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A REVIEW OF TWO CONFERENCES: THE HEAD AND THE HEART OF ARTS IN PRISONS

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Abstract: This is a comparative review of two conferences held in North America in March of 2018. Carceral Cultures was presented by the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, from March 1-4. The purpose of the conference was to bring together cultural theorists, practitioners and activists to contemplate the carceral. The Shakespeare in Prisons Conference was presented by the Shakespeare in Prisons Network at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, from March 22-25. The focus of this conference was to bring together artists and theorists who work in the field of arts in corrections, not limited to the works of the Bard. As a sometime practitioner-researcher of Prison Theatre I have found it interesting to compare the two conferences in terms of how each appealed to my head (cognition), and to my heart (affect), in engaging with the politics and aesthetics of arts in prisons. The conferences were divergent in so many ways, and yet now converge in my mind to deepen my understanding of the work that I do, and strengthen my resolve to continue resisting the broken (in)justice system through art-research-activism.

Keywords: carceral studies; Shakespeare in prisons; arts in corrections; prison theatre; applied theatre

North America hosted two conferences this March (2018), one at the beginning, and one at the end of the month, each dealing in different ways with incarceration, arts, and culture. Carceral Cultures was presented by the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, from March 1-4. The focus of the conference was to bring together cultural theorists, practitioners, and activists to contemplate the cultures of incarceration that are now giving rise to the displacement, separation, surveillance, and control of human beings on a mass scale. The Shakespeare in Prisons Conference was presented by the Shakespeare in Prisons Network at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, from March 22-25. The focus of this conference was to bring together artists and theorists who work in the field of arts in corrections, not limited to the works of the Bard. As a sometime practitioner-researcher of Prison Theatre I find it interesting to compare the two conferences, divergent in so many ways, and yet convergent in my own reflection about how and why I do what I do.

The Carceral Cultures Conference delegation was infused with outrage at the recent acquittal of Gerald Stanley by an all-white jury for the killing of young Cree man, Colten Boushie, in 2016; and by the failures of police, and health and social service professionals in adequately supporting 15-year-old Anishinaabe girl, Tina Fontaine, who was found murdered in the Red River, Manitoba in 2014. Her suspected murderer was also acquitted in February 2018, despite compelling evidence and testimony to the accused's guilt. A little later on at Shakespeare in Prisons, we were concurrently witnessing the first major uprising of young people against gun violence in the United States, following the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida in February 2018; and the horror of yet another police shooting against an unarmed African American man: this time Stephon Clark, who was in his own grandmother's backyard in Sacramento when he was shot dead on March 18, 2018. These events, so present in our minds at the time of the conferences, served to ground our debates and discussions in contemporary realities of violence and injustice.

At the Shakespeare in Prison's Conference, Dr. Sheila Cavanagh from Emory University spoke about the difference between her Shakespeare studies class of young, free, undergraduate university students, and the Shakespeare study being led by educator Steve Rowland at Woodburne Correctional Facility in New York State with incarcerated men. Her university students, she suggested, spend most of their time analysing the meaning of Shakespeare's words, at the expense of feeling the resonances of the work. Whereas, the men at Woodburne most often connect to the text through their own personal experiences and feelings, at the expense of critical analysis. She described these differing approaches as the difference between head and heart, or cognition and affect. Her collaboration with Rowland centres around linking the

two cohorts through video, so that they may bring new and important perspectives on Shakespeare's works to each other. This dialectic between cognition and affect, or head and heart, perhaps best sums up the dialectic between these two conferences for me. Carceral Cultures, well and truly haunted by the ghost of Michel Foucault, was a heady, analytical workout for the mind. It led me through a maze of political and ideological checkpoints, towards the intellectual heart of the carceral state in settler-colonial nations. It engaged deeply and rigorously with the politics of crime, (in)justice and incarceration, through lenses such as critical feminist theory, biopolitics, necropolitics, and abolitionism. Shakespeare in Prisons on the other hand, very quickly became a warm and supportive pop-up community of arts in corrections advocates and evangelists. It was characterised by heart-to-heart conversations, hugs, circles, songs, and dances. It nurtured my need to find like-minded people who work in this space, to validate what we do, and to make new friends. There were other fundamental differences as well.

Carceral Cultures

This conference invited "an intersectional analysis of phenomena such as mass incarceration, migrant detention, and the workings of the surveillance society," and an opportunity to "interrogate the myriad ways in which the carceral has come to shape the economies, ecologies, aesthetics, and social and political experiences of contemporary culture" (Canadian Association of Cultural Studies 2018). It was structured around three keynote presentations, three plenary sessions, and streams of six paper presentations to choose from. In some cases, the engagement with contemporary cultures and politics of incarceration included arts interventions and methods of enquiry, but also covered other forms of activism and analysis. For the purpose of the review, I will focus more on arts-based methodologies, as this was my own criterion for navigating the conference program.

The first plenary, entitled "Carceral Visions" included presentations by two film director-scholars: Dorit Naaman from Queen's University, and John Greyson from York University. Naaman's recent interactive web-based documentary *Jerusalem we are Here* (2016) invites audiences to "digitally witness" Palestinian Arabs returning to their former neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, following the Nakba, when over 700,000 were expelled or forced to flee from their homes in 1948. Through her presentation, Naaman asked reflexive questions around the use of suffering and emotional disclosure in activism; and the role of art in investigating a "first step" in providing new visions. John Greyson spoke about his body of works that deal with homosexuality and imprisonment. Greyson's focus was on the tyranny of realism in activist art, which he sees as "trapping" artists, activists, homosexuals, and survivors in a one-dimensional imaginary

that promotes “reductive moralism.” I was pleased that both of these talks echoed some of the key discussions in my own field of applied theatre, where a dependence on personal testimony, emotional disclosure, and realism in performance can be seen as limiting the educational or emancipatory potential of the work, not to mention its artistry (see Cahill 2010, Jeffers 2008). Subsequent sessions also included film-making-as-research, taking up interesting themes of power, ethics, and reciprocity.

In the panel entitled “Carceral Necropower,” Celia Haig Brown from York University described how documentary film-making had come out of methodological necessity for her, while conducting research with Inuit communities in the remote High Arctic. Having been subjected to forced migration during the Cold War, these communities continue to experience surveillance and disciplinary power through seemingly innocuous means such as healthcare programs. Haig Brown has worked in collaboration with communities to make films that explore ideas of cultural, linguistic and environmental sustainability. For her, film-making serves as an ethical and reciprocal means of investigation within an Indigenous research context.

In the panel “Creative Approaches to Social and Restorative Justice,” (where I was also presenting), Brenda Longfellow (York University) spoke with Brenda Morrison (Simon Fraser University) about their emerging collaborative project using volumetric video to capture stories from participants who are engaging in Restorative Justice processes. Morrison explained that the Restorative Justice “circle” disrupts discipline by promoting introspection, self-knowledge, sharing and telling narrative, reframing, and nurturing. Volumetric video has the potential to bring outside participants into this circle in an immersive experience. This method offers subjects of the film the chance to alter voice, skin, and hair, which can provide protection and confidentiality for them as storytellers. Longfellow also discussed how this might raise ethical questions for the process, where there is a potential power differentiation between the film-makers and the subjects. Their hope is that the resulting immersive films can be used in education and activism to deepen understanding of alternative approaches to justice.

A further two sessions focused on the interface between prisons and the community, highlighting the educational, activist, and abolitionist efforts of organisations such as the Alternatives to Violence Project (Vancouver), the Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education (University of British Columbia) and Joint Effort, the feminist organisation established in the 1970s to engage in solidarity work with women in prison in British Columbia. Through these conversations, panelists explored how, despite being used widely in corrections and policing, the word “community” has lost much of its meaning. The emphasis for all of these initiatives is on non-coercive, participatory, community-led programs that recognise the structural inequalities that lead to incarceration. Many of the programs use arts-based methods including film, storytelling, slam poetry, craft, and

drum making, with panelists highlighting these as being a way to connect and start conversations, and in some cases, for undertaking ethical participatory research.

In the final plenary session, chair Catherine Kellogg (University of Alberta) entreated delegates to remain hopeful, despite the undeniable sense of outrage and despair that might be elicited by the themes and content of the conference. Indeed, the conference threw up some painful, difficult, and intractable topics, and despite people's clearly heartfelt intentions, the heady intellectualism of many presentations and audience conversations rendered me somewhat numb to ideas of hope, humanity, and…art.

Only two events in the program were able to mitigate some of these feelings for me. The first was the conference cabaret, where highlights included formerly incarcerated comedian Mark Hughes, who made many audience members visibly uncomfortable with his brutal and hilariously irreverent jokes about drug addiction and criminality; and the Indigenous women's vocal group M'Girl, who sang beautiful harmonies to percussive hand drum beats. The second was a presentation by Tracy Bear (University of Alberta) in the final plenary session, where she spoke eloquently and poetically about Canada's "missing and murdered" young women in the context of her own responsibility as a Nehiyaw'iskwew (Cree woman), and mother to a teenage daughter. These moments enabled me to reach the heart of the conference themes - a sense of empathy and connection - through unbridled laughter, song, and story.

Shakespeare in Prisons

The Shakespeare in Prisons Network presented the third biennial Shakespeare in Prisons Conference, which was initiated by a partnership between Shakespeare Studies scholars at the University of Notre Dame, and the Shakespeare Behind Bars program based in Michigan, USA. It was billed as a gathering to offer prison arts practitioners "the opportunity to share their collective experiences … rejuvenate passion; renew commitment for their vocation; and build upon their expanding network of peers" (Old Globe Theater 2018). While there was a strong emphasis specifically on Shakespeare programs, with a large number of those occurring both in the US and internationally, other speakers (like myself) were also included in the program. Many approaches that were represented at Shakespeare in Prisons can be traced back to the long-standing Arts in Corrections movement that first came to prominence in the United States in the 1980s. This movement promotes and facilitates participation in the arts for incarcerated populations, recognising its educational, transformative, and humanising potential. Performing and studying Shakespeare is seen as being almost quintessentially humanising, with the works being a vehicle through which incarcerated

men and women can explore the irresolvable tensions of being a flawed human being in an unpredictable world, while at the same time enjoying the various instrumental benefits of being part of a group performance effort. Those who are incarcerated are said to be particularly attuned to themes of love, hate, jealousy, treachery, loyalty, guilt, remorse, freedom, redemption, and so on, that can be reflected in the extremes of a life story marked by criminality (see Pensalfini 2016). The focus throughout this conference therefore, came from this wellspring of intention, where talks and discussions emphasised the individual's personal journey from trauma and transgression, through transformation, towards redemption.

In contrast to Carceral Cultures, the Shakespeare in Prisons Conference was a single stream event, so that participants were encouraged to walk the same ground together, collaboratively building on themes and conversations over the three days, and forming a strong identity as a community of practice. It was structured around panel discussions, film screenings, and live performances, and included long meal and refreshment breaks where possible to allow each of us connect meaningfully with other delegates. The organisers made significant space for opening and closing ceremonies by First Nations leaders Jimmy Turtle and Henry Edward Frank respectively. In each of these ceremonies, delegates were invited into a circle and smoked, with Turtle offering a blessing to energise and galvanise the group going forward into our conversations, and Franks leading the group in a series of traditional songs to bless our journeys back into the "real" world, where we might share and spread our newfound knowledge. Carceral Cultures included a brief traditional welcome, but I believe that both conferences would benefit from including much more First Nations involvement in their programs throughout, given the crisis of Indigenous over-incarceration that continues to exist in settler/colonial nations.

Being a practitioner focused conference, Shakespeare in Prisons programmed only one panel dealing with research and evaluation, aimed at arming practitioners with the skills and information necessary to gather evidence and prove the worth of their programs, mostly in the context of offender rehabilitation theory. Yet there were certainly resonances throughout the conference program for my own work as an arts-led researcher, where I was able to reflect on the tensions of knowledge construction, ethics, and power relations in the range of interventionist arts programs that were presented.

There was a significant presence here of "returned citizens," who were invited to perform, and to speak about their experiences of leading and participating in arts programs inside. This was in contrast to Carceral Cultures, where the comedian Mark Hughes had asked his audience of delegates at the cabaret to put their hands up if they had been in prison, and only three or four had responded in the affirmative. An early

panel of returned citizens “Stories of Hope from Beyond the Razor Wire” set the tone by inviting men and women who had been incarcerated to share their stories of transformation through participation in the arts. Most inspiring here were the stories of returned citizens such as Henry Edward Frank (William James Association), Wendy Staggs (The Actors’ Gang), and Jecoina Vinson (Drama Club), who have themselves gone on to work with incarcerated populations. Another panel, “Sharing the Collective Wisdom of Corrections Professionals,” invited professionals from the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, the US Attorney’s Office, and three California State prisons to consider how institutions and program providers might collaborate to deliver effective programs. Practitioner panels included “Pathways to Freedom,” which focused on how programs such as Marin Shakespeare and the Playwrights Project maintain relationships and develop opportunities with participants after release; and “Women in Practice,” which aimed to explore the opportunities and challenges specific to women who do this work. Another panel offered a platform for the newly established Justice Arts Coalition, led by the William James Association and California Lawyers for the Arts, to invite support from delegates and feedback on the ways in which they might advance creative arts engagement in the justice system.

Coming from Australia, where it would be almost impossible to bring a group like this together, these panels presented a rare and interesting 360-degree view of program delivery from the perspective of all the key players. In between the panel presentations, there were several film screenings, profiling international work such as the Centre for Rehabilitation Through Imagination (Serbia), Alokananda Roy (India), and Catharsis: Lebanese Centre for Drama Therapy (Lebanon). Yet these panels and film screenings were somewhat lacking in substance, often showcasing examples of practice and stories of transformation uncritically, without addressing some of the thorny problems and wider political implications of the work. The “Women in Practice” panel (on which I participated) descended into an emotive and uncomfortable exploration of what happens when women practitioners become romantically involved with incarcerated men. Problematic on so many levels, we did not have the time and space to adequately explore this terrain and recognise more prevalent issues such as risk, sexual harassment, and unequal power relations that can characterise gender politics in these contexts.

Three solo performances were also programmed, which provided an aesthetically compelling counterpoint to the panel conversations. The first, a work-in-progress presentation of Othello’s Tribunal by Sammie Byron (Shakespeare Behind Bars), showed the actor grappling with playing the title role in a prison production of Shakespeare’s Othello. Byron’s own crime, the murder of his partner, was directly reflected in the story of Othello and Desdemona. Byron shared intimate aspects of his own life story in monologue, followed by a powerful performance of Shakespeare’s

murder scene, in which he took the roles of both Othello and Desdemona. It was a brave and emotional performance for which the audience (myself included) commended Byron; but it also raised questions for me about how he might develop the work to make it more aesthetically integrated, rather than it feeling like "therapy on stage." As if in answer to this question, Lisa Wolpe, leading Shakespearean actor and founder of Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company, presented her solo performance Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender. Wolpe elegantly wove together her own life story and traumatic family history, with experiences of performing across gender in roles such as Hamlet and Shylock. The performance not only contained stunning interpretations of Shakespeare's characters, but was interspersed with powerful personal narrative, and poetic exposition of the "alchemy" that brought these characters into being. Her work illustrated just how a personal "trauma story" might be artfully integrated into Shakespeare's world, and vice versa, to create an aesthetically satisfying experience for an audience. Finally, Liza Jessie Peterson presented excerpts from her one-woman-show The Peculiar Patriot, combined with a staged reading from her book *All Day: A year of love and survival teaching incarcerated kids at Rikers Island* (2017). Peterson's performance, on the last day of the conference, finally satisfied my need for some acknowledgement of the politics of mass incarceration in the United States. Based on her experiences of teaching poetry to (mostly black) kids at Rikers, the performance artfully moved the audience through her struggles as an African American woman to make sense of the injustices that she was witnessing, and at the same time inspire her students towards artistry and political literacy. It was by turns politically incisive and confronting, hilarious and uplifting, shattering and heartbreaking.

Conclusion

These two conferences converge and converse with each other in my mind to deepen my understanding of the work that I do, and strengthen my resolve to continue resisting the broken (in)justice system through art-research-activism. Where Carceral Cultures was firmly rooted in politics, Shakespeare in Prisons was more focused on the personal: personal stories of transformation and redemption through the arts. Radicalism, activism, and abolitionism energised the conversations at Carceral Cultures; whereas reformism and rehabilitation were more present at Shakespeare in Prisons. Of course, there was affect in Carceral Cultures and cognition in Shakespeare in Prisons, but I thought more in the former, and I laughed and cried more in the latter; and I cannot help thinking there could have been more of each in the other. For me, it is no surprise that the real winners in both of these conferences were the performances, where ideas and emotions, and the personal and political, were integrated to achieve a depth of understanding for audiences through aesthetic engagement.

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