

In-class and public prison arts performances are viewed as instances of gift giving, yielding major benefits but also potential problems.



Widening the Circle: Prison Arts Performances as Gifts

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Abstract

After outlining the major benefits – and problems – of both in-class and public prison arts performances, and presenting an explication of gifts found in Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, I offer a normative lens through which these performances should be viewed: as exemplary instances of gift giving.

Mechanized doors, spools of razor wire, electrified fences, bars, grating, flickering fluorescent lights: These are not the settings of a typical art studio ... unless one creates art in prison. The occurrence of art within prison has a robust and well-documented history, from inmate sketches of pastoral scenes on the walls of centuries-old jailhouses to the contemporary poet Jimmy Santiago Baca composing and publishing poems while incarcerated. Indeed, “There are many working artists in prison – men and women who have already determined that the creation of personal or cultural expression helps them to do their time” (Hillman, 2003, p. 17). For almost as long as prisoners have been at their art behind bars there have been artists coming in from the outside to instruct, supply materials, and serve as an audience. Many artists have begun prison arts programs in order to find a space, bracket time, and provide greater opportunity that is officially endorsed by the prison’s staff for the artists and their art.

This kind of space is not empirical, as in Newtonian or quantum space, though it does

encompass location – the gymnasium, the chapel, the law library; space, in the prison arts context, is less scientific, more humanistic: the attitudes, the intentions, the feelings present, in addition to physical place. Certainly some places are more conducive to the creation and appreciation of art, places that are not found in prisons, such as a studio, workshop, or gallery. But carving out space that facilitates and nurtures the creation and appreciation of art within the prison is one of the most important goals of prison arts classes.

The dominant metaphor used by the artists who enter correctional facilities and find or create spaces where art happens is the circle; as Leslie Neal (2003) asserts, “The circle must always be made” (p. 76). This identification makes sense for the dedicated space of an arts class within a regimented and oppressive prison atmosphere. Although circles are enclosed and definite, they are shielded, insulated, protective, symbolically much more like a “womb” (p. 76) than a confining prison cell. Simply the presence of a circle differentiates space; the space within a circle is different from the space without. So too with a prison arts class: The arts occur within the prison, yes, but specifically within the circle, and so are distinct from the prison. Ask anyone who has visited a prison arts class, and he or she will confirm this fact. The work done in these classes is fundamentally different from (perhaps even in direct opposition to) the workings of the prison.

However, prison arts programs do not just provide sanctioned space, time, and opportunity in the classes they offer. A thrill and joy

accompanies the knowledge that others are reading your poem or considering your drawing. This is why “most curricula are organized around producing culminating events – performances, exhibitions, and publications” (Hillman, 2003, p. 18). The presentation of a prisoner’s work, whether in class or in public, enriches the benefits of prison arts classes by widening the circle. It may be surprising, then, to learn that there has not been a detailed consideration of prison arts performances and their benefits.

I attempt to offer just such a consideration here. After outlining the major benefits – and problems – of both in-class and public prison arts performances, and presenting an explication of gifts found in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (Hyde, 1983), I supply a normative lens through which to view these performances: as exemplary instances of gift giving.

Prison Arts Performances Within the Circle

Often at least one performance takes place within the circle each class meeting, and depending on the art form, the class may consist entirely of in-class performances. These performances can range from a prisoner volunteering to read aloud a poem that is under discussion, to the demonstration of an original dance-step during stretching and warm-ups. The in-class performances can be as formal and organized as inviting a visitor or guest artist to class for an arranged performance, or as informal and spontaneous as a teacher holding up a student’s painting in order to illustrate a shading technique to the whole class. In the poetry courses I teach, I like to bring in audio recordings of poets reading their own work; this, too, is a performance, which often leads to another performance, when students, inspired by what they just heard, stand up and recite their own poems.

Some of the major benefits of performances that occur within the circle go hand-in-hand with their drawbacks. First of all, in-class performances lead to increased comfort, familiarity, and trust among peers and between the students and the teacher. Recently, during a miniature workshop in one of my poetry classes, a student’s poem was up for discussion, and, as is customary in our class, another student volunteered to read the poem aloud before the author read it. After that student read it aloud, another student,

having enjoyed the poem and the reading of the poem so much, requested if he too could read it to the class. Once the original author read it to us, the other students lauded their fellow poet and the poem. Because the poet was quite shy and often reluctant to speak up during class (he did not say a word for the first three weeks of class), the gradual opening-up of the poet – he was deftly and confidently answering questions about his process and poems by the end of the workshop session – and the enthusiasm of his peers makes this incident particularly noteworthy. The reading of the poem, the performance of the poem, allowed for a deeper relationship to take hold among the students.

Unfortunately, in-class performances also leave both teacher and students vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by those who might take advantage of such intimacy. It may be the case that some people teach prison art classes to satisfy (sometimes unhealthy) personal desires, such as sadomasochistic fantasies or “savior/saint complexes” (Williams, 2002, p. 296), and some prisoners take advantage of sincere, earnest teachers. Manipulation of this kind can occur at any level of an educational institution; however, the repercussions of such manipulation in a prison can have more immediate and dangerous consequences.

Times may arise during or after a performance within the circle that are sometimes referred to as teaching moments, instances where the teacher notices an opportunity to highlight a technique or draw attention to a main emphasis of the class that appears in a performance. Moments like these can be particularly powerful and illustrative because the students get to see a concrete embodiment of an abstract concept under consideration enacted in the art and performance. What better way to illuminate how the enjambment of lines in a poem can create tension for readers than to point out that very technique in the poem a student just read aloud?

However, problems can occur during an in-class performance when what the teacher identifies as a teaching moment impinges upon the attitudes, instincts, or culture of the prison and prisoners. For example, take Pat MacEnulty’s (2003) recollection of a discussion in an in-class fiction workshop of a prisoner’s story:

I saw the raw material for a fabulous short story, and I began to suggest ways to improve the piece, to heighten the dramatic potential, and to deepen the characterization. Like pioneers under siege on the Oregon Trail, the rest of the participants formed a protective circle around the writer. They insisted that the story was perfect as it was and that the writer shouldn't change a thing. I tried to convince them that good writing required manipulation and revision. I wanted them to look at their experiences objectively in order to be able to turn these events into the stuff of fiction or memoir (p. 63).

MacEnulty (2003) recognized the power of the material in the student's story, but also its need for refinement, and saw this story as a great opportunity to point out the importance of revision in writing. The students also recognized the power of the story, its power to "validate their worth as human beings" (p. 64), not (only) the deft narrative or apt metaphors, but the value in the fact that it was something this prisoner created with her own abilities and skills. When MacEnulty began to critique this creation, the defenses went up; the critique was interpreted to have come from outside the circle, so the circle narrowed to exclude MacEnulty. In this case, the goals and interests of the teacher came into conflict with the goals and interests of the students. "Fortunately, I had established a rapport with these women, and the writer whose work was in question and I were 'homies.' Otherwise, I would have lost the group" (p. 63). The trust and intimacy that MacEnulty had established, perhaps through other in-class performances, helped her neutralize the unanticipated backlash from this teaching moment and maintain her place within the circle.

A compelling in-class performance can also serve as inspiration for the prisoners. When I have my students listen to a recording of Jimmy Santiago Baca reciting a poem, the first thing they want to do – after heaping praise upon the formerly incarcerated poet – is stand up and share their own work. At no other time am I more assured of the efficacy of the arts in prison. A possible problem with such moving

performances, though, could be the withdrawal of a student with a fragile ego or low self-confidence. Incarcerated men and women experience a barrage of implicit messages, from the very condition of the facilities in which they live, from society's overall attitude toward prisoners, and from explicit messages in the form of physical assault, rape, and theft by other prisoners and sometimes staff, all of which (re)affirm a sense of personal worthlessness. Individuals with long histories of neglect and abuse at the hands of others and society understandably have shaky confidence in anything they produce [How could anything that comes from this battered being have any worth? a prisoner may think.] and they may compare their own work to the work they come into contact with during a performance within the circle. In a situation like this, a performance may cripple instead of inspire.

Journeys from the Circle: Public Prison Arts Performances

All of the benefits and problems of performances that happen within the circle, in the security and familiarity of the space of that particular prison arts class, accompany performances that move beyond the circle, that leave the circle, or that are sent out of it to the outside world. Public readings, dance recitals, mural projects, Shakespearean productions of Hamlet, any prison arts performance that does not take place within the classroom, can build trust, concretize abstract elements of study, and inspire; but they can also precipitate exploitation and manipulation, result in conflicts of interest, and seize hold of creativity and confidence.

A public performance can increase the trust of the students in the teacher; it affirms that they were instructed, guided, and provided with the opportunity to create something compelling, and the performance stands witness to the students' abilities to create art that can hold its own outside of the circle. The teacher also begins to grow comfortable with the students and to trust them as artists. As Grady Hillman (2003), a long-time teacher in correctional facilities, points out, "If we are attentive, our students teach us the power of the tools we use in our art" (p. 14). Reciprocity deepens any relationship, and a public performance is a materialization of teacher/student reciprocity.

At the same time, efforts must be made to assure that the prisoners are not the objects of the performance, but the subjects, that they are the “participants and creators” (Thompson, 2003, p. 57). The prisoners, and their art, should not be paraded around frivolously or put on display “as a simplistic one-way statement about their offending” (p. 57). Such exploitation only serves to perpetuate the abuse of incarcerated men and women. Ideally, the paintings of serial killer John Wayne Gacy (and the paintings of anyone, for that matter) are exhibited and purchased as art, not as kitsch or as a joke. A prison arts performance should “open up questions and doubts in both the prisoners’ and the audiences’ minds,” (p. 57), not serve as the first stop on a personal freak show.

It is, however, a remarkable thing that incarcerated men and women can produce and perform such gripping art in such adverse conditions. When I imagine my students’ staying up until the early morning hours working on poems because it is the quietest time to write, when I think of the small cell, the lighting, the dearth of materials and yet poem after poem after portrait appears in the annual anthology produced by the prison arts program for which I teach, my own work is invigorated. William “Buzz” Alexander (2003), a champion of prison arts, asks, “Who imagines prisoners dancing with a focus and passion that causes an audience to catch its breath” (p. 132)? Not only can the performance inspire and give confidence to the prisoners in pursuit of their art, but it also can enkindle the artistic spirit in those who witness prison arts performances.

Just as an in-class performance can provide teaching moments, so too can a public performance by the prisoners themselves offer rich opportunities to teach. There are few better ways to learn a lesson or familiarize oneself with a technique than by enacting that lesson or technique. Public prison arts performances can be viewed as a consummation of what has been transpiring within the circle, and therefore as one big teaching moment.

Unfortunately, as with performances in the circle, sometimes the goals the teacher has for the public performance differ or come into conflict with the goals of the students, and to stubbornly march on despite these conflicts can

lead to manipulation, exploitation, and arrested creativity and confidence. As evidenced by the previous example from MacEnulty (2003), care must be taken in adjudicating the goals of the teacher – in MacEnulty’s case, writing with the “aim to publish” – and the goals of the prisoners – who write “to save their lives” (p. 64). A teaching agenda must not displace the space created by the circle or transmogrify what leaves the circle.

There are certain benefits, though, that can only arise from a public performance. Prison arts performances are typically grand events: a professionally published anthology, an invitation-only dance recital, a performance of Hamlet’s fifth act complete with set and props. Buzz Alexander (2003) describes an annual art exhibit facilitated by The Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan:

The annual art exhibit is talked about and prepared for by prisoners throughout the system all year, on evaluations the artists rate every aspect of the exhibition above 9.5 on a 10-point scale, and artists testify again and again that public exposure has meant everything to them in terms of confidence, determination, and hope (p. 127).

Public performances generate excitement – importantly, positive excitement – among the prisoners. They promise a release from tedium (even if only for one evening) and are a rare occasion for which outsiders come into the prison to enjoy something inmates have produced and not to scrutinize, survey, or condemn. And, much more often than not, the performances are well received, which confirms the prisoners’ sense of worth and reinforces confidence in their abilities as artists.

The audiences benefit from these performances, too; they get to satisfy their own aesthetic thirst by attending a play or an exhibit. In addition to the artistic merit of these performances, the audience also gains information and insights about prison, although many prison arts performances are not about prison or the prisoners’ experiences of incarceration (Johnson, 2002). However, as mentioned above, care must

be taken by the audience not to objectify the prisoners' experiences or performances, especially when recounting the performances to others who were not in attendance.

Because a public prison arts performance is produced with the explicit intent that what's created within the circle leaves the circle, it can also create unique problems. Any public performance can be a logistical nightmare, but a public performance in prison further complicates already stressful preparations. Take, for example, a theatrical performance, and some of its typical concerns: assembly of sets, acquisition of props, casting, and booking a venue.

In a prison, these concerns can become nearly insurmountable roadblocks. How is a set constructed with nails, hammers, and saws, when certain kinds of ink pens are not even allowed in a prison? How are props procured (think of the sword in *Macbeth*!)? During artist Judith Tannenbaum's (2000) work on a performance of *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin Correctional Facility in California, a particular prop, a length of rope, had to be kept "in a special locked box" (Johnson, p. 150) and signed out for each use. With the ubiquitous possibility of transfers, inmate infractions, and facility-wide lockdowns, casting a play requires a flexibility and open-endedness that can be disastrous for rehearsals and, ultimately, the production of a high-quality performance in a reasonable period of time. Determining a suitable venue within the prison for the performance can also be difficult, since very few productions are granted permission to be taken on the road. Is it to be produced in the unairconditioned gym? The cramped chapel? Among the stacks in the library? Add to all of this the necessary presence of correctional officers at any event held in a prison and the fact that most prisons are severely understaffed, and a public prison arts performance can run into a slew of problems right away.

Logistical problems seem insignificant, however, when compared to another problem that a public prison arts performance can create. Whether a dance recital, a theatrical production, an art exhibit, or a poetry anthology, these performances are enacted and produced by men and women who have perhaps victimized someone, and any encounter between a victim and a victimizer can lead to revictimization.

Victims reasonably assume they will not have to speak to, see, or in any way interact with their victimizers once their victimizers have been incarcerated. But, because a public prison arts performance leaves the prison, leaves the circle, is produced with the intention that it will enter the outside world, a serious concern arises. For some victims, the pain, suffering, and thoughts of the trauma they have endured never ceases, and sometimes the only solace they have is the fact that the person who so profoundly injured them has been caught and cannot return to harm them again. The damage to a victim caused by an unexpected encounter could be untold. Something seemingly inconsequential, like a name at the end of a poem, if that name is the name of a victimizer, may actually be wrought with problems. The threat of revictimization is the single most dangerous aspect of any public prison arts performance. However, I think an introduction and consideration of Hyde's extended study of gifts will prevent a sweeping condemnation of prison arts performances based on this, or any other, possible pitfall.

The Gift Circle

The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property is a historical, anthropological, and philosophical survey concerning art, gifts, and gift exchange. There are many kinds of gifts – peace gifts, death gifts, gifts of maturation – but Hyde highlights one kind of gift that is relevant for our purposes: artistic gifts. Everyone has had a transformative experience with art. I still remember the first poetry reading I attended, where poet Kate Daniels read a poem about how, after she had given birth and returned to her work at Vanderbilt University, she relieved the unbearable pressure of the milk in her breasts into her office trashcan! A door had opened up to me; I never knew you could write about stuff like that, let alone poeticize it. I felt as if I had been let in on a secret, a secret that fundamentally altered my perception and approach to poetry. This is why Hyde seems exactly right when he says, "for it is when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may correctly speak of it as a gift" (p. 47). The secret that I felt I received was actually a gift, not a secret at all. In fact, as we shall see, a gift is quite different from a secret.

Hyde outlines a number of characteristics

of gifts and draws transformational art into the realm of gift. Gifts come to us by or through another's volition, not our own; gifts must be "bestowed upon us" (p. xi). A true gift must continually circulate, or as Hyde emphasizes, "the *gift* must always move" (emphasis original, p. 4). Paradoxically, Hyde points out, "a gift isn't fully realized until it is given away" (p. 50). A gift, then, entails two parts: receiving the gift and giving the gift away. But, importantly, there is no obligation of return explicit in the giving of a gift (pp. 9, 20). Instead, "Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along," we embark upon the "labor of gratitude," not to even the score with the original giver because we must, but to cultivate the gift in such a way that we can then bestow a gift upon another (p. 47). Hyde states, "It is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again ... ; therefore, the end of the labor of gratitude is similarity with the gift or with its donor" (p. 47). And the end of labor entails the passing along of a gift. Additionally, because gifts are given by one person to another, "the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved" (p. xiv). But Hyde stresses that some gifts should not be accepted because the gratitude and relationships it creates can be prohibitively complex and even dangerous (pp. 70, 72).

When speaking about the space created by prison arts classes, we have used the term circle; coincidentally, Hyde speaks about the circular nature of gifts and their exchanges. The prison arts performances either stay within the bounds of the circle, or they journey out beyond the circle (during a public prison arts performance). In this way, the circle functions as a boundary, at times a quite permeable boundary, but a boundary, a demarcation, a border, nonetheless. The circle, for Hyde, also represents "the container in which the gift moves," but he refers to it as a "body" or "ego" as well, and the body or ego can expand to encompass many or contract and exclude all but one (p. 16). So, our talk of the circle and prison arts performances translates quite well into talk about gift and gift exchange.

In light of Hyde's phenomenological account of gifts, I know that when I heard Kate Daniels read her poem, she was not imparting a secret — something to be squirreled away, kept to myself

for my own pleasure — but passing along a gift, a transformational art experience. For weeks I retold what I could remember about the poem to my friends (to my delight, they also seemed amazed that someone could write a poem about milking her breasts into a trashcan). Her reading changed poetry for me, uncovered what could be written about and how it could be written. It ignited a sense of gratitude in me, as well, and awakened the feeling that I too had something to share, that I must labor in this something's production and assure its entrance into the world.

What I have experienced with prison arts performances echoes Hyde's characterization of gift. I have been gifted many times over by the men with whom I have worked. When certain students read poems in class (whether their own work or that of others), my understanding of those poems — and poetry — changes. The way they read, the tone, the pace, the rhythm, their seemingly instinctive comprehension of the life of the poem, opens the poem up to me in a way that had never been available before. At these times, I also know reading the poem transforms them; the gift stirs them, alters them, impresses upon them to reciprocate. Similarly, the prison program's annual anthologies change the men who decide to submit work. Now, poetry is not just a bit of self-expression jotted down on scraps of paper; it does not just serve as a break from tedium; the men are not simply unskilled toilers. No, the poetry is an exercise in craft. The men are poets, artists who labor in the production of their poetry. And they now feel the gratitude and the pull to continue to labor for their gifts. When I leaf through the annual anthology, I am taught about poetry's plasticity, its caches, through the forms, metaphors, and uses of language found in those books. And, just as with Kate Daniels' reading, I am struck with the desire to write my own poems. I feel I have to write, to labor to create something that could stand as a kin to the work in the anthology. I must return the gift.

Providing a population that is at best ignored, and at worst dehumanized, the means to create art in poetry, drawing, and photography classes — and then sharing that art with others through the annual APAEP anthologies and art exhibits, so that it may move, may circulate — is a gift. My relationship with students, their relationships with me, with all the artists who visit my classes,

with each other, with other inmates, with the prison staff, with the readers of the anthology, with the exhibit-goers, and the sense of gratitude and call to return that which has been received, are all parts of the gift.

The effort, practice, and revision that culminates in the performance the prisoners give is their labor of gratitude, the second part of the gift, the circulation of the gift, for they have already received the gifts the art class offers: the poems, paintings, photographs, dance steps, voice training. The performance itself – the anthology, exhibit, theatrical production – is a gift to be received.

A Gifted Response to Pitfalls

Now we may return to the two unique pitfalls of public prison arts performances: the logistical problems such performances create and the potentially disastrous revictimization that could arise from prisoners' public performances. First, if the energy expended, the fretting, the successful navigation of bureaucratic hoops, the near-breakdowns are all viewed as the labor of gratitude, then the complicated logistics simply become a part of the production and circulation of a gift. A look at Hyde's distinction between work and labor will clarify this point. "Work is an intended activity that is accomplished through the will"; sweeping the stockroom for minimum wage is work (p. 50). "Labor," says Hyde, "can be intended but only to the extent of doing the groundwork, or of not doing things that would clearly prevent the labor" (p. 50).

Even though composing and distributing mountains of memos, confirming officer and staff schedules, compiling a guest list, arranging practice, and scrounging up props, may seem like work to be done in preparation of a public performance, they are, in fact, the labor of a public prison arts performance. Yes, many of these things can only get done because of the strong wills of the teachers and administrators of the prison arts programs, but the assertion of will here is all groundwork for the gift, for the performance; if the actual performance is willed into being, willed to take a certain shape, if the labor mutates into work – and there is not genuine reception and return of the gift – then the gift is lost. As the performance nears and stress mounts and unexpected hiccups disrupt plans, it

is important for those strong-willed teachers and administrators to keep this distinction in mind or else risk corrupting their labor and losing the gift.

The threat of revictimization is the second problem particular to public prison arts performances. It is naive to overlook the fact that some students in prison arts classes have, as a result of their previous criminal activities, victimized others. The trauma of victimization can last long after the perpetration, prosecution, and penalization of a crime; therefore, any connection (or reconnection) between a victim and victimizer may be the catalyst for repeat victimization. And since I have argued that public prison arts performances are gifts produced within a circle, within prison, with the explicit intention that the gift will leave the circle, pass through the prison gates, go "around the corner" and "out of sight," and work within the receiver, inspiring a relationship and labor of gratitude, these gifts may pose a danger to victims who may be the unintended and unwitting receivers of public prison arts performances (Hyde, p. 16).

Even if a victim was invited to a staging of *Waiting for Godot* in which her or his assailant is cast, it is difficult to imagine that victim actually showing up to the performance. In fact, with the precautions taken by a facility in compiling a list of guests cleared to enter the facility the day of a performance, it is equally difficult to imagine that an invitation from an inmate would ever make it into the hands of a victim. However, when the public performances are exported outside the prison walls – in the form of art installations, poetry readings broadcast on public radio, anthologies of collected work – it becomes easier to conceive of a situation where a victim might see the name of a victimizer below the title of a charcoal portrait or catch a snippet of an assailant's voice on the radio while flipping through stations in the car and be forced to confront the trauma of victimization all over again.

In instances like these it would be correct to say that the public performances are not seen as gifts at all but as anathema. Indeed, Hyde recognizes that certain gifts ought to be refused: "We often refuse relationship, either from the simple desire to remain unentangled, or because we sense that the proffered connection is tainted,

dangerous, or frankly evil. And when we refuse relationship, we must refuse gift exchange as well” (p. 73). When the connection essential for gift exchange is rebuffed or severed, then there is no gift. The attempted relationship between victim and victimizer is rightly refused if the result would be “evil.”

To suggest that a potential connection between a victim and victimizer via a public prison arts performance should be refused, however, is not intended to burden the victim or participate in a form of victim blaming. Should a victim take it upon herself to refrain from leisurely scanning through radio stations on the off chance she will hear her convicted rapist reading a sonnet? It is certainly reasonable for any victim to assume that with the incarceration of a victimizer comes a complete cessation of contact, and for many victims this is the case. Unfortunately, there is always a chance, however slight and despite the institution’s best efforts, a letter may arrive in the mail from a victimizer. But, and not to sound callous or unsympathetic to the plight of victims, it would be disastrous to eliminate the mail privileges for all inmates because of the statistical few who would abuse the system. Similarly, I think the positive impacts of public prison arts performances far outweigh the possible – though, admittedly potentially devastating – pitfalls.

Fortunately, most prisoners who stick with prison arts classes and participate in performances are men and women who realize why they are in prison, and the arts classes are steps in a path that will change their lives. The prison artists want to leave – and never return to – prison. They are not using the public performance to terrorize their victims from behind bars; they are there for the gifts, and the gifts for which they labor are not meant for their victims.

Conclusion: Bringing the Gift Full Circle

By drawing upon Hyde’s work, I have provided a normative lens through which to view prison arts performances. Unfortunately, how we treat the typical gift and its giver differs significantly from how we treat prisoners and their art. To consider prison arts performances as gifts is to reexamine our circle – who it encompasses, what it circulates. “For our circle,” says Neal, “truly is the metaphor for community

and who we are, who we would like to become, and how we may choose to restructure our world” (p. 76). Our circle contains our gifts, contains our community. Our circle should widen to include those who are incarcerated as they widen their circle to include us.

But, practically, what answers, if any, do viewing prison arts performances as gifts provide? It is unclear whether it supplies an answer for rising incarceration rates or swelling prisons. It is even less clear if treating performances as gifts can defray the enormous costs of imprisonment. Even when considering the treatment of inmates, the introduction of the language of gifts can be problematic. Speaking of prison arts performances as gifts seems to spur even more questions: What changes should be made to the preparation and enactment of performances to ensure the maximum gift output? In the presence of gifts, how should we behave differently as teachers, prisoners, audiences, or victims?

With a conceptual framework, the next step for prison arts programs is to formulate and standardize instructional and behavioral models for the bestowal and reception of gifts in prison arts performances. Fortunately, with the booming emphasis placed on community engagement initiatives by universities and corporate entities (all of which I strongly urge to adopt Hyde’s notion of gift when facilitating projects), prison arts programs have powerful and innovative partners in developing such gift receiving and gift giving models.

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