand our project as a collaborative writing/performance process that “provide[s] a systematic treatment of the origins, goals, concepts, genres, methods, aesthetics, ethics and truth conditions” (p. vii). To perform the complexity of the ebb and flow as multiple ways of knowing and varying ways of creating reality for self and others is social engagement, a democratic act. Specifically, while performing our own histories as narratives and making sense of our stories, “words or utterances” (Hickson, 2016, p. 386) allow the collective authorship to remain authentic.

Within Performing History/Autobiography in Progress, we are attempting to combine the above point of view with Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective (i.e., envisioning social life as a play). His model of life as theatre is all about masks, calculated versions of self that folks perform with the cynical expectation of showing others what will best serve themselves in an encounter. For Goffman (1959), our various self-interests make it almost impossible to express our own authentic selves or experience others. However, some of us have masks that others see as discrediting to what we are attempting to present. Often, we end up dehumanized by those with the power to impose their definition of the situation on those of us with what are defined as disruptive masks that we cannot keep hidden. Then again, one group’s mark of shame is another’s badge of honor. Notions of right and wrong, just and unjust are always dependent upon who is doing the judging (i.e., who has socio-political power), and social juries are complicated. So, who is stigmatized, when, and where? Those who are incarcerated or in the process of returning to society after decades in prison? Members of marginalized and disadvantaged subpopulations, such as Black men enmeshed with the criminal justice system? Police officers in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, during the trial of his killer? Both? Either?

At this point, when you bring these literal “others” (i.e., supposed: cops and robbers; good guys and bad guys; oppressors and the oppressed; heroes and villains) together, the fault lines created by Mills’ earthquakes of change are starkly observable. In such a learning environment, false dichotomies of deviant and normal diminish, if not disappear altogether. The studied program used the Zoom platform’s multiple electronic boxes to carve out spaces for dialogue that came together to form a single stage for face-to-face interaction. In these—as in all—relations, the self is shaped through interactions where individuals are replicating what is distinctive among their colleagues while also differentiating themselves (Blumer, 1969). Certainly, in the moment and hopefully beyond, these exchanges transformed supposed adversaries into accomplices. Specifically, it may be a sociality where individuals move beyond stigma/counter-stigma, literally taking the role of “other” in an ongoing dialogue. For these police officers, returning and incarcerated citizens, and activists, it became a scene where they could, at least temporarily, *see, speak, listen, hear, and behave* in ways that challenge the conventional stigma narrative and establish space for maintaining aspects of their authentic selves (Scott, 1990).

When offered to police officers together with incarcerated/returning citizens during a time of political and medical upheaval, *Performing History/Autobiography in Progress* promoted normalized interactions and the suspension of oppositional identities during particularly uncertain times. The basic human need to distance the self from organizational identity claims and stigma is channeled into a locus of positive social exchange. In these moments, the self is reconciled with the other, and stigma is negated within the dialogic space offered through the program. Common stereotypes are inverted through structured face-to-face interaction, or as Goffman (1963) explains:

When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another’s immediate presence, especially when they there attempt to sustain a joint conversational encounter, there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides (p. 13).

In *Performing History/Autobiography in Progress*, stigmatized statuses take on a formal function as part of the course. This occurs when participants exercise their power through authentic exchanges in a dialogic space. Moreover, folks on all sides of the law transform into fellow resisters of the dominant ideologies that drive both the justice system and dehumanization more generally. In the process, we help each other change our lives and our practice.

Methods

At the end of April 2021, our friend and collaborator Emma Alaquiva was in Los Angeles, California, for a film festival and graciously recorded an interview with Mr. Smith about his

work on Performing History/Autobiography in Progress. Later, he interviewed Ms. Stein while she was in Pittsburgh for a performance of *Etty*. Transcripts of those interviews, in conjunction with the first author's observations made as a course participant, constitute the data used for this descriptive case study.

The analysis of the data has been conducted from a positioned-subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, and Millar, 2001), where we assume program participants actively interpreted and constructed meaning from their experiences throughout their time in attendance. This allows for the recognition of various perspectives and an attempt to understand their experiences through a lens of abolitionist theater (i.e., a form of art that humanizes the stigmatized in the hope of reforming systems). We used a grounded theory methodology where responses to interview questions were transcribed and reviewed for emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014; Glazner & Strauss, 1967). Analytic memos were utilized to understand the process of destigmatization at the core of this work. As the importance of specific themes, like voice and dialogue, began to emerge, relevant observations, as well as analytical insights, were noted in an effort to determine which factors were most significant. In the following section, excerpts from interview transcripts are followed by explanations of how these data fit into a schema of destigmatization. Data emerging from the participant observation phase of this study are explicitly delineated; however, such observations proved invaluable when interpreting the interview material. Participant observation is also the source of characterizations made whenever describing the character of the studied course or how its students responded to its instructors.

Analysis

Each of the two interviews begins with Mr. Alaquiva asking Roger Guenveur Smith and Susan Stein about their connection to the project. Mr. Smith explained the project as follows:

We're working on this thing called Performing History/Autobiography in Progress. It's a social living collective, in which we meet every Friday morning, eight o'clock my time here in LA and 11 o'clock Pittsburgh time. And for an hour, we share work. We share dreams, we share nightmares. Some of the work is improvised, some of the work is prewritten and some of the work is a combination thereof. It's been a tremendous gathering of people who are speaking, yes, but also listening. So, we vibe off of what we create for each other, for ourselves and for a larger listening audience as well. But it's very intimate and can be very moving. And it's always very challenging to step up to the electronic box to share what resonates with us politically, personally.

It's been a great journey so far. Some of the people who were participating in this are creating work, which is really priceless, really unforgettable. The range of experiences that the participants have is very wide, very diverse. But in some ways, speaks to

Pittsburgh history. And that's always exciting to me because Pittsburgh has always been a fascinating place. I've worked there just a couple of times. I was in a John Singleton film there, I performed *A Huey P. Newton Story* there, I did a baseball play called *Juan and John* at the August Wilson Center. So, every time I have an opportunity to work in Pittsburgh, I learn a little more.

Of course, my great friend, Mr. Bill Nunn, who played Radio Raheem in *Do the Right Thing*, is from Pittsburgh. Whenever I hit the city, we always had a great time and I miss him dearly, but I know just like those hills in Pittsburgh, the strength of Bill Nunn continues to resonate in my imagination. And one time Bill took me up way above the rivers. And it was a spectacular view, right, a lot of bridges, a lot of smokestacks coming up. You could see the variety of communities, but I imagined what Pittsburgh was before all of that development when it was just those three rivers flowing. And it's a beautiful place, particularly when imagined like that.

And here we are on the banks of the Los Angeles River in LA and this is the first place where human civilization began here. Right here, the Tongva people who were here way way before Columbus, before Cabrillo came into the harbor out there 40 miles away. This is where LA was first developed and of course this river was not encased in concrete way back when.

Just in this response, Roger is perfectly modeling how the course operates. First, he notes that it is a morning course where people can, early in the day, share their dreams and nightmares. In this, he is pointing out that the class is an opportunity for people to exchange imaginative material and, in that exchange, collaborate on bringing it to life.

From this, he goes on to explain his own connection to Pittsburgh, having acted in a film and performed plays in Pittsburgh as well as his friendship with Bill Nunn, a well-regarded actor and the son of a Hall of Fame Pittsburgh Steeler recruiter, responsible for bringing in the Black players at the heart of the 1970s football dynasty. Beyond that pedigree, Mr. Nunn costarred along with Roger in Spike Lee's classic of American cinema, *Do the Right Thing*. Altogether, this is a profound and endearing local connection from a lifelong resident of Los Angeles, which helped collapse the geographic and social distance between Hollywood and the Steel City. After setting the stage in this manner, Roger goes on to draw parallels between the three rivers at the heart of Pittsburgh and the Los Angeles River, as well as the human and environmental catastrophe at the heart of so much of the American experience.

Having viewed Roger's response, Ms. Stein offers comments about theater as well as incarceration and gets into the specifics of the program. Ms. Stein explained:

I came to this work through Etty Hillesum, the woman whose diaries I . . . adapted into a play that we brought into theaters, universities, schools, and prisons throughout the world. The work really resonates with incarcerated people because Etty is in prison. She's at the Westerbork concentration camp, then she's at Auschwitz, she writes from those places and the incarcerated citizens respond strongly to the fact that as her freedoms are being taken away, her inner universe is expanding. Specifically, she is committed to rooting out hatred inside herself as a first, and next, step to making the world a better place. That got me here. . .

Norm wanted to bring that into the work in prison with the police academy, because it's an important conversation about how not to hate and how to nurture yourself regardless of your circumstances. Police officers and incarcerated citizens need that, they need to consider finding their voice even when they are surrounded by hate. . . So, we had the idea a while ago, but then with Covid and the murder of George Floyd, things were moving in ways that they hadn't before, then there we were, and I'm learning a lot.

Here, Ms. Stein begins by discussing her work on the play *Etty*. She does this to highlight—as opposed to avoid—what seems an insurmountable divide between her and the class. In *Etty*, Ms. Stein plays a twenty-eight-year-old Jewish woman in Amsterdam, while program participants are predominantly incarcerated Black and Brown men. The incarcerated citizens can relate to the idea of fostering a growing inner life as a response to being cut off from the larger world. Ms. Stein then explains that Dr. Conti saw this work as something that the incarcerated citizens should be experiencing along with police recruits in the hopes of turning the post-play talk back into a dialogue between presumed enemies.

Susan goes on to further explain how the course functions through relationships with participants:

One of the men in the room was incarcerated for decades and he's really been teaching me a lot. His name is Yusef Jonas and he's been teaching me that until we are we, there's no future, that we have to see we instead of I. Then we're in this room and it seems like the only way to go, especially when you're bringing people together who should be at odds, in terms of what everyone says. It's as if they're not going to be having a conversation, they're going to see themselves as adversaries, but that's not what's happening. In fact, they have more in common than people in other groups probably do. It's about breaking down those kinds of definitions which end up as labels, which are superficial, but defining. Then here we are, just creating together and then you don't know who's who. You don't know who was incarcerated, who's a cop, who's a sociologist, who's an actor because we're all all of it at that point.

We're in the room and we're all the same. You can probably see a tangible change in the interaction and people's demeanor, how they are throughout. You get there, you do the course and then by the end or throughout there's a noticeable change in how people interact or behave or think. It's immediate, I changed in the first class. Yes, we are different. I mean, you almost can't be there and not change and I don't know what it is because we're in the Zoom box.

The poignant wisdom of Etty Hillesum allows the woman who portrays her on stage, Ms. Stein, to connect with a seemingly disparate collection of incarcerated and non-incarcerated students alike. Here, Susan directly supports this point when she references how she has been learning through dialogue with one of the returning citizens, Yusef Jonas, and his call for a more collectivist notion of self. Again, as is the case with Roger, Susan is enacting the spirit of the course while discussing it. She explains that, during course sessions, statuses and roles fade away as participants begin to incorporate each other's voices into their own self-dialogues. Moreover, she observes that there are meaningful changes in demeanor and deportment that are immediately noticeable and would indicate a step toward greater humanization between participants.

As a follow-up, Roger was asked in an interview why he feels it is important to be a part of these dialogues. Roger responded with the following:

Well, we *have* to have these conversations every Friday, and every Saturday and every Sunday and every day of the week, and every year on the calendar . . . We've got to work it out, we have to let it go, we have to explore. We have to do, in this theatrical form, in this poetic form, that which is not on the regular. It's not in the regular programming. . . . [We] have to always commit ourselves to freedom. [Paul] Robeson said that "you either commit yourself to freedom or you commit yourself to slavery." And Robeson said, "hey, I have an alternative. I'm the son of enslaved people from Robeson County, North Carolina." Right? And that, for me, has always been kind of a North Star of guidance, a Paul Robeson and a Ruby Dee, Freddie Washington, all of these people who are obviously distinguished, dynamic artists, but who committed their art to liberation. And I think that, our artists, with whom we gather every Friday could, simply be out there as wordsmiths seeking fame and fortune in the world of artistry, which sometimes can pay, but usually does not. Instead, I think we are all engaged in the process of commitment, of investment through commitment, so that might inspire subsequent generations of cultural workers and involved citizens.

As another illustration of the course dialogic, Roger's response begins with a discussion of freedom and then expand into a historical account of key artists and committed civil rights

activists. In order to push the conversation further, Emmaï inquired into Roger's understanding of freedom vis a vis the COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s. Roger explained that:

Freedom is the removal of the mask, but we're not just talking about the mask, in a physical material form [i.e., the Covid mask]. We're talking about the mask and the mental form, in a political form. We're talking about a mask in an intellectual form, because I think that we have come through a regime in the last five years of anti-intellectualism and that has affected our country, affected our nation, has affected what we aspire to. We have to recommit ourselves to freedom, we have to recommit ourselves to the abolition of mental slavery as the great poet Bob Marley did.

In this, he was bringing the dialogue back to the present socio-political moment and the importance of working for liberation in the moment. Moreover, it is a literal point, which resonates with the spirit of Goffman's social psychological work (i.e., masks and identity), that informs the larger educational project.

Building on themes of freedom and slavery, Emmaï's interview with Susan Stein eventually moved into a discussion of working with incarcerated citizens when he questioned her attitude towards working with incarcerated students. She responded:

I didn't know I'd be so comfortable in prisons. I grew up in the Projects and everything in my life was geared towards actually going to prison. It was just luck and a couple of generous people that put their hand out at the right moment. I made a different turn and didn't end up that way.

Right away in the prisons, I felt really comfortable and then, I started hearing from the program staff or the chaplains that the incarcerated people were really comfortable with me. In fact, the incarcerated people were responding in different ways. I think the texts that we shared, are about the Projects, are about poverty. I grew up really poor. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have said that to you out loud. I experienced a great deal of shame around that. It's only recently that I'm learning that the shame is not about poverty. The shame is about a lot of other things and scaffolding is necessary. I think people who have grown up in the Projects and in poverty know each other. That's the text and that's the real crime, the crime is poverty.

Here, in response to an inquiry about why she feels comfortable working with incarcerated citizens, Susan almost immediately began discussing what she clearly considers one of her most stigmatizing characteristics: a background of poverty. What is particularly interesting about this is the bidirectional effect evident in the collaborative process; in-class activities through which incarcerated citizens are destigmatized work for her as well (i.e., dropping the mask, as Roger

described it). Working with this population, she has come to recognize that the shame of poverty belongs to the societies that allow it rather than the groups who are subjected to it.

Contraband

In what can only be understood as a dramatic turn of events, in November of 2022, Ms. Stein, Sgt. Bristow and Dr. Conti traveled with Mr. Smith for a performance of his one-man show, *Frederick Douglass Now*, inside a Pennsylvania prison. The troop was met at the front gate by the facility's Superintendent, school Principal, and the acting Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. There was an immediate connection between the Secretary and Mr. Smith, because it turned out that his brother-in-law was an actor who had previously worked with Roger. The Secretary also happened to have attended Morehouse University with Spike Lee. At one point in the performance, Roger hands out pumpkin seeds, so Dr. Conti checked with the Superintendent to make sure that it was permissible. Seemingly, in response to the camaraderie between Mr. Smith and the Secretary, the Superintendent allowed the artistic indulgence.

The audience for the performance included approximately twenty-five incarcerated citizens, half of them worked regularly with Dr. Conti, seated in the middle of the room with a long table of administrators, including the Principal, Superintendent, and Secretary on one side and a round table made up of high-ranking correctional officers on the other. Ms. Stein, Sgt. Bristow and Dr. Conti had recently seen the performance at the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh; all found the prison performance more compelling. Unfortunately, their appreciation was not shared by local prison officials.

The following description of what transpired after the performance of *Fredrick Douglas Now* has, for obvious reasons, had to be pieced together from a variety of sources. While we have worked very hard to present it in the most fair and accurate manner possible, given that different people will have had different interpretations of events, we cannot be one-hundred percent confident that every event occurred in exactly the way it was conveyed to us.

The first sign of trouble was during the distribution of the pumpkin seeds, the correctional officers refused to take any, and they were left in a pile on their table. Throughout the performance, their faces seemed to register distaste, though some of the administration seemed to be enjoying the show and appreciated the fact that a distinguished actor was performing within their facility. After a talk-back facilitated by Ms. Stein, the incarcerated citizens had some time to visit with the outsiders. They were all very excited to have been able to share in the performance, though one of them warned Dr. Conti, "Man, they ain't never gonna let you back in here after this." While Conti did return a few months later for a session of PTI-O, concern was nonetheless warranted.

At some later point, the same man who had issued the warning attempted to organize a strike among incarcerated workers. The organizer, along with a friend, were paced in the facility's disciplinary housing unit (i.e., solitary confinement or "the hole") while all of the regular participants in the program had their cells searched and were removed from all programming, including any prison education programs. The man organizing prison workers was later transferred out of the facility while his friend was released back into general population. Months later, when Dr. Conti was submitting to his annual clearance check, required for continued entrance to the facility as an educator, it was determined that since he had visited a exceedingly ill man he had long since worked with in prior courses, an individual presently held at a facility for the aged and dying, he would be suspended from entering the prison where his programming was centered for one year. While this penalty may have been entirely the result of a minor policy violation, a number of correctional officials were very surprised by it and Conti's work was immediately relocated to another facility. The point of including this story within this article is to note that, despite or perhaps because of the power of these sorts of education- and performing-arts-related experiences, there are in fact some histories as well as identities—such as the dramatically portrayed story of Frederick Douglass—that are off limits in carceral settings, and perhaps beyond.

Conclusion

This article has presented a descriptive case study of a community-engaged dialogic learning experience that attempts to find common ground among divergent groups. Specifically, it addresses the course Performing History/Autobiography in Progress, a fundamentally humanities-based education program that brings incarcerated and returning citizens together with police officers and others within a dialogic space for an ongoing artistic exchange. The course is an example of abolitionist theatre, in which the voices of *the other* are incorporated into self-narratives to foster a process of destigmatization.

As part of an interview following a performance of his one-man show *Fredrick Douglass NOW* at Widener University, actor, director, and writer Roger Guenveur Smith was asked about how his work is connected to the larger issues of slavery and abolition. He offered the following response:

The greatest enslavement, universally, is the enslavement of the human imagination. We look to the theater as extracurricular and something on the side that we can have if we can afford it or if we have leisure time, but I would suggest that theater is an essential process of human engagement and when we are disconnected from it I think we have a tendency to fall into a kind of psychic incarceration in which we are not allowed to dream, to protest, to play the villain, to play the hero to look on a stage in a circle around

a campfire and see ourselves reflected. (The full interview is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dviAdGM4vaA>)

This is the spirit that qualifies Performing History/Autobiography in Progress as a form of abolitionist theatre. Through the performing arts, and its unique collaborative, dialogic learning environment, it opens minds, thus freeing students and instructors alike from the seemingly unrelenting pandemic of psychic incarceration and mental slavery.

In the late Fall of 2021, when the Performing History/Autobiography in Progress course title was announced, one of the men incarcerated at Pennsylvania's SCI Fayette asked, "are there any histories that are off limits?" The title of this article thus emerged from a student's honest inquiry about the limits of what is allowable when writing about or performing history. Immediately, many of the participants were confronted by an embedded question, one we all—students, instructors, and scholars alike—must confront and deconstruct: Whose histories have capital? This is a play on Tara Yosso's powerful work, *Whose Culture has Capital: A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth*, a piece where she deconstructs Bourdieu's hidden assumptions about the social capital impact on the value of knowledge production across social class structures (Yosso, 2005). Our performances of writing out loud, our sense-making, creating and discovering opportunities ripe for dialogue—the most valuable type, those that are uncomfortable—are the makings of worthwhile learning and perhaps the proper substrate for abolitionist theatre. Indeed, we are sharing in the linguistic capital of those of us who find ourselves relegated to carceral existences, or those who survive terms of confinement and emerge on the other side of our criminal justice system, to demonstrate the hidden meaning and taken-for-grantedness of language, notions of self, and community.

In terms of implications for practice, the first thing observed from this case study is the importance of finding creative ways to bring teaching, research, and social activism together in order to make the most of larger cultural moments. Specifically, the program was effective in channeling the upheaval of a global pandemic and large-scale social movement into a dynamic academic experience because it was based upon a solid andragogical core (i.e., the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program). Moreover, the facilitators had experience using the Inside-Out curriculum with similar populations (i.e., police officers/recruits and returning/incarcerated citizens). Performing History/Autobiography in Progress evolved from an openness to collaboration across disciplines, fields, and social categories.

The most important recommendations for anyone interested in replicating this sort of course begin with a recognition of the value of Inside-Out instructor training. This work would have been impossible without that initial training. Most of the people involved with the studied course would never have met were it not for the experiences behind prison walls that Inside-Out makes possible. Second, potential Inside-Out instructors are encouraged in their initial training to think

about how they might take the basic curriculum and do something new with it. The program's valuing of creativity is part of what lead to the creation of Police Training Inside-Out and eventually, Performing History/Autobiography in Progress. Third, within Inside-Out there is a focus on "tearing down the walls that separate us." The "walls" in question extend far beyond those of the carceral system into social categorizations (i.e., race, class, gender, etc.) that function to isolate and dehumanize.

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