

Joshua Mensah
Bruce Levitt

Realizing Perception: A Reflection of PPTG works and performances

Cornell University has recently introduced a new minor, "Crime, Prisons, Education, and Justice," which supplements extensive research into civil rights phenomena of mass incarceration with real life engagement with the prison system. The phenomena could prompt attention toward socioeconomic inequality, political history, the criminal justice system, the private prison industry, and many other facets. However, witnessing and working with materials of PPTG have allowed me to understand the many ways mass incarceration affects those currently incarcerated. The PPTG believes in self-fostered redemption and transformation as opposed to self-inflicted rehabilitation. Accordingly, the members of PPTG believe that "one's transformation must be witnessed by others" and therefore perform periodically within their prison for a public audience. Although mainly for self-verification, the very act of witnessing PPTG's work alters the perception of the unincarcerated audience. The concept of 'perception' itself functions, not only as a theatrical tool but also, as a recurring theme throughout the works of the men of PPTG. My reflection leads me to believe that all social forces are reinforced by societal and personal perceptions of situations. The work of the men of PPTG have realized much of one of the most powerful perceptions surround a being---imprisonment.

David B, in "Prison 101," comically informs the audience of how to 'survive' in prison. Before expressing the importance of love in prison, he challenges the audience's perception of the meaning of imprisonment: "Basically have you ever been forced to do something or felt forced to do something that you know deep down inside is not comfortable? Then, yes, you have been to prison. See, my friends, prison is not only physical. Prison can be a mental and spiritual problem as well." David's description of prison unbinds the notion that the tangible walls of a prison are the only forces representing imprisonment. In fact, David acknowledges other real

forces that act on an individual, such as marriage and employment, along with invisible forces, such as insecurity, that are manifested within the individual. The aforementioned quote doubles down on these two different types of forces when adding “or felt forced to do something,” which proves how imprisonment can be self-created. If imprisonment can be self-created, then one’s own perception is *at least* an optional method for being imprisoned.

The Incarcerated Life also had examples of the ‘perception’ theme. I misplaced which work this came from, but Sheldon spoke of how his confinement was formed within his mind. In the Q&A, the entire group elaborated on this concept when answering the question ‘Do you sense our freedom.’ It became obvious that many members thought of freedom and thought of their connection with the audience differently. Sheldon, though he said confinement was mental in his work, said that he did feel the freedom of the audience versus his own confinement. David was quick to assert that there was ‘no difference’ between the inmates on stage and the audience and that the restrictive fortress in which they live does not need to define how they perceive themselves. Leroy seemed to answer in between the two: He said that he *feels more free* while performing for the unincarcerated audience but then reverts back to a sense of incarceration once the event is over.

The first revelation to point out from this Q&A is that their disagreement proves that confinement is perception. The audience was the only people in the room going home yet the people on stage disagreed with their social status in relation to us. A second revelation is that all three of these responses did *not* contradict each other. David spoke mostly from a human-to-human level. From the above analysis, we already know that David understands that perception is key. David had most likely wanted to clarify in the Q&A that once all of the social constructions you place around yourself and others are gone, we are all equals. Sheldon, on the

other hand, spoke in more legal terms. He did not say he was inferior to the audience; he was lamenting over the fact that he could not leave the tangible confinement of the building. Lastly, Leroy, again, was not speaking of inferiority. The audience seemed to be an interaction he missed. His answer descended into a speech about missing the interactions he used to have. As he performs these interactions throughout the event, the increased freedom he speaks of appears to be just the happiness of having less physical restriction than usual.

I, last, want to talk about my own perception. When I was child, I assumed that people were imprisoned because we believed they committed crimes. As I grew up, I began to understand that historical and social forces play a substantial factor in the existence of crime. This experience with the work PPTG, buffered by my participation in a CPEJ course this semester, has shown me that the criminal justice system itself is one of the leading factors in the mass incarceration phenomena. I have also learned that redemption is possible. The existence of adverse forces on the lives of those who are and will be incarcerated is not permanent. Through adjustments to our criminal justice system and greater emphasis on the power of redemption we can at least counteract some of these socioeconomic forces. The existence of PPTG does both these. PPTG along with other programs and movements are altering society's perception of criminality and confinement, which I expect to have a positive effect on our justice system. Also important, PPTG has positively influenced PPTG members' perception of their own role in society, which is an achievement that politics cannot hinder.

Thank you for allowing me to experience and witness the work of the men of the PPTG.