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Teaching and Learning Through Performance Praxis in Carceral-Impacted Spaces

Kamran Afary, Greg Langner, and Allen Burnett: Editors, Special Issue on
Performance Praxis in Carceral Spaces

In this special issue, *Liminalities* turns its focus toward the pedagogies, performances, and poetic resistances unfolding behind and beyond prison walls. Here, more than an aesthetic gesture divorced from material conditions, *performance* is a practice of survival, disruption, and collective imagining — a form of education breathing through the cracks of carceral architecture. Each contribution in this issue foregrounds how performance — whether theatrical, literary, or pedagogical — becomes a transitory method of rehumanization in contexts designed to erase, confine, and contain the basic human freedom of autonomy.

We begin with Lynn Baker-Nauman's "Who is Godot?," a reimagining of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* through the lens of abolitionist theatre and drama therapy. Rooted in the legacies of artists like Spoon Jackson, who found his voice while playing Pozzo in a prison production of the same play, Baker-Nauman's work connects existential waiting to the limbo of incarceration, where performance becomes a lifeline. In Baker-Nauman's hands, *Godot* is no longer only a philosophical metaphor but a political intervention — one that asks what it means to wait, to hope, and to resist in systems built on delay and disappearance.

Stephen Hartnett and Meghan Cosgrove's essay, written in conversation with currently and formerly incarcerated artists, invites us into what they call the "artistry of agency." Through themes like trauma processing, gender negotiation, and family healing, they highlight the relational and transformative power of arts education behind bars. Their piece is both testimony and theory — a celebration of incarcerated creativity and a challenge to institutional narratives of punishment and reform.

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<<http://liminalities.net/21-4/teaching-and-learning.pdf>>

In “Performing Abolition in the Hold,” Jadan Janak uses autoethnography to excavate the embodied contradictions of teaching in a women’s prison as a Black, Queer, transmasculine educator. The essay bears witness to the emotional and ethical stakes of abolitionist pedagogy in hyper-gendered, racialized spaces, where identity is always already under surveillance. Janak’s classrooms are fugitive spaces — unstable, subversive, and brimming with the possibility of collective transformation.

“Troublemaker,” created by former graduate students at California State University, Los Angeles — two of whom are formerly incarcerated, and one who is now a member of the faculty at the University — blurs the boundary between art and advocacy. Through multimedia storytelling, the piece stages incarceration as a lived reality — not as a spectacle — filled with contradictions, pain, and courage. The work invites audiences to listen, distinctly: to hear and to process the complexity, rage, hope, and resolve that too often remain unheard.

Rounding out the issue is Claudia Yaghoobi’s “Pedagogical Explorations,” which centers Iranian prison literature as a powerful site of cross-cultural human rights education. From memoir to graphic novel, from close reading to collaborative performance, Yaghoobi’s teaching navigates the “dangerous shores” between textual meaning and lived experience. Through an engaged pedagogy grounded in bell hooks and Wallace Bacon, the piece invites participants to reckon with their biases, connect with others across borders, and confront the realities of state violence and resilience.

Together, these works challenge us to reimagine the origins and formations of new knowledge, the power of performance, and whose presence and participation we revere as performers, teachers, learners, and witnesses. They remind us that inside and outside prison walls, education is always a political act, and performance — when rooted in truth, vulnerability, and justice — can provide paths to liberation.



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