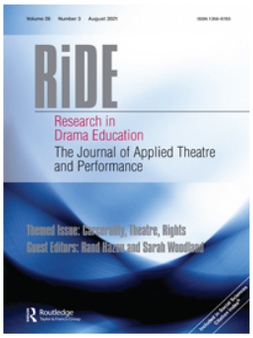


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# Prison theatre and the right to look

Nicholas Fesette[a], Bruce Levitt[b] and Jayme Kilburn[b]

[a]Oxford College of Emory University, Oxford, GA, USA; [b]Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

**ABSTRACT**
The Phoenix Players Theatre Group (PPTG) was founded in 2009 by incarcerated men at the Auburn Correctional Facility in Upstate New York. This article explores PPTG's work using Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2011) theory of the 'right to look' in order to understand how prison theatre functions within and against the visual regime of carcerality. This article describes how PPTG employs non-traditional performance perspectives drawn from rasaesthetics to visualise and re-make the outside world while simultaneously working against the 'panoptic' regime of Western theatre to create a different kind of seeing.

**KEYWORDS**
Prison theatre; visuality; rasaboxes; incarceration; community-based performance

*There is power in looking.*

bell hooks (1992)

*If a tree falls in the forest … no one hears it, right? We're a coalition of people that have fallen in the forest. And nobody listens.'*

Michael Rhynes, co-founder of the Phoenix Players Theatre Group

## Introduction

Inside the Auburn Correctional Facility in Upstate New York, the Phoenix Players Theatre Group (PPTG) creates a place to be seen and to see each other. Founded in 2009 by two incarcerated men, Michael Rhynes and Clifton Williamson, PPTG uses theatre and writing in weekly workshops. The members meet to train, tell stories, and craft theatre pieces. In the founders' own words, 'PPTG is a grassroots programme developed by and for incarcerated persons and communities in a maximum security prison. It is a transformative theatre community, which utilises theatre to reconnect incarcerated people to their full humanity' ('The Latest PPTG Brochure' 2014). Even though the group invites facilitators like the authors of this article into its meetings, PPTG is run and operated by its incarcerated members, which serves as an important reminder to the group that in this space they have power. Because our roles within the group change depending on what is required of us, the authors identify ourselves fluidly, referring to ourselves variously as volunteers, participant-observers, teaching artists, researchers, facilitators, and witnesses. Prison officials call us 'civilians'. As facilitators, we often lead theatre exercises, work with the

**CONTACT** Nicholas Fesette nicholas.fesette@emory.edu

members of PPTG on their performance pieces, or ask questions of work presented – all to help them use theatre as a way to cultivate and communicate their stories. At other times we act as participant-observers when the men, for example, need to discuss something that is going on in their lives, seek advice from one another, or have exercises that they themselves create. In these sessions we do not 'facilitate' the work but, instead, observe, listen, and learn along with the other members. Ultimately, every two years the group devises and presents a 90-minute performance for a public audience that the group invites into the prison.

During the first few months of this two-year cycle, members are introduced to the psychophysical technique, 'rasaboxes', adapted from the work of Richard Schechner (2001), which was introduced to the group by Stephen Cole and Paula Cole, early PPTG facilitators. In our first session exploring the technique, we lay out large pieces of construction paper on the floor, writing in large colourful lettering nine emotional states – or 'rasas', a term which might loosely be translated from Sanskrit as affect or feeling, strongly connoting flavour and gustatory sensation. When the workshop begins, the participants are instructed to walk between the pages and draw a picture or write a word that embodies the corresponding emotion. As people move from rasa to rasa, they take time to carefully consider which representative life event they might offer. On one page, participants draw images of good times: visits, family, relationships, and personal accomplishments. On another, we find images of annoying cell block neighbours and aggressive prison guards. These drawings serve as the foundation upon which we will begin our physical explorations of the rasas, a practice that reconfigures the space of looking within the prison. Images of real and imagined moments in time create a collage of how the group, as a collective, envisions itself, as well as how each of the constituents share looks of recognition with each other.

This article studies PPTG through the lens of Nicholas Mirzoeff's theory of the 'right to look' in order to understand how prison theatre functions within and against the visual regime of carcerality (2011). Following Mirzoeff, the participants in PPTG performatively claim the right to look on their own terms. Witnessing is a key part of the transformative power of the PPTG process – for each member of the group, for other incarcerated people, and for the audiences invited to see their theatrical performances. The incarcerated participants create a 'space of appearance' within the prison walls, in which they can bear witness to each other's full humanity and invite spectators to do the same. As this article will explore, PPTG's performative right to look reveals the intersubjective potential of live performance itself.

Drawing on original performance material, as well as commentary gathered from members of the group, this article describes how the Phoenix Players employ the non-traditional performance perspectives of rasaboxes not only to visualise and re-make the outside world, but also to view and reflect on themselves.[1] These practices endeavour to work against what Schechner characterises in his article 'Rasaesthetics' as the 'panoptic' structure of Western theatre (2001, 30). The practices of rasa entail a different kind of seeing from the kind at work in the prison, which forecloses on the humanity of the incarcerated. Whereas in a 'panoptic' theatre, 'the eyes and to some degree the ears are where theatricality is experienced', in rasa, theatricality is experienced in the guts (27). Departing from canonical Western theatre acting traditions, such as the system developed by Konstantin Stanislavski and the theories of Bertolt Brecht, Schechner conceives of an

emotion-focused and sensorial process for performance that rejects forms of knowledge that privilege sight. Rasaboxes therefore serves as a key example of how the practices of prison theatre, as enacted by PPTG, can stage a counter-visual protest against the regime of the prison. Written from the authors' own perspectives – which are also subject to prison surveillance that restricts, in many ways, our own artistic and relational freedom – this article interrogates how PPTG strives against voyeurism toward co-creative engagement of the full human being.

At several points in this article, we repeat the claim that PPTG creates a space for incarcerated people to practice and recognise their 'full humanity' – a goal that was first articulated by the incarcerated founders of the group, quoted above. This practice is poised against the constitutive dehumanisation of incarceration, as it is enacted through techniques such as visuality. It may be said that PPTG performs an uncritical reiteration of the category of the 'human', a category that has been problematised by a number of scholars representing diverse theoretical traditions, including Orlando Patterson (1982) and Frank B. Wilderson III (2003) from the perspective of Afropessimism. However, in figuring humanity as a kind of practice, PPTG productively re-frames the issue as one of becoming, rather than being. Humanity is understood to be an ongoing practice and not an essentialist category; to be human is to do human. We practice humanity by spending time together, sharing looks, speaking freely, making art collaboratively, and other behaviours that involve mutual recognition *as if* we were outside the context of social death.

Indeed, the writing and publishing of this article supports the goals of PPTG, in that the authors believe it is our obligation (and privilege) to bear witness to the group for readers who are unable to enter the prison themselves. In this moment in history – as the COVID-19 pandemic that has ravaged US prison populations prevents PPTG from meeting, all while the country continues to reckon with its racist history, including the constitutive violence of policing – engaging through written critical reflection with the topic of prison performance seems essential. As protestors brave infection in the streets to affirm that Black Lives Matter and to amplify calls to defund the police, interrogating the visual life of mass incarceration through the prism of performance may offer additional ways of understanding the stranglehold of carcerality on our collective imagination.

## Visuality, carcerality, theatricality

'I want to claim the right to look' (Mirzoeff 2011, 473). Thus visual activist and cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff begins his influential article, which reflects on the history of how the visual field comprises regimes of power from the battlefield to the plantation to the city street. Starting with this performative declaration of desire, his argument not only outlines how power manifests in surveillance situations – that is, which entities possess the power to watch, examine, and scrutinise – but also points to the ways in which the early nineteenth-century concept of 'visuality' dominates how the trajectory of history itself is visualised and understood.

Visuality 'is not composed simply of visual perceptions in the physical sense but is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination, and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space' (476). Mirzoeff attributes the notion of visuality to British historian Thomas Carlyle, who in 1840 wanted to outline how heroic leadership

influences history. Heroes were seen to be engaged in masculine acts of visualising history, in contrast with the feminised chaos of the mob, who were demanding to be led. As Mirzoeff describes, visuality, in telling a 'great man' narrative of history, reorders populations into the individualised 'heroes' and the insensate masses. Visuality comprises relations that privilege a sense of order (and an order of the senses) in which, almost always, a great (white) man will be placed at the centre (or top). Assembling this order entails identifying which peoples are the 'other'. Criminalisation, therefore, can be seen as one form through which visuality functions. In this way, visuality recalls Jacques Rancière's (2010) influential analysis of the police, which he understands as functioning to enact a 'partition of the sensible' (36). Mirzoeff's definition of visuality is distinct from Maaike Bleeker's (2008) more generalised understanding of visuality as a theory of looking. Visuality, in Mirzoeff's view, does not simply track how and what is seen by biological or technological eyes, but instead denotes an all-encompassing regulatory schema for preserving authority across time and space. In order to do this, visuality employs a complex of processes for determining where power lies and which political actions are sensible, which includes determining which populations must be surveilled, but also includes which stories about our history are viewed as real and significant, and which are viewed as nonsensical or expendable. Mirzoeff's opening claim of the right to look, then, is not simply a claim of a right to open one's eyes and *see*. Rather, it is a claim, against visuality, of the right to tell one's own story. It is a rallying cry for autonomy and a rejection of repressive models of power and authority.

One such model against which the right to look works is the contemporary US prison. Though Mirzoeff does not directly discuss the prison industrial complex in his article, the structures of carcerality suffuse his historical analysis. Judah Schept, in '(Un)seeing like a prison: Counter-visual ethnography of the carceral state', draws on Mirzoeff to point out that one of the key ways the prison controls historical knowledge about itself is by structuring how it comes to be seen (2014). This can be compared to the cop on the street who says, 'Move along, nothing to see here'.[2] The prison, in various ways, institutes a scopic regime, which determines who can see what, where and when. This seeing is closely connected with America's racist history. Mirzoeff discusses in detail slavery and Jim Crow, direct antecedents to the modern prison (475). He suggests that slavery is in part 'the removal of the right to look' (481). One has only to recall Emmet Till to realise that under Jim Crow, 'reckless eyeballing' – simply looking at a white person, especially a woman or authority figure – was a punishable offense (482). Mirzoeff states, 'Such looking was held to be both violent and sexualised in and of itself, a further intensification of the policing of visuality' (482). Repackaging slavery into mass incarceration has produced an influx of incarcerated Black and brown people, with incarceration rates nearly five times greater than whites (NAACP 2020). The many viral videos of police brutality, in which police officers often react with violent rage when confronted with the direct and unflinching gaze of a Black person, evidence that 'reckless eyeballing', or, demanding to see and be seen, is still criminalised in practice if not in law.

The authority of the prison determines what is seen as true and real about the prison. Carcerality works in part by creating a situation in which *to be seen* is to enter into a relation of power, one in which incarcerated individuals are envisioned to have none. The prison system always works to reinforce its own authority, and the intrusive visual policing of the prison functions as a sophisticated psychological weapon that is

difficult to disrupt. This is not to say that incarcerated people do not imagine practices and ways of being that assert power or resistance.

PPTG facilitates a process whereby the incarcerated members can interrogate what is true and real about themselves outside of the totalising gaze of the prison. In some ways this process recalls the concept of 'mask lifting' practiced by the UK-based Geese Theatre Company (Watson 2009, 53). In several Geese performances actors wear half masks representing the 'front that people show to the outside world' (53). Throughout these performances, actors are encouraged to lift their masks to reveal something they have been hiding from the audience, 'thoughts and feelings which are not publicly shared' to reveal the character's 'inner voice' (53). In PPTG's rehearsal space members similarly acknowledge that they often wear metaphorical 'masks' employed as a means of survival. Geese uses physical masks in order to externalise the ways people hide their true emotions, while in PPTG the members seek to shed their metaphorical masks in order to 'go deeper into the undiscovered country of the self', as founder Michael Rhynes puts it. Within the space the participants create, PPTG employs exercises that uncover what is hidden behind the mask. Through these exercises participants eventually feel comfortable leaving their masks at the door, allowing them to really *see* and *be seen* by one another.

Whereas Geese employs dramatherapy and mask work, PPTG uses rasaboxes. In the opening paragraph of 'The Actor as Athlete of the Emotions: The Rasaboxes Exercises', Michelle Minnick and Paula Murray Cole (2002) bring into dialogue the 'unlikely trio' of the classical Indian performance text *Natyasastra*, contemporary studies on neurobiology and psychology, and the writings of Antonin Artaud (214). As Minnick and Cole assert, 'one finds that all three are concerned with the same thing: a theory of circular, rather than a binary relationship between emotion and the body, inside and outside, which focuses on a visceral, gut-based mode of perception, rather than a solely visual-auditory one' (214). Each of the nine Sanskrit-based rasaboxes signifies an emotional state, for example 'raudra' loosely translates to 'rage'.[3] Unlike more simplistic emotional performances – such as a frown signifying anger – Minnick and Cole describe rasaboxes as 'dipping into a universal pool of emotion' and argue that the way each person expresses emotion is unique (217). Each time an actor engages in a rasa exercise they may change how they interact, gesture, and embody an emotion.

In fact, in its early days PPTG was first introduced to rasaboxes by Cole in a series of workshops, and today employs several exercises outlined in Minnick and Cole's essay, including the 'word-image association' and 'embodying the rasas'. Each of these exercises emphasises how individuals differently enact and perceive emotions. As previously mentioned, the 'mask' that the men wear in order to be perceived as 'tough' creates a universal visual cue easily recognised by every incarcerated person. As PPTG member Robert has demonstrated during our sessions, there is a specific way he carries himself in the yard: back straight, shoulders out, with an intentional gaze and purposeful walk. However, rasaboxes challenge the men to explore how to embody emotions authentically. Instead of putting the focus on the interpretation of emotions by others or facades of toughness, they are tasked with embodying the rasas as an individualistic act that demands tapping into deep feelings, not just their surface presentation.

While visuality and carcerality have been studied by scholars like Michelle Brown (2009) and Nicole Fleetwood (2020), the authors of this article believe that the theatrical aspect of the right to look in prison has been overlooked. Mirzoeff writes,

> The right to look is not about merely seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each inventing the other, or it fails […] The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity. (473)

Claiming the right to look is therefore more than simply *looking* – it is a communal sharing of presence. The counter-visual potential of the right to look is revealed in its co-constitutive power between subjects exchanging recognition and connection. It is not voyeurism or gazing, but a deeper attendance, a witnessing that consolidates a radical intersubjective moment. One example of the ways the participants in PPTG share this presence is in 'embodying the rasas'. This co-constitutive practice involves separating the members into two groups: the statues and the sculptors. A rasa is assigned to each of the 'statues' who then embody the given emotion. Then, the sculptors are invited to further heighten the shape of the statues. Once the statue is finished, sculptors are invited to look at the embodied nuance in each of their co-creations. This process is then repeated; the sculptors become the statues and statues become the sculptors.

This does not indicate that theatricality is inherently resistant to visuality, or that performance does not function in tandem with the processes that support carcerality. Instead, we believe that attention to theatricality reveals new insights about regimes of control as well as how subjects work within and against those regimes. We are following Josette Feral's (2002) suggestion that the theatrical process is distinct from the space of the theatre. Indeed, as she has defined theatricality as a kind of alterity cleaving an 'outside' and 'inside' of a theatrical frame, visuality and theatricality share certain noteworthy features – inasmuch as both processes are engaged in the segregation of space, time, and sense (98). Féral writes that 'theatricality has little to do with the nature of the invested object – the actor, space, object, or event – nor is it necessarily the result of pretense, illusion, make-believe, or fiction', but is instead 'a process that has to do with a "gaze" that postulates and creates a distinct virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge' (97). In this way, the processes of visuality and theatricality seem to be engaged in parallel projects, although with crucial differences. Both comprise a special visualisation of space in order to produce meaning; both entail a performative invocation of authority that divides populations; and both are simultaneously generative and reflective of history.

However, theatricality differs from visuality in its ephemerality and democratic potential. In the context of incarceration, in which the participants in prison theatre are not free and have suffered the loss of normative democratic rights (such as the right to vote), it is important to note that the theatre does not actually provide liberation – a point that Ashley Lucas (2020) underscores powerfully when she writes, 'The theatre can promote free thinking and empathy, but it is not, in fact, liberation' (39). We suggest instead that theatricality, unlike visuality, can produce a 'space of appearance' that prefigures alternative possibilities for the future, in the way that Mirzoeff describes elsewhere in his book *The Appearance of Black Lives Matter* (2017). He writes that in this prefigured space,

> people act *as if* they were free, *as if* what happens there happens everywhere, now and in the future. It does not represent, it performs … It creates real relations of existence, without regard to external social forces, *as if* they were permanent. (33)

These spaces prefigure 'abolition democracy' in which those people who are not supposed to appear nor even speak claim the right to exist together in recognition of one another (32). Abolition democracy was first discussed by W.E.B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction in America*, and has since been taken up by prison abolitionists like Angela Y. Davis (2005) in order to envision racial and economic justice that is not only a project of deconstructing oppressive institutions, but also a creative project of world-building. According to legal scholar Allegra M. McLeod, 'Abolition democracy is committed … to a conception of justice that not only attends carefully to the actual outcomes of processes that claim to administer justice, but also seeks to distribute resources and opportunities more equitably' (2019, 1619).

It is perhaps useful to consider theatricality as an aesthetic antecedent to visuality. Theatricality is the laboratory for the visualisation of history. In this way, we might understand how performance processes can, depending on their use, contribute either to regimes of visual control and violence like the prison or the radical aims of the right to look. Claiming a way of looking which attends to that which is not immediately apparent can re-constitute the reality of the prison's violence. In short, what one sees when one looks at the prison is not the full reality, and it takes some digging in order to grasp the fully real. If we are to engage the traumatic reality of the prison, then paradoxically we must attend to the ghosts as well as the cracks, fissures, and failures in what is given to be seen. Schept (2014) writes,

> A counter-visual ethnography looks for what is not 'there' […] the ghosts of racialised regimes past, the sediment of dirty industry that seeps into and imbues the present, and the trans-historical and trans-local circulation of carceral logics and epistemologies that structure the contemporary empirical realities we observe, record, and analyze. (203)

A conscious effort to understand and contest these structures entails a particular performance of looking – one that the space of the prison theatre seeks to create. In describing and analysing the theatre practices of PPTG, we seek to enact the kind of counter-visual ethnography Schept describes. This entails a gaze that attends to the creative modes of living and performative potentiality buried by the prison system, while simultaneously marking the violence of that system. Prison theatre can thus not only create a temporary escape for incarcerated people, but it can also disinter the histories of brutality in full view of an attending public.

## Re-visioning with the Phoenix

In prison, besides the physical structures of visuality – isolation, high walls, constant surveillance, the inability to see beyond the limits controlled by the institutional authorities, and the fact that those outside of prison are unable to see what goes on inside the walls – perhaps the most pervasive and most destructive element of carcerality involves the 'self' and the 'other' that one encounters.

As PPTG members describe it, the 'prison mask' worn by all within the institution – the incarcerated, the correctional officers, and the staff – prevents each from 'seeing' the

'other'. The unnatural existence within the confines of the institution prevents one from 'seeing' oneself and visualising who they might be, have been, and are becoming. Therefore PPTG employs a careful process of vetting potential members, which was created to try and gain some perspective on engaging with the 'other'. This exacting process was established when it was time for the few founding members to admit their first group of new participants. With between fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred incarcerated residents in the prison at any given time, some process for scrutinising a handful of new members needed to be established.

To be considered for the Phoenix Players, aspiring members must complete a seven-page essay questionnaire. The topics to be answered range from being asked to explain how one has demonstrated commitment to prison groups in the past, to one's educational level and interests, including favourite authors and artists. Additional questions probe a prospective member's prejudices and discomfort with certain people or activities as well as responses to constructive criticism. And potential members are asked to describe themselves before incarceration and to enumerate their current and future goals. Finally, members are asked to write an autobiographical story.

After would-be PPTG members submit their application, current members spend several sessions engaged in in-depth discussions in an attempt to 'see' potential future members in as complete a way as possible. This is accomplished by reviewing the applications alongside the piecemeal outside knowledge that each group member has to share about the applicant. Only after this vetting – during which time some applicants are eliminated from consideration – are the remaining candidates admitted to the group.

It is no accident that most PPTG members have very little knowledge about each other before they are admitted to the programme. By design, the prison since its founding has incarcerated people in segregation in order to discourage fraternisation. Auburn Correctional Facility was opened in 1817 and was the first prison to put prisoners in individual cells (Rothman, 1998, 100-116). The Auburn System, as it became known, enforced a strict silence policy, clothed prisoners in striped uniforms, and made them work in prison shops. The incarcerated marched in lockstep from one location to another. They had to turn their heads to the right so that they could not even look at the back of the head of the person in front of them – making them invisible to each other. Disobedience was met with physical whipping.

Punishment was not always invisible to the public. Prison officials from other facilities toured Auburn Prison and the system was emulated around the world. As Caoimhe McAvinchey points out, prisons began as holding facilities for publicly displayed torture or execution, events that were choreographed 'with staged conventions and a dramaturgical structure adhered to by the state which produced the spectacle and understood by the public audience who witnessed it' (2011, 22). Even the executioner in these public events wore a hood, not to hide his identity from the condemned and the onlookers, but rather to mask himself from himself – to depersonalise his own sense of self in order to carry out his task, and turn his eyes away from his own soul. McAvinchey points out that by the end of the eighteenth century,

> these public narratives of punishment and justice had been rewritten. Executions were carried out in private, behind closed doors, and the prison went from being a place where people waited to be punished to being a site of punishment and reformation. (27)

This very much describes the rise of the Auburn system, the logics of which haunt the facility even today.

Part of the visuality practiced by the carceral state is to forbid the incarcerated to view themselves as full human beings, and only allow them to engage in visual relationships that threaten mortal violence. Mark, a current member of PPTG, describes the reality of visuality in Auburn this way: 'We all wear masks to shield ourselves from the harshness that prison breeds'. Mark points out that someone is always 'watching what you do or don't do'. Here he includes the other members of the incarcerated population as well as the officers and staff. Fellow member Demetrius expands on this point:

> Everything is watched and observed in prison; therefore visibility is enhanced. It is difficult not to be seen in prison. The tense environment requires inmates to watch other inmates closely, and the corrections officers to watch the inmates even closer. The simplest interaction between two individuals—whether green [prisoner uniform] or blue [guard uniform] is information that may be useful. Surveillance is a form of survival.

Looking, in prison, belies a physical struggle to survive.

Mirzoeff writes that the 'complex of visuality' separates and prevents social groups from becoming mobile, organising, and acknowledging their political power: 'visuality separates the groups so classified as a means of social organisation. Such visuality segregated those it visualised to prevent them from cohering as political subjects' (476). PPTG member Daniel similarly says the carceral system's surveillance mechanism is designed to divide the incarcerated men under the very real guise of survival:

> The more stringent surveillance comes from other inmates. Everyone in green is always watching and listening to what is going on in your life […] Not only are you being watched closely but you're doing the same thing. It's how you survive in here and protect yourself.

Fellow member Sheldon says, 'Everyone is very tense, poised to strike or defend (predator and prey). The eyes are always *darting,* from left to right, rapidly … There are no *secrets* in prison. Someone is always watching'. The carceral system, then, not only 'sees' the incarcerated men as having unchangeable criminal tendencies but creates a need for visibility to be used against each other. This multi-tiered visual regime has often caused PPTG members to sequester themselves in order to prevent being 'caught up' in the prison's visual policing when an important personal event is near. Recalling the historical danger of 'reckless eyeballing' referenced above, this fear of having one's 'look' misinterpreted by the guards or other incarcerated people means that they will instead stay in their cells, missing one or more PPTG sessions, yard time, and other activities when a visit, parole hearing, or release date is approaching. As incarcerated people are acutely aware, one does not actually have to commit a crime in order to be seen as a criminal and therefore punished. As prisoners, criminality is the lens through which they are always viewed, and this visual process of criminalisation constrains the physical and psychical realities of incarcerated people.

This prison visuality is far from the 'right to look' as Mirzeoff describes it. The Phoenix Players upend the authority of visuality present in the carceral state by claiming the right to look and the right to be seen. We begin and end each Friday night session with their mantra, written by founding member, Michael Shane Hale:

We are a community of transformation
Through the power of self-discovery
We create the opportunity
To know and grow into ourselves

Through the power of self-discovery, PPTG claims the right to look that Mirzoeff differentiates from freedom or liberty as a 'claim to autonomy based on one of its first principles: The right to existence' (2011, 477). Mirzoeff cites DuBois's 'insistence' that the enslaved 'freed themselves by means of a general strike against slavery rather than passively being emancipated' (478). In much the same manner, the PPTG mantra claims the authority to 'transform', rather than passively receive 'rehabilitation', which founder Michael Rhynes sees as others doing something to you – like rehabbing an old house. As Rhynes points out, many in prison were never 'habilitated' in the first place, so why would anyone believe that 'rehabilitation' is a useful process? By claiming the 'power of self-discovery', PPTG subversively undermines the carceral state's vision of the passive, compliant prisoner, awaiting resurrection to civil society.[4]

PPTG members claim the right to 'look' and transform themselves by claiming from the carceral state the right to look at themselves, to see who they *were*, who they *are*, and who they are *becoming*. And they create their own methodology in doing so. In contrast to other well-known prison theatre projects, Rhynes rejected the notion of performing existing plays and mainstream methodologies of theatre acting in favour of creating original work to advance their journey of transformation. Some US prison theatre groups – such as Shakespeare Behind Bars, founded by Curt Tofteland in Kentucky, and Rehabilitation Through the Arts, founded by Katherine Vockins in New York – in large part make use of established scripts and traditional rehearsal processes, including sets, costumes, and lighting. PPTG seeks to forge its own processes not pre-determined by conventional techniques of the theatre. Rhynes further insists on the notion that, in order to be complete, one's transformation must be 'witnessed'. But by whom?

## Counter-visuality and feeling

Much of what we are considering here is concretised in the oft-cited model of the panopticon. For Foucault, a generalised theory of social discipline entails a model of subjectivity within which populations are always already trapped in 'so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible' (1977, 200). However, as Simone Brown (2015) points out, there has been a critical overreliance on panopticism in order to explain surveillance cultures, an overreliance which especially finds its limits 'for theorising the role of trauma, vulnerability, and violence in the making and marking of blackness as property' (42). She complicates Foucault's influential model by offering the model of the slave ship in addition to Bentham's prison. This move is particularly useful in conceiving how social (and actual) death are produced through visual regimes – such as the prison – a violence that might otherwise go unremarked. She writes, 'The cargo hold is a slow-motion death' (48). The prison, as a modern manifestation of the 'hold', institutes a visual regime that inters subjects in a situation of living morbidity. Brown helps us understand how the dehumanising gaze of prison authorities are not solely disciplinary, they are also death-granting.

It is perhaps true that, inasmuch as subjects deem it possible that they are on visual display, they will govern their own behaviours in the ways that are expected of them. Within the prison system, this often means shutting oneself off and conforming to the rigid policing of the institution in the ways we describe above. But reading Brown alongside Foucault can help us understand how this conformity is a morbid act – even though it supports the subject's survival. In PPTG, we have seen participants who close themselves off, worried that they will accidentally transgress physical and emotional boundaries set in place by the prison. Yet we have also witnessed members refuse to adhere to the rigid policing, therefore acting in a 'criminal' way by hugging volunteer facilitators, sharing contraband, and sometimes talking back to guards. Members of PPTG understand implicitly that resisting the institutionalisation of the panopticon is crucial to their well-being, though their vital acts in the short term might appear risky or unusual to outsiders.

PPTG uses theatre practice to further problematise the model of panopticism – or, to be specific, what Schechner identifies as the panoptic structure of Western theatre history (2001, 27). In the panoptic model, knowledge is closely tied with vision. In PPTG, the visual is de-privileged, in favour of a kind of looking that emphasises embodiment and visceral connection. For example, the Phoenix Players sometimes do improvisational scenes in their Friday workshops, during which other members, seated as the audience, also participate by shouting out different rasas that the actors then adopt in the moment. Instead of the space of panoptic theatre, which starkly divides those who watch (and therefore 'know') from those who do (and act), PPTG uses rasaesthetics to problematise the boundaries between performer and audience. Knowledge is then carried and transmitted through voice and body. This knowledge developed in Friday workshops then carries over into devised performances for the invited public.

Mirzoeff argues that '[The] ability to discern meaning in both the medium and the message generates visuality's aura of authority' (479). In other words, the guards gain their authority by interpreting the visual cues of the prison: They are the ones who see, and they are the ones who decide the meaning of what they see. Mark says that the things one does to try and conceal oneself in prison – for instance, putting up a curtain in front of the cell when using the bathroom – can signify to the guards and other imprisoned people that something forbidden is going on. The act of trying not to be seen or of securing one's privacy is then viewed as another form of criminality.

In some ways, PPTG alters visuality at Auburn because the theatre exercises, such as rasaboxes, cannot be easily decoded by the guards and therefore subsumed by the state. For example, in one PPTG session, the members were divided into two groups and asked to stand on opposite sides of the classroom. One member from each side then began to walk to the middle of the room, embodying a rasa of their choosing. Similar to the 'Relating' exercise Minnick and Cole describe, the exercise eventually shifts from each member focusing on themselves and their own expressions of the rasa, to shifting focus on the other. When the point of focus shifts to the other person, they are then asked to respond to the person in their rasa. As one can imagine, a member in raudra (rage) will sometimes raise their voice, whereas someone in adbhuta (wonder) may respond to a raised voice with interest, getting closer to the person instead of moving away from them. During this particular night, one of the guards walked by and, in seeing the spectacle, began to laugh. He stood there for a while, apparently not knowing what to make of these very vocal and physical interactions. While this

laugh can be read as an act of ridicule within the prison's regime of power, it is also useful to attend to the ways of knowing enacted in the theatre practice that benefit the incarcerated participants.

For example, Robert later told us that because of this exercise he was able to navigate an interaction with an especially threatening guard. He said that, in noticing that the guard was presenting in raudra (rage), he was able to perform adbhuta (wonder), knowing that it had earlier worked to temper his scene partner's hostility. Staying calm allowed Robert to react in a way that would not encourage further aggression. In this particular instance, Robert was able to claim a bit of authority over visuality, or at least maneuver within it.

Rasa is not understood by the prison authorities: there is no knowledge or familiarity with rasa on the part of guards or staff. Therefore, the men have knowledge and ways of using that knowledge that is outside of the regime. It is precisely within this 'not knowing' that allows PPTG to subvert the visual regime of the prison. Unlike other moments in PPTG, when a guard might view with suspicion a physical interaction between a female facilitator and incarcerated man, the more theatrical physical actions are not easily identifiable. For example, there is no handbook given by the state for what it means when a prisoner makes a 'caw' sound and flies around the room like a bird, occasionally pecking at their partner. Because rasaboxes demand a personal interpretation of the emotion, the visual life of the emotion (especially when theatrically enacted) falls outside of the visual comprehension of the guards.

Generally, as Demetrius states, 'Bringing too much attention to yourself in prison is not a good idea'. Once, after we closed a PPTG session, Demetrius asked the facilitators if we minded being looked at by other incarcerated people. At the time, our classroom sat across from the 'bull pen' where all of the incarcerated men are forced to gather after their activities before they are counted and sent down to the yard. Both rooms have corresponding banks of windows, so that the occupants are entirely visible to each other. Often, the people in the bull pen would stare at us as we closed our session, sometimes waving through the glass to get our attention. Demetrius and Robert said that they used to be hyper-aware of being watched by the men and tried to adjust their behaviour accordingly, holding back smiles or the appearance of comradery. As Demetrius says, appearing to have something of pleasure to lose in prison can be dangerous. However, as the other incarcerated men watched us, they became curious, asking PPTG members what they were doing in the group, not able to decode its function through the visual cues. As our members recount, when they walk through the yard non-PPTG members will sometimes yell to them 'PPTG!' This call has become a sign of kinship, a recognition that there are pockets of joy and autonomy in prison that circumvent colonisation by carcerality.

## Bearing witness

'Witnessing' is a key concept that informs the practices of PPTG. Theories of witnessing have been extremely well established in trauma studies and performance studies. In the works of Giorgio Agamben (1999) and Cathy Caruth (1996), the witness is a figure of impossibility or non-seeing – an attendance to an event that cannot be understood in the moment, and can only be recognised in repetition and deferral. For

performance theorist Diana Taylor, against the logics of disappearance, such repetitions might be seen as performances that comprise 'acts of transfer' that '[transmit] social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity' across time and space in a way that can serve as 'an ontological affirmation' of marginalised ways of knowing (2003, 3). Within the context of the mass rendition and removal of sight that composes the US prison system, prison theatre can in part be understood through the lens of Taylor's study of performance. In distinction from the carceral state, which endeavours to disappear its subjects, theatre can transmit narratives and knowledges across prison walls. Moreover, in analysing the practices of PPTG as exercising the right to look, we want to further suggest that theatrical performance – especially when it is informed by rasaesthetics – can create a space of mutuality that affirms alternative visions of incarcerated people. As Mirzoeff writes, 'the space of appearance counters the built environment that forms spaces of nonappearance – that is to say, spaces where no one outside cares what happens there' (2017, 21).

This is evidenced by the group's eventual staging of its work for a public audience invited into the prison. At the end of every two-year cycle, PPTG mounts a performance for approximately 80 invited guests. This audience comprises members of the outside community, including individuals who have taught classes through the Cornell Prison Education Program and journalists who are interested in writing about mass incarceration. Family members of PPTG members are not permitted by the prison authorities to view the performances live, nor are those who volunteer with various other programmes at the prison, so the performances are recorded and posted on PPTG's website.[5] The performance is a significant event in the lives of the men. It is the culmination of all the strange theatre exercises we have taken part in, the raw conversations we have had, and the countless evenings the incarcerated members have spent writing and memorising their often extremely personal and intimate pieces. Not all the pieces written during the PPTG process are mounted for the production. Some are too vulnerable or, as members have said, involve their family and are therefore not their story to share. These presentations are not viewed by the group as a separate occurrence, or the final event for which they've been working. They are instead part of the overall process.

Many of the stories explore feeling invisible. During the May 2018 show, *The Strength of Our Convictions: The Auburn Redemption*, Sheldon presented a piece entitled 'Nostalgia'. The piece focuses on Sheldon's memory of when he was in a fourth-tier cell and had a limited view over the high wall surrounding the prison. The train tracks were far enough and just on a bit higher ground, so that the daily trains that passed by could be seen:

> I look through the bars
> Beyond another set of bars
> Through the window of bars
> Over a daunting wall.
> *Bam, Bam, Bam* …
> It's the train.
> One, Two, Three.
> I count the cars
> Admiring the artistry of graffiti (Johnson 2018)

The imagery in the piece invokes both a sense of invisibility and yearning. Sheldon is stuck behind several sets of bars, an invisible observer to the outside world. Sheldon transitions at the end of his piece from being able to literally see the train to projecting himself outside of the prison in order to run alongside the train. He says, 'Even from within, This triple encasement. / Thumbs up, I hitch a ride'. Sheldon's piece hints at the inability of the carceral system to take away his imagination. He is still able to see past the walls and therefore imagine himself outside of them. As Rhynes once described the structure of the prison, 'the walls contain everything but the sky'.[6] At the end of the piece, when he hitches a ride, Sheldon is projecting himself backwards and forwards in time simultaneously – backwards to his childhood when he could have 'thumbed a ride;' and forwards to a future when the train could carry him far from the prison. Visuality polices physical space, but also the psyche. In response to this, Sheldon's piece works against what Mirzoeff might view as carcerality's control of his visual imagination. While his physical gaze can only reach so far beyond the bars of his cell, his creative mind stretches farther, conjuring scenes that restore a powerful sense of adventure and play.

As Daniel says, 'PPTG makes me feel seen once again as a human being […] The moment I walk through the doors in the school building a transition takes place. I instantly go from feeling like property to feeling like a friend, brother, and community member'. While PPTG assists in the incarcerated member's personal transformation, the carceral institution is eager to co-opt prison theatre groups in order to prove its own worth, and the struggle to survive in prison can make trying to change these larger institutional issues seem pointless. Despite sometimes feeling the futility of trying to make larger change, PPTG creates a space where incarcerated people can just be seen, which is a gesture that can have deep significance both personally and communally.

In PPTG, witnessing works in two directions: It originates within the participants to repair and restore the aspects of their humanity fractured in incarceration so that they can see themselves as more than just an ID number and criminal conviction. And at the same time the practice of witnessing works from without, helping to alter the perception of the people reductively marked 'criminal'. Rhynes has written, '[It's] important to perform in front of an audience. Transformation needs to be witnessed. Our detractors portray us as animals, the media depicts us as super predators. We of PPTG seek to change those perceptions' (2014). By creating space for its incarcerated members to envision the reality of their humanity, PPTG members tug at the veil of the prison, seizing the 'power of self-discovery' to gain insight into themselves and their fellow members. And all the while, those who volunteer with the group gain an intimate look into the structure of incarceration, an inside look that, as witnesses, they carry with them into their daily lives and contacts with fellow 'civilians'.

Conversely, the facilitators bring with them healthy helpings of the world beyond the walls, sharing their life experiences with the PPTG members. PPTG members, too, are interested in learning about the preconceived expectations of the prison, so that they can better understand how incarcerated people are viewed on the outside.

The PPTG process, then, is a form of rebellion against the carceral state's control of visuality, deconstructing the control over self-image and public image by claiming what Mirzoeff states is the claim to 'a right to the real' (473). And by performing publicly, PPTG further claims the right to define what the public understands as true about incarcerated people, and to extend the public vision beyond the notions of prison life

constructed and regulated by the carceral state. *Looking*, then, as claimed by PPTG, is a process whereby the carceral state's control of the real might be deconstructed, as the incarcerated begin to witness themselves and their peers, along with the public, in a more dynamic, transformative light.

## Notes

1. In addition to drawing on previously published text and media, in December 2019 the authors of this article spoke with current members of PPTG about the topic of the visual life of the prison, and collected written commentary from the group in the form of a questionnaire. On this form, group members were invited to voluntarily provide answers to questions such as 'How would you describe the visual life of the prison?' and 'Are there ways to increase or decrease visibility?' Members of PPTG were not asked to engage with Mirzoeff's theory, but were explicitly told how their responses would be used. The members of PPTG included in the article have agreed to be named and have granted permission to the authors to share their commentary and writing. For the most part we will use real first names, which is a convention to which PPTG members have agreed. The prison administration does not oversee the writings that come from our sessions, whether they are creative or scholarly.
2. Once again, this formulation recalls Rancière, especially as he theorises the function of politics in distinction from the police: 'Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along' … into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in refiguring the space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it' (37). The space of prison theatre might therefore also be considered a space for politics within the prison.
3. According to Minnick and Cole, there are nine basic rasas with corresponding emotions: 'sringara (love, the erotic), raudra (rage), karuna (grief, but also pity or compassion), bhayanaka (fear), bibhatsa (disgust), vira (courage, virility), hasya (laughter, ridicule), adbhuta (wonderment, surprise), and santa (bliss, peace)' (216).
4. Literary historian Caleb Smith (2009, 6) calls this narrative of resurrection the 'poetics of the penitentiary', which he identifies as one of the USA's founding political myths.
5. This site archives performance photos and video, as well as text written by PPTG, including scripts and personal essays: http://phoenixplayersatauburn.com. Much of the research in this article was collected from previous performances or writings published on this site.
6. This quote comes from an interview shot for the documentary film about PPTG, *Human Again*. One of the authors, Bruce Levitt, was also the producer for this film. The interview is not included in the final cut of the film, but is in the authors' possession. All participants in the film signed a form granting permission for the use of the footage.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

***Nicholas Fesette*** is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Oxford College of Emory University. His current book project examines the prison state as a performing structure that continually re-stages race and class oppression.

***Bruce Levitt*** is a professor in the Department of Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University. For 10 years Levitt has assisted the Phoenix Players Theatre Group in their training and devising six

original pieces that the group has performed for invited audiences. Levitt was the inaugural recipient of Cornell's Engaged Scholar Prize.

***Jayme Kilburn*** is a Doctoral Candidate at Cornell University. Her dissertation, *Facilitauteur: Agency, Ethics, and Feminist Ideologies in the Rehearsal Room*, sits at the centre of a changing directing discipline in which educators and practitioners are coming together to create ethical methodologies for working with actors.

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