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## Prison Is Not ... But It Can Be ...

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*Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*

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## **Prison Is Not...But It Can Be...<sup>1</sup>**

Keoni K. Watson<sup>2</sup>

*This poem is a clarion call to action to confront our perceptions about what prison is and what it can be. The poem asks the reader to explore how they experience the “prison industrial complex” in their own lives, and how they might shift their views through perspective-taking to create a more holistically integrative prison experience for themselves and others. The value of the poem lay within the context in which it was created: written by person-first prison inmate Keoni Watson—during a three month performative workshop facilitated by Rivka Roccio at an Arizona State Penitentiary—to be performed as a spoken word poem for upper-echelon prison staff members and inmates “off the yard” sitting side-by-side with education staff from Arizona State University. Keoni challenges reader and audience to investigate their contribution to bridging the gap of their own “cultural, generational difference and bias” in regards to prison being a place of immensely underutilized transformational potential for individuals as well as communities.*

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<sup>1</sup> This poem is published in collaboration with Rivka Roccio’s essay, “Poetry Slammin’ in the Slammer: Questioning the Limits of Arts in Corrections,” in *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal* Volume 2, Issue 1 (Summer 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Keoni K. Watson is a writer, music producer, HipHop artist, and self-taught Street Scholar. He was released from prison in 2015 after serving twelve years, where he spent the majority of his time developing curricula for himself and his inmate peers using self-help books he could find in the library. His research interests focus on a hybrid between Integral Life Practice and Participatory Action Research. Since being released, Keoni focuses all of his energy and efforts towards reuniting with his family, developing his music career, and starting a family of his own. He’s beyond grateful for Rivka Roccio and Julie Rada both for their volunteered time and empowerment of him and his peers’ “ground-up” learning and leadership through theatre. His gratitude abounds for the editors of *PTOJ* for the dream-come-true opportunity to be published for the first time. The author may be contacted at [konsciouskreative@gmail.com](mailto:konsciouskreative@gmail.com) and his music discovered by searching #KKwatson.

## **Prison Is Not...But It Can Be...**

Prison Is Not... But It Can Be...

Those Pieces of Art That Leave Each Viewer Breathless

Somehow More Whole For Having Been Blessed Enough to Stand Before it

Reflect-as-Enrich Life Through It.

Prison Is Not But It Can Be

Performance Artwork Connecting Convict Community, Through The Communion Of Human Creativity—

Theatre That Has Magic To It

Power To Bridge Gaps Of Cultural, Generational Difference and Bias.

Prison Is Not... A Violent Environment.

Filled With The Fear—Sweat, Tension, Stench of Pent Up Men Aggressive

Underutilizing The Positive Force Of Inmates Who Have Decided To Transform Themselves

Honoring Both Cultures

Cop And Convict!

Coming Together As One Movement, Servin' Society As Systemically Viral As Crime Impacts It Now

But It Can Be...Some Crucial/Integral Piece

Cutting Edge, Next Best Evolutionary Step

Prison Is Not...Staff Empowering Inmates To Have A Voice.

In Those Programs That Determine Our Readiness To Re-Enter Public Society

Inmates Empowered To Meet And Gather;

Our Ground Up Collaboration Approved and Legitimized By The Top Down Administration

Given Credit And Credence—Room and Space To Fail and Succeed As It Will...

Because That Is Success; A Significant Success; Something Beautiful To Behold.

But It Can Be...A Proactive Role In Co-Creating The Next Generation Of Our Convict Cultural World;

A Trust Put into the Hands of Inmates, A Trust We Will Serve More Than Ourselves:

Committed To and Responsible For...Right Action

That We Might One Day Contribute Our Personal Transformations To Serve Our Community,

Communities Within and Beyond Prisons.

Prison Is Not...So Heavy It's Easier To Want To Crumble Under Rather Than Transform The Weight Of It;

Stand Tall As The Human Being I am—

Person First—Prisoner...

But It Can Be...A Spiritual Artist Practicing Grassroots, Ground-Up Empowerment

Praising My Peers As People; Paving Over Roadblock Fears That Dare Not...

Perform An Authentic, Vulnerable, and Orating Voice Of The Voiceless...

Speaking Into Existence A New Prison Paradigm...

Prison Is Not, All It Can Be

But It Can Be, All It Can Be.