

CAGECRAFT:  
PRISON, PERFORMANCE, AND THE MAKING OF CARCERAL SUBJECTS

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Nicholas Fesette  
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Nicholas Fesette, Ph.D.

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This dissertation draws upon five years' work as a volunteer teaching artist in the Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in Upstate New York, where I have co-facilitated a company of incarcerated poets and performers, the Phoenix Players Theatre Group. "Cagecraft" is my term for the process of making theatre in response to imprisonment, a concept that I employ to study a range of modern and contemporary performances made with, by, and about incarcerated peoples. I examine photographs of a 1908 prison performance by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show alongside the Edison Company's film *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901); the dramaturgy of playwright Naomi Wallace; and a collaboration between conceptual artist Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace—a Black Panther and one of the "Angola 3," who was incarcerated in solitary confinement for over 40 years.

In the case of the Phoenix Players, cagecraft denotes physical theatre techniques used to create a space in which the men feel empowered to share personal narratives, which form the basis of collectively devised performances for an invited audience. Cagecraft, I argue, catalyzes the occasion for incarcerated artists to be witnessed as full human beings, an experience that has transformative effects

individually and socially. Central to this study is a theory of the “carceral subject,” which characterizes a contingent state of capture and bondage that coalesces most dramatically on the minoritarian and subaltern. To be recognized as a person entails surrendering to a cage made from an individualizing network of social, cultural, and institutional traumas, structured by the assemblage of the prison. Through cagecraft, I argue, carceral subjects can interrupt trauma, enacting utopian, world-making gestures from behind bars. I conclude that cagecraft has the power to liberate actors and audiences, at least in the moment of performance, because artists re-make themselves and therefore re-make the world.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nick Fesette is a theatre maker and scholar with interests in acting and directing, prison studies, performance studies, theatre history, modern and contemporary drama, community-based theatre, and critical theory. He earned a Bachelor of Arts *magna cum laude* in Theatre with a minor in Creative Writing from Hamilton College in 2009 and a Master of Arts in Theatre Arts with a minor in Directing from Cornell University in 2016. Nick's research has been published in print in *Teaching Artist Journal*, and online in *Modernism/modernity*, *The Theatre Times*, *Etudes*, and *Rejoinder*. In Fall 2018, he will join the faculty of the Oxford College of Emory University as Assistant Professor of Theater Studies and Director of the Theater Program.

For Sally

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## PREFACE

In one of my earliest memories, I'm sitting on my father's shoulders as he steps into the entryway of the prison where he works as a corrections officer. This fragment is the extent of the memory. I don't recall what we are doing there. I must have been three or four years old, so I can't even be sure that this is a real memory. In any case, I remember quite vividly walking from my father's car to the prison and crossing the threshold, and observing the foreboding walls, oppressive interior, sally port, and uniformed officers. The memory stops there.

As I grew up, the prison remained in my life as a kind of dirty secret, despite the fact that corrections is a major employer where I'm from: My grandfather was a CO before my father and many of my peers' parents, aunts, uncles, and siblings also worked inside. If we went to the store with my dad after he finished a shift, he would furtively shed the blue Department of Corrections uniform into the back of his truck and put on a different costume. It was understood that we wouldn't discuss his day. Work was *always* bad, and some days we didn't want to know why. He read pulpy horror novels to pass the time on the job. Sometimes he popped a CD into the truck stereo, and we would all enjoy music that he had learned about from an incarcerated person. I'll never forget the first time he played us Sublime's song about the LA riots, "April 29, 1992 (Miami)"—a song that, played in this context, obtains a special kind of irony. In darker moments, he referred to the prisoners as "critters."

Years later, when my grandmother enrolled me in a one-week theatre summer camp for teenagers at SUNY Plattsburgh, I didn't yet realize that making performance would come to dominate my conception of myself as someone who had escaped the suction power of the prison. Theatre allowed me to conceive of a horizon that was beautiful and free. Suddenly, speaking with other people and making friends was

much easier. I developed a romantic life. I became an artist and intellectual. I could tap into the sweet anarchy of emotional inquiry and share that with others. It was the profoundest magic. So later, when I was preparing for graduate study, searching for a path to deepen my engagement with performance, interrogating the prison seemed like a natural line of inquiry. It's a topic that not only exemplifies the transformative power of performance, but also carries on my work as an artist interested in the relation between the subject ("actor") and power ("script"). It's an arena where I can explore my interest in the body as it works within and struggles against constraints, survives duress, makes choices, circumvents challenges, and stages resistance.

But what I also want to foreground with this personal reflection on my familial connection to the prison is that there's an ethical dimension to this project with broad historical, social, political, and cultural resonance. The carceral state's pull is complex and formidable, the financial incentives to maintain its power deeply entrenched in America's DNA. For working class folks, being a cop or corrections officer means good money and benefits, opportunities that don't exist anymore in many other industries. For rural whites, the terms of this employment are bound up with the violent history of race in America. In states like New York, majority-black and brown offenders from urban areas end up in prisons located in and guarded by majority-white communities. Thinking and writing on this project has only deepened by understanding of my own personal implication in this economy of bodies. The prison touches the lives of every American in some way. Uncovering its tentacular reach into the imagination is one approach to understanding its effects in the world. Researching the prison's performance life is one way I make use of my privilege to be able to enter and leave relatively unscarred.

The suspension of due process alongside the psychic terror of indefinite detention have become norms in how the United States government metes out

punishment. At the same time, attention—in journalistic, activist, and academic circles—on the injustices of the justice system has undergone a tremendous groundswell in recent years. Yet for a great many people, the rationale for a critical investigation of this topic might seem opaque or even stupid. What do theatre and performance have to do with the political and moral struggles surrounding the prison system?

There is a tendency in everyday discussions about imprisonment to allow the encroachment of a kind of biological, spiritual, and moral determinism that envisions the prison as a necessary evil. This tendency represents something of an irreducible impasse to prison reform, posing a serious challenge to applying the critical study of imprisonment to the actual situation. A folk wisdom dominates: *Someone will do the bad things, and there must be a place where bad actors are punished.* This is a secularized argument for the necessity of a hell on earth, for what else is a prison but an embodiment of the underworld, where sinners reside in agony until salvation? Attending to the fact that this penal common sense is not an immortal truth, but the result of a limited (and unimaginative) lineage of human thought, reveals some of its strangeness. How do such thoughts develop? And how does the “I” who voices such thoughts come to define “good” and “bad”? How might the very condition of possibility for the formation of that “I” be connected to that definition?

In *Crime Control as Industry*, the sociologist and criminologist Nils Christie writes: “Acts are not, they *become*. So also with crime. Crime does not exist. Crime is created. First there are acts. Then follows a long process of giving meaning to those acts. Social distance is of particular importance. Distance increases the tendency to give certain acts the meaning of being crimes, and the persons the simplified meaning of being criminals.”<sup>i</sup> What is the mechanism of the *becoming* he describes? How does this giving criminal meaning to acts come to be? Crime as a category is shown to be a

product of a set of industrial and cultural relations, the purpose of which is the manufacture of power and authority. As Christie sees it, the main danger is not in acts which disrupt the social fabric but is in the efforts to categorize what exactly constitutes disruption itself. What might be classified as “bad” or “disorderly” is contingent on a given historical and cultural context, and often radically inconsistent from person to person. As a result, any number of harmless, justifiable, and indeed, innocent acts—and the people who perform them—are categorized and created as criminal. This is why psychological and physical distance come into play: as Murray Edelman demonstrated, the greater the distance, the greater the tendency to manufacture whole-cloth fictions to explain social phenomena.<sup>ii</sup> The police, courts, and prison then step in to capture and confine these unwanted criminals—who are in fact human beings labelled as such. This force also carries cultural weight, determining what and how we view the world.

The negative ramifications of this process in the USA have been broad-ranging. Consider, for instance, studies undertaken by Jennifer Eberhardt et al, which show that the perception of the relation between violent crime and blackness is bi-directional.<sup>iii</sup> Not only are individuals of all races more likely to perceive black faces as violently criminal, but there’s also the tendency to associate images of violent crime with blackness itself. This is not to eschew the reality of human tragedy, but to interrogate what exactly is defined as reality to begin with, what kinds of authority are required to determine that reality, and what capacity artists have to imagine an otherwise.

If the real evils of the world were punished—i.e. environmental destruction, racial violence, economic apocalypse—then the prison population would be very different. If there must be a hell on earth, then I’d like to imagine it filled with real sources of suffering, as the artists did in *Captured: People in Prison Drawing People*

*Who Should Be.*<sup>iv</sup> In this project, the editors commissioned incarcerated visual artists to draw portraits of CEOs and heads of major corporations who have committed crimes that have gone unpunished, such as fraud, theft, conspiracy, manslaughter, unethical labor practices, etc. The work turns carceral logic around, imagining a world in which the perpetually criminalized might bring charges through their creativity against those who will perpetually escape conviction, despite pervasive wrongdoing.

Using a performance lens to approach this topic has positioned me against a certain punitive definition of justice, which I understand as a performative project that sets violence as its means and ends. The alpha and the omega of the American system of punishment is the circulation of pain—a project that tries and fails to produce meaning in the world. Of course, violence and suffering are in some sense inevitable and ubiquitous. Pain is the *sine qua non* of life on this planet. But this fact should be the driver of structures of compassion and care, rather than the linchpin of systems of punishment. A system of justice and morality that seeks to perpetuate the most obvious and ineluctable fact of life—that *to be* entails surrendering to a certain measure of pain—is a system which is more interested in manipulating terrains of power, a dramaturgy of inequality, than in true justice or morality. I’m interested in how legalistic notions of “innocence” and “guilt”—categories which are only really useful in the adversarial context of the courtroom—have corrupted all our stories of right and wrong, good and evil, or, to be more precise, of who is included in the community and who must be excluded.

However, I once heard a brilliant talk by the poet and lawyer Reginald Dwayne Betts. A formerly incarcerated man himself, Betts had been invited to deliver the keynote lecture at a conference on prison arts and activism at Rutgers University in 2014. The conference was lively and energetic, full of (com)passion and joy. However, Betts’s talk had a contrapuntal tone, bringing us back down to earth. He was

serious, dour, decidedly *undecided* and unsure about how to engage the baroque complexities of America's prison behemoth.

At one point, he told a story of a woman who had approached him after a similar talk he had given elsewhere. She was a mother and handed him photographs of her child. She said that her baby had been cut in half by machine gun fire, caught in the crossfire of a gang confrontation. Betts asked us, in that moment, what should he have said to her. The implication was that our punitive criminal justice system offers her a definite, simple, dramatic response: the police will get the bad guys and the law will destroy them by any means necessary. But Betts implies that prison artists and activists are perhaps not as persuasive in a moment like that. It would be insufficient and borderline disrespectful to talk of creative transcendence, crisis intervention, conscientization, or broader socio-economic and historical contexts to a woman who has just lost a child. We were more or less stunned silent. I mean, what *does* one say? She's looking to heal, but America largely doesn't support healing. The United States thrives on open wounds.

I offer this story because conversations on mass incarceration and prison reform frequently underplay the role of violent crime in prison populations. If we're going to end mass incarceration, we have to discuss violence because violent offenses comprise a majority of the convictions that result in prison sentences. Betts's story of the mother relates the affective life of the pain caused by gun violence. That pain is real and shouldn't be taken lightly. The prison system largely fails to deal with this pain effectively—if it addresses it at all. The American criminal justice system eschews caring for victims, except when it can use them as rhetorical props to consolidate its own power. Rather than propose a definite answer to the grieving mother, this study points to the lack of resources and, indeed, imagination in that moment itself as a sign of a deeper lack. Perhaps performance can create the space for

us to talk about this lack, to discuss how visions of wounds inflicted sustain us and beget future wounding. Perhaps by dwelling in this uncomfortable space we can dream of other visions and create spaces of healing without the prison.

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<sup>i</sup> Christie, Nils. *Crime Control as Industry*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 22.

<sup>ii</sup> See Edelman, Murray. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964.

<sup>iii</sup> Eberhardt, Jennifer, Phillip Atiba Goff, Valerie J. Purdie, and Paul G. Davies. "Seeing Black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2004. Vol. 87, no. 6, 876-893.

<sup>iv</sup> Tider, Andrew and Jeff Greenspan. *Captured: People in Prison Drawing People Who Should Be*. 2015. <<https://thecapturedproject.com/>>

## INTRODUCTION

### CAPTIVE DREAMING: PERFORMANCE STUDIES, PRISON STUDIES, AND SUBJECT THEORY

*Abstraction is also flight. It is freedom from the immediate spatio-temporal constraints of the moment; freedom to plan the future, recall the past, comprehend the present from a reflective perspective that incorporates all three; freedom from the immediate boundaries of concrete subjectivity, freedom to imagine the possible and transport oneself into it; freedom to survey the real as a resource for embodying the possible; freedom to detach the realized object from oneself more and more fully as a self-contained entity, fully determined by its contextual properties and relations, and consider it from afar, as new grist for the mill of the possible. Abstraction is freedom from the socially prescribed and consensually accepted; freedom to violate in imagination the constraints of public practice, to play with conventions, or to indulge them. Abstraction is a solitary journey through the conceptual universe, with no anchors, no cues, no signposts, no maps, no foundations to cling to. Abstraction makes one love material objects all the more.*

*Adrian Piper<sup>1</sup>*

The field of theatre and performance studies is in many ways uniquely poised to consider the topic of imprisonment, particularly in the American context, and theatre and performance can contribute to struggles for change—on both the individual and collective levels. This study proposes *cagecraft* as a critical term for understanding how the process of making art works as a practice of freedom that can open oppressive structures up for public engagement. This neologism is more than clever wordplay on the technical term “stagecraft,” as it describes a performance-based way of understanding the relation between the art-making process and the larger structures and confinements within which that process takes place. Cagecraft describes a technique of freedom. It is an artistic engagement with an individual’s constraints—

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<sup>1</sup> From “Flying.” *Adrian Piper: Reflections 1967-1987*. Curated by Jane Farver. New York: Alternative Museum, 1987, 26.

historical, social, political, economic, cultural, subjectival, and others. Cagecraft, I argue, catalyzes the occasion for artists to be witnessed as full human beings, an experience that has transformative effects individually and socially. Cagecraft applies not only to imprisoned people but in varying degrees to everyone, coalescing most dramatically on the minoritarian, subaltern, and, indeed, the incarcerated. This vision of confinement can therefore be understood as a condition that exists on a spectrum upon which all subjects are located, rather than as simply an identifiable place for containing deviants, criminals, and rebels.

From Aeschylus on, Western theatre has often employed a kind of cagecraft, turning to the prison in order to stage social, political, and philosophical questions. The structures of the prison and theatre are connected in the very bedrock of Western performance, and this connection finds special relevance in modern and contemporary performance practices.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes dramatists themselves have been subject to political or criminal imprisonment. Playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Miguel Piñero, and Václav Havel drew on their own prison experiences in their writing, but incarceration also plays a role for many artists who have never done time. We might think of the works of Bertolt Brecht, Tennessee Williams, Suzan-Lori Parks, Caryl Churchill, Marsha Norman, Stephen Adly Guirgis, Migdalia Cruz, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, and many others. In some cases, playwrights do so in order to titillate and entertain, capitalizing on public

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<sup>2</sup> This preliminary investigation is guided by the methodology found in Kubiak, Anthony. *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

fascination with crime and punishment, but in others the theatre dramatizes dreams of freedom and liberation, articulating political critiques of the prison system and manipulating time and space in order to deconstruct metaphysical confinements.

For example, in *Prometheus Bound* (c. 430 BC), Aeschylus presents us with the titular Titan, chained to a boulder for eternity in punishment for his transgressions against Zeus, king of the gods. It is arguably the first play in the prison genre. Prometheus brought fire to humanity—quite literally enlightening them—thereby raising the human animal above its rightful place in the cosmic hierarchy. The myth of Prometheus often functions as a symbol of technological innovation and progress, but he also stands as a figure of the rebel or criminal.<sup>3</sup> He is, in certain ways, Christ-like: a sacrifice to the divine, subject to durative torture. In other ways he is like Lucifer, stripped of his angelic nature for his vanity. Prometheus's rebellion is on the one hand a justifiable act of care for humanity, but on the other, his actions have an air of irresponsibility and recklessness, resulting in the death and destruction that comes with technological progress. After all, fire provides heat and warmth, but it also burns flesh and vegetation. His hubristic interventions in the fate of humankind might be construed as both magnanimous and myopic, an ambivalence which poses interesting questions about the responsibility of the specific individual to the collective totality, and vice versa. Prometheus is punished for acting outside the moral order—he defies the social script, and it's not entirely clear whether this was for good or ill.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kaufman-Osborn, Timothy. *Creatures of Prometheus*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997.

Aeschylus's play itself also presents certain interesting challenges for theatre makers because the setting is static, centering on Prometheus's place of constraint. The action is literally arrested in place; other characters enter and speak with Prometheus, listening to his lamentations and invective against his captor. Throughout, the audience must witness his body wracked upon the stone. The audience is bound to the vision of the captive onstage, as he is to the rock. We are asked, by both Greek chorus and Prometheus, why Zeus would persist in this punishment, since it is plain to all that the torture is disproportionate to the crime: unwise and needlessly unmerciful. We find, in this very early dramatic work, not only a representation of the confined and condemned, but a model for how the embodied aspects of the theatre engage with issues of individuality, morality, complicity, pain, mercy, forgiveness, and witnessing.

Just as often, performance and imprisonment have been offered as metaphors of each other, their relationship leveraged as a critique of either or both. To provide just one more famous example—and also to dwell with the ancient Greeks for a moment longer—I might invoke Plato's allegory of the cave. In this figuration, captivity and spectacle are joined as models of a perniciously pervasive ignorance. The prisoners in the allegory—representing the citizenry—remain chained in a sepulchral theatre, forced to serve as audience to the play of shadowy illusions on the wall—which form the substance of their reality—until the philosopher brings them to the true, non-illusory light of knowledge outside the cave—a liberation that, Plato warns, will bring the persecution of the citizenry onto the philosopher.<sup>4</sup> Prometheus's

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<sup>4</sup> More on the relation between Plato, metatheatricality, and antitheatricality in Puchner, Martin. *Stagefright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*. London and

fire casts the very shadows that bind the minds of the enslaved masses. He is thus doubly deserving of eternal punishment because his arts are deceptive.

Just like both Plato's prisoners and Prometheus, the forces that structure our identities and lived experiences can be seen in part as confining, constraining and, indeed, violent. To be recognized as a person entails surrendering to a cage made from a network of social, cultural, and institutional traumas. Through cagecraft, I argue, artists can interrupt trauma, enacting utopian, world-making gestures from behind bars. Cagecraft wields the power to liberate actors and audiences, at least in the moment of performance, because artists re-make themselves and the world. Cagecraft resonates with the conceptual artist Adrian Piper's ideas about freedom, which serve as the epigraph to this chapter. Making art, understood in Piper's formulation as a kind of "abstraction," performs a dynamic flight beyond and above the concrete world. It manifests in the body as freedom, which can then translate into material action when one re-enters the atmosphere. To provide a rough schema, cagecraft is: shorthand for the idea that making art enacts freedom; directed toward social justice; anti-racist, feminist, queer, intersectional art practice; an act of social and cultural transformation; the foregrounding of the voices of those experiencing oppression; interruptive of traumatic, "imprisoning" aspects of subject-formation; and utopian.

This formulation is indebted in part to Michel Foucault's theory of freedom as not properly a "thing," that might be granted through law or institution, but as a

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Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002; and Puchner, Martin. *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

practice.<sup>5</sup> He says, “The guarantee of freedom is freedom.”<sup>6</sup> Cagecraft therefore opens an entry into the practice of this performative guarantee. I might also invoke Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works*.<sup>7</sup> Jackson examines how artists from a variety of disciplines engage with the “reciprocally sustaining infrastructure[s]” of social life in order to trouble debates about/between the system and the individual.<sup>8</sup> She argues that the turn to theatricality and performativity in the visual art world brings with it a different reckoning with spatiality, temporality, and relationality that allow works to uncover the contingent, structured nature of subjectivity itself. Cagecraft similarly troubles a false binary of subjective and social.

This study exists at the intersection of theory and praxis. Drawing on theories from performance studies, this research is driven by on-the-ground inquiry and theatrical experimentation as well as more traditional forms of archival and ethnographic research. Performance, in my definition, crosses boundaries of media and genre, comprising both the everyday and aesthetic. Performance is defined by a kind of repetition, or “restored” or “twice-behaved” behavior.<sup>9</sup> Performance does something in the world by reiterating or citing some action or behavior that has already happened in the past. Thick descriptions flesh out close readings of dramatic

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, Michel. “Space, Knowledge, and Power.” *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 245.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson, Shannon, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>9</sup> See Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985. 35-37; and Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

texts and personal and poetic flights of fancy punctuate more deliberate, critical analysis. In practical terms, this study can be seen as the written component of a larger body of work, a portion of which is unrecordable in traditional scholarly discourse. The text (and, indeed, the spaces between the written word) therefore point to other dynamics of physical movement, touch, and affect, a dissertation that escapes textual capture, but which is archived in the body. This textual work feeds that performance work and vice versa.

This chapter serves as an introduction by first surveying the three theoretical schools around which this study orbits: performance studies, prison studies, and subject theory. I will also introduce the other key critical terms: *carceral subjectivity* and *trauma machine*. In the final section, I provide a brief overview of the other chapters.

I've identified three overarching goals for this study: First, I want to bring theatre and performance studies and critical prison studies together in an expansive conversation that has broad resonances. I think the poetry, grit, politics, history, drama, and power of the prison says important things about the performance of making art in general—what people making art *do* in themselves and in the world. I turn to subject theory because at its most granular level, performance functions to transform subjectivity. My intervention is a simple one: bringing these two fields together reveals that the performance of making art is a practice of freedom.

Second, I want to flesh out the scholarly side of the field of prison theatre, specifically its theoretical, dramatic literary, and historical aspects. A lot of work in this interdisciplinary area is done by theatre and performance practitioners, but, with a

few exceptions, there isn't much done by scholars. Practitioners are largely committed to seeking *how* to make prison performance, but I'm also interested in *why* and *what* we do when we make performance inside the American penitentiary.

Finally, this study explores what theatre and performance can contribute to prison reform and abolitionist struggles, and, in turn, what those struggles contribute to broader conversations about race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality. When presenting this work publicly, I've been questioned quite pointedly about what theatre and performance have to do with prison studies. In one case, a questioner more or less accused me of offering incarcerated people "false amelioration." This study endeavors to argue against this antitheatricality. In some sense, I think theatre and performance are sometimes identified in the field of prison studies as complicit with the project of imprisonment. Punishment can be understood as a kind of performance, and therefore the latter category is inherently suspect. In this study, I take such critiques seriously, while at the same time demonstrating that there is more to the story.

### ***Critical contexts***

The overlap of performance and prison obtains fresh significance in the era of mass incarceration—the historical period from the late 1970s to the present, in which both rates and populations of imprisonment in the USA exploded. Today, we are saturated with the prison—both literally and metaphorically. Michael Tonry, Marc Mauer, Bruce Western, Douglas Massey, Nancy Denton, and Katherine Beckett are some of the most prominent researchers of this prison rise, spanning fields from

sociology to political science.<sup>10</sup> The common definition of the term “mass imprisonment” was perhaps first articulated by sociologist David Garland, and found a wide readership in legal scholar Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*.<sup>11</sup> This term characterizes the size and scope of incarceration in the USA, in which nearly 2.5 million people live behind bars, and far more than that number encounter the justice system on a daily basis. This rise in rates of imprisonment occurred during a time when rates of crime were in fact declining. A number of factors have contributed to the prison rise, not least of all the confluence of capitalism and racism. The journalist Eric Schlosser published an investigative piece on the “prison-industrial complex” in the *Atlantic* in 1998—a critical term that Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and other black feminists have taken up.<sup>12</sup> This term describes how profit-making interests conspire to capture and exploit black and brown people in the baroque police and prison apparatus. More recently, the term “hyper-incarceration,” first used by sociologist Loïc Wacquant, has come to the fore to describe the targeted intensity of

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<sup>10</sup> See Tonry, Michael. *Punishing Race: A Continuing American Dilemma*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Mauer, Marc. *The Race to Incarcerate*. New York: The New Press, 2006; Western, Bruce. *Punishment & Inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006; Massey, Douglas and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; and Beckett, Katherine. *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Garland, David, ed. *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences*. London: Sage Publications, 2001; and Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press. 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Schlosser, Eric. “The Prison-Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*. Dec 1998, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/12/the-prison-industrial-complex/304669/>> Accessed Mar 28, 2018. See also Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003; and Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulags*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

imprisonment.<sup>13</sup> While the logic and philosophy of incarceration touches us all in some way, the specific experiences and consequences of imprisonment focus inordinately on particular communities and populations. Thinkers like Wacquant argue that the odds of whether a person ends up in jail or prison can be determined by looking first at their zip code, then at their race and class. Increasingly, scholars like Beth Richie elucidate the particularities of this system's effects in relation to issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that in recent years the overall prison population has decreased (slightly), the rates of incarceration of women remain the fastest growing of any other demographic. From appalling medical (in)attention for pregnant prisoners to systemic rape, the prison is designed to brutalize non-cis-gendered men in particular ways. The class and race-based violence of the prison is also a sexual project. For example, the authors included in the collection *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* approach how the police and prison entangle trans and gender queer people within a constellation of traumas.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wacquant, Loïc. *Prisons of Poverty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Richie, Beth. *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. See also Lawston, Jodie Michelle and Ashley Lucas eds. *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011; and Biggs, Lisa. "Serious Fun at Sun City: Theatre for Incarcerated Women in the 'New' South Africa." *Theatre Survey*. Vol 57, Issue 1, Jan 2016, 4-36.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley, Eric and Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011. See also Dillon, Stephen. "Fugitive Life: Race, Gender, and the Rise of the Neoliberal-Carceral State" Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2013.

In historical accounts, such as those produced by David M. Oshinsky and Kahlil Gibran Muhammad, mass incarceration is only the most recent event in a genealogy of American terror, in which black and brown bodies are captured and exploited.<sup>16</sup> It is the latest moment in the narrative of white supremacy, which started with the Atlantic slave trade and persisted after Emancipation through mass lynching and Jim Crow. Drawing on theorists like Dylan Rodríguez, I define white supremacy in this study as a global power structure, political imaginary, and social organization that violently positions “whiteness” as a central understanding of what constitutes civilization, rationality, and indeed the “human.”<sup>17</sup> It’s not the irrational outlook of a few outliers, but an all-encompassing ideological, epistemological, cultural, institutional structure within which we are all born and to which we are all in some way complicit. According to scholars like Marie Gottschalk, what’s new in our current racist era is its relation to the concomitant rise of neoliberalism.<sup>18</sup> Neoliberal politics can be understood as a general regime of extreme austerity: the simultaneous shrinking of the Keynesian welfare state and the decentralization and privatization of public goods and services. Paradoxically, what has occurred as the state has on the surface attempted to dramatically cut its spending, is that an astonishing amount of government resources have been funneled into the military, police, and prison. The

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<sup>16</sup> Oshinsky, David. *“Worse Than Slavery”: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. New York: Free Press, 1997; and Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Rodríguez, Dylan. “White Supremacy.” *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Ed. Bryan S. Turner. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Gottschalk, Marie. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

state's primary responsibility is understood as security. This means that, although the cost of maintaining our bloated prison state is astronomical, it can always be justified in the interest of public safety. This is despite the fact that increased spending in areas like healthcare and education would produce far less violent results for individuals and communities. This also means that the prison system finds some of its strongest defenders in the communities it most directly affects, as scholars like James Forman Jr. argue in *Locking up Our Own*.<sup>19</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has similarly explored how, in our supposed "post-racial" age ushered in by the election of President Barack Obama and the rise of black and brown public figures, systems of racist oppression still persist *vis a vis* the neoliberal regime.<sup>20</sup>

The shorthand for this conglomeration of elements concerning policing and imprisonment is the *carceral*—a term common in the field of critical prison studies, but less so in more public conversations. Carcerality comprises system, structure, project, process, worldview, and logic. It is an ideology in which the "carcer"—Latin for circle, enclosure, cave, barrier, prison—remains at the forefront. It marks an imaginative limit of social and political possibility.

Throughout this study, I rely on the framework of prison abolition. This political movement sets as its goal the creation of a world that no longer relies on the prison. Abolition is in part a meta-politic that argues that social and political movements should not follow a carceral logic to expand the prison system by

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<sup>19</sup> Forman, James, Jr. *Locking up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016.

capturing and imprisoning subjects. A carceral solution is always already insufficient. In practical terms, prison abolition entails engaging root causes of crime and pursuing “non-reformist reforms.” In this study, I examine both how theatre and performance contribute to dreams of prison abolition, as well as how they have contributed to the retrenchment of carcerality.

Abolition interests me for a number of reasons. As a critical framework, it captures the depth, size, and complexity of mass incarceration. The term abolition diagnoses the historical dimension and required scale of the issues, specifically the fact that reforms and alternatives need to address mass incarceration’s racist and capitalist dynamics. Abolition rejects carceral logic holistically. As trans activist and filmmaker Reina Gossett says, abolition foregrounds the philosophy that “no one is disposable.”<sup>21</sup> This requires troubling a black-and-white victim/perpetrator binary, as Jackie Wang argues in her essay on police violence, “Against Innocence.”<sup>22</sup>

Prison abolition requires rethinking how communities and governments solve real issues of victimization and tragedy. Scandinavian prisons are frequently held up as models of what a “non-imprisoning prison” might look like.<sup>23</sup> Less frequently examined are the non-reformist reforms based in the USA that offer alternatives to the courts and prison system. For example, the 2011 documentary film *The Interrupters*

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<sup>21</sup> Barnard Center for Research on Women. “Reina Gossett + Dean Spade (Part 1): Prison Abolition + Prefiguring the World You Want to Live In.” YouTube. Feb 7, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDQIW1uJ8uQ>>

<sup>22</sup> Wang, Jackie. “Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety.” *Carceral Capitalism*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Larson, Doran. “Why Scandinavian Prisons are Superior.” *The Atlantic*. Sept 24, 2013. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/why-scandinavian-prisons-are-superior/279949/>>

depicts the efforts of Cure Violence Illinois, which has actively (and effectively) intervened in situations of street violence before they can occur. Such community-based prevention efforts have reduced everyday occurrences of violence drastically, cutting down shootings sometimes as much as 73%.<sup>24</sup>

Common Justice, part of the Vera Institute, offers another dramatic alternative to incarceration in the USA. Launched by Danielle Sered, the initiative entails participatory, restorative justice programs in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>25</sup> This program is unique because it is directed at prison reform by engaging the victims of crime. Sered points out that if prison reduced victimization, the USA would be the safest country in the history of the world. In part because of this, the carceral solution can be seen as the soft on crime solution. The prison is both grossly ineffective as deterrent and completely evades the question of accountability. Initiatives like Common Justice seek to disentangle notions of accountability and punishment. Sered identifies four factors that cause violence: shame, isolation, exposure to violence, and diminished ability to meet one's economic needs.<sup>26</sup> The prison replicates all of these. Sered also points out that the most-victimized demographic, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, are young black men. This also happens to be the most-imprisoned demographic in the USA. The fact that the prison system has come to the forefront in

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<sup>24</sup> Cure Violence. < <http://cureviolence.org/partners/us-partners/illinois-partners/>> Accessed May 2, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> AtlanticLIVE. "The Case for Diversion / Race and Justice in America." YouTube. Nov 12, 2015. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dk97bWAjdgw>>. See also Sered, Danielle. "A New Approach to Victim Services: The Common Justice Demonstration Project." *Federal Sentencing Reporter*. Vera Institute of Justice. Vol 24, No 1, October 2011, 50-53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

how America solves its problems is a moral crisis that demands close study and dramatic action.

Because of the rise of mass incarceration, during this period prison narratives proliferated. As Doran Larson argues in the introduction to his prison writing collection *Fourth City*, researchers study this literature with the assumption that solutions to the problems of the criminal justice system can be found within works by writers who have experienced incarceration.<sup>27</sup> Media such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013- )—based on Piper Kerman’s memoir of the same name—represent the lives of incarcerated people in order to raise consciousness about their struggles. Juxtapose this goal with the concomitant inundation and popularity of sensationalized prison-related media on television and film. Much of this media serves to sate the perverse desire to peak through the bars into the prison cell. Prison “docutainment” like *Lockdown* (2006-2007) or *Lockup* (2005-2017) and narrative films like *Get Hard* (2015) or *The Longest Yard* (1974, remade 2005) offer viewers a voyeuristic glimpse of the imprisoned body, object (and sometimes agent) of revanchist violence. Michelle Brown goes so far as to say that this cultural network structures the consciousness of the public itself with the logic of penalty, while obscuring certain key facts, such as the penitentiary’s racist history.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Larson, Doran. “Introduction: The American Prison Writer as Witness.” *Fourth City*. Ed. Doran Larson. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. 2013. 1-10.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, Michelle. *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*. New York: New York University Press. 2009.

Where do theatre and performance exist within this prison culture milieu, and what might they contribute to either buttress or critique carcerality? How does prison performance engage with the current historical and political reality of mass incarceration? Why attend to it now, in a cultural and media landscape over-saturated with narratives and images of imprisonment? And how does the representation of prison change when written by someone who has never experienced incarceration? These questions concern not only the genre of prison drama; they also concern the wealth of works for the theatre that deploy carcerality despite not *literally* being set inside a prison. Playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Sarah Kane, and August Wilson write dramas that retain a carceral residue, performatively confronting audiences with the themes of capture, bondage, and pain that characterize punitive confinement. Playwrights have depicted the prison more often than there is space here to recount. For example, one of Tennessee Williams' earliest plays was a Brechtian prison drama titled *Not About Nightingales* (1938). In the appendix to this dissertation, I've provided a list of dramatic literature that might be considered carceral. I mean this in a very broad sense: not all of the plays included represent the prison directly, but all of them evoke themes and affects of confinement and captivity.

Why is the carceral—both performative and dramaturgical—a continuing fascination for performance-based artists? These questions gain added weight when we consider the critical context in which the traditional dramatic theatre is figured as

imprisoning for creative expression, a ubiquitous metaphorical account which perhaps found its most popular iteration by Hans-Thies Lehmann.<sup>29</sup>

One of the problems with writing about carceral performance is that the category covers a wide range of practices. We might begin by considering ongoing conversations in the field of applied and community-based theatre. Jan Cohen-Cruz, Mady Schutzman, Dudley Cocke, Joan Lipkin, Baz Kershaw, Sonja Kuflinec, and others have researched community-based theatre work that directly or indirectly informs the theory and practice of prison theatre.<sup>30</sup> Theatre and performance have long been used to empower the marginalized and disenfranchised, engaging audiences that sometimes have never experienced live theatre, as evidenced by groups like Fringe Benefits, El Teatro Campesino, the WOW café, Ten Thousand Things, Free Southern Theater, and more. In part, the value of such performances is that they democratize theatre or otherwise expose as an act of philanthropy the theatre to people who don't have the privilege or money to buy tickets. There is tremendous power in expanding

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<sup>29</sup> For Lehmann, postdramatic theatre has the potential to break through “the *prison* of cultural intelligibility” from Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*. Trans. Henry Erik Butler. London: Routledge, 2016, 168 (italics mine). See also Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> See Cohen-Cruz, Jan. *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*. New York: Routledge, 2010; Schutzman, Mady and Jan Cohen-Cruz. *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*. London: Routledge, 1993; Kershaw, Baz. *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge, 1992; Fox, Ann and Joan Lipkin, “Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theater Through Disability Theater: Selections from the Disability Project.” *NWSA Journal*, Vol 14, No 4, Fall 2002, 77-98; and Kuflinec, Sonja, *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

representation onstage for subjectivities beyond the rich, able-bodied, white cis-heteronormative identity.

In addition, the theatre has qualities that make it essential for communities that exceed the humanitarian or representational. As Augusto Boal theorizes in *The Rainbow of Desire*, “Theatre has nothing to do with buildings or other physical constructions. Theatre—or theatricality—is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity. The self-knowledge thus acquired allows him to be the subject (the one who observes) of another subject (the one who acts).”<sup>31</sup> The (self)reflective power of theatre to make things seen *and* heard in the body and voice results in its production of an embodied understanding that finds windfall in the broader world. This potential of theatre, to facilitate the production of (self)knowledge using few resources beyond the human body, lends itself to the prison—and other non-traditional settings and communities.

Global encounters between theatre practitioners and imprisoned communities are well-documented, forming a fully-established sub-field of applied and community-based performance. Volumes such as *Performing New Lives*, edited by Jonathan Shailor, *Theatre in Prison*, edited by Michael Balfour, and *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices*, edited by James Thompson, have collected critical essays and participant accounts from a diverse array of prison performance practitioners.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Boal, Augusto. *Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson, New York: Routledge, 1995, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Shailor, Jonathan, ed. *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011; Balfour, Michael, ed. *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2004; and Thompson, James, ed. *Prison Theatre: Practices and Perspectives*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998.

There are also numerous monographs that offer more focused analysis of one or several prison theatre practitioners. Some are written by a lead or participant artist, such as Jean Trounstone's *Shakespeare Behind Bars* and Rob Pensalfini's *Prison Shakespeare: For these deep shames and great indignities*, and some are written by outside observers, such as Rena Fraden's *Imagining Medea*, Laurence Tocci's *Proscenium Cage*, and Niels Herold's *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance*.<sup>33</sup> Also of note are texts that attempt to provide an overarching view of how theatre and performance have engaged issues of incarceration, including representational depiction, such as *Captive Audience*, edited by Kimball King and Thomas Fahy, and *Theatre & Prison*, by Caoime McAvinchey.<sup>34</sup>

Today there are numerous theatre-in-prisons programs around the world. In the history of any given prison, one finds instances of theatre being used to advance the project of rehabilitation and divert punishment—a set of practices I take up for critique in detail in the second chapter. These performances span scripted plays to “living statues” to visits from popular performers of stage and screen. Scholars have also engaged the cultural life of the prison, some of whom draw on performance, such as

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<sup>33</sup> Trounstone, Jean, *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001; Pensalfini, Rob. *Prison Shakespeare: For these deep shames and great indignities*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Fraden, Rena. *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001; Tocci, Laurence. *The Proscenium Cage*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2007; Herold, Niels. *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance: Repentance Rituals and the Early Modern*. London: Palgrave, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Fahy, Thomas and Kimball King, eds. *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theater*. New York: Routledge. 2003; and McAvinchey, Caoime. *Theatre & Prison*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Caleb Smith, Jason Haslam, Robert Ferguson, H. Bruce Franklin, Alison Griffiths, Katy Ryan, Sarah Tyson, and Joshua M. Hall.<sup>35</sup>

Clean Break Theatre in the UK is perhaps the oldest continually functioning theatre company dedicated to working in and around issues of criminal justice and imprisonment in the world.<sup>36</sup> Founded in 1979 by two incarcerated women, this group has over the years produced performances with imprisoned women. Their methods run the gamut, from traditional, commercial theatre to solo performance to collectively-devised plays. In addition, they currently institute programs to help incarcerated women build professional skills to facilitate their reentry into society. Herbert Blau's production of *Waiting for Godot* (1953), which toured into San Quentin Prison in 1957, is another noteworthy twentieth-century prison performance that had lasting impact on the history of prison theatre. Following this production, the San Quentin Drama Workshop was founded. One of the incarcerated founders, Rick Cluchey, went on to become one of Beckett's major US collaborators. He was the subject of a fictionalized HBO film *Weeds*, starring Nick Nolte. But this was not the first time Beckett had been performed in prison. In 1953, a prisoner at Luttringhausen Prison in

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, Caleb, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009; Haslam, Jason. *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005; Ferguson, Robert. *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014; Franklin, H. Bruce. *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998; Griffiths, Alison. *Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and Prison in Early Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016; Tyson, Sarah and Joshua Hall, eds. *Philosophy Imprisoned: The Love of Wisdom in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014; and Ryan, Katy. "State Killing, the Stage of Innocence, and *The Exonerated*." *American Literature*, Vol 83, No 1, Mar 2011, 121-151.

<sup>36</sup> See [cleanbreak.org.uk](http://cleanbreak.org.uk)

Germany translated and produced *Godot*, with incarcerated actors for an imprisoned audience.<sup>37</sup>

Rhodessa Jones and the Medea Project for Incarcerated Women have long staged public performances for audiences in the Bay Area.<sup>38</sup> Jones initially entered San Francisco jails as an aerobics instructor, before beginning to experiment with using theatre techniques to develop performances using the stories of the women she encountered. She collaborates with social worker Sean Reynolds, and other engaged artists and community members, to create an empowering environment for captive women who have often themselves been victims of sexual and physical violence. Troubling the binary between perpetrator and victim is in fact one of the goals of the work. Jones has also taken the project internationally, for example working with incarcerated women in South Africa.<sup>39</sup>

A major strain in the history of prison theatre is the performance of Shakespeare within the prison context. For instance, Shakespeare Behind Bars—formerly led by Curt Tofteland—has been enormously influential in the field, in part owing to the 2006 documentary about the group. The program boasts on its site that their program has a 5.1% recidivism rate, which is far below the national average.<sup>40</sup> In 2007, Tom Magill released the film *Mickey B*, a fascinating adaptation of *Macbeth* he produced and directed with Irish prisoners translated into contemporary language. Jean

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<sup>37</sup> Poynton, Amy Elizabeth. “Herbert Blau: Directing a Revolution in American Theatre, 1952-1965” Ph.D. diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> See [themedeaproject.weebly.com](http://themedeaproject.weebly.com)

<sup>39</sup> See Fraden (2001) and Biggs (2016). See also Warner, Sara. “Restorytive Justice.” In *Razor Wire Women* (2011).

<sup>40</sup> See [shakespearebehindbars.org](http://shakespearebehindbars.org)

Trounstine was one of the first prison theatre practitioners in the United States to teach Shakespeare behind bars, bringing the Bard to Framingham Women's Prison in Massachusetts.<sup>41</sup> Recently this interest in prison Shakespeare led to the founding of the Shakespeare in Prisons Network, which hosts a biennial conference.<sup>42</sup>

Qualitative and quantitative research have painted a picture of the many benefits of prison art and education. The Prison Creative Arts Project in Michigan is one of the largest of its kind in the world.<sup>43</sup> Founded in 1990 by William "Buzz" Alexander, the project encompasses both academic and volunteer-based programming, such as exhibiting annually a public display of art work by Michigan prisoners and publishing the Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing. Theatre artist and professor Ashley Lucas is the current director of the program, and theatre workshops and performances are frequently organized. In New York State, Rehabilitation through the Arts (RTA) is a similar program, staging a public theatre performance annually.<sup>44</sup> One of the members of the board of directors, Lorraine Moller, published in 2004 a study in which she compared 35 men who had participated in RTA, and 30 who hadn't.<sup>45</sup> She concluded that participating in RTA improved their "positive coping" abilities, decreased anger, and decreased the number and severity of infractions and consequent disciplinary action.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Trounstine (2001).

<sup>42</sup> See [shakespeare.nd.edu/spn/](http://shakespeare.nd.edu/spn/)

<sup>43</sup> See [lsa.umich.edu/pcap](http://lsa.umich.edu/pcap)

<sup>44</sup> See [rta-arts.org](http://rta-arts.org)

<sup>45</sup> Moller, Lorraine. "500 Angry Men: Drama and Meta-Drama at the "Big House." *Reflections, A Journal of Writing, Service Learning and Community Literacy*. 4.1, 2004, 167-177.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid* 174.

California remains a major player in the prison theatre world. In addition to well-publicized activities, such as Tim Robbins' work with the Actor's Gang that uses *commedia dell'arte* with prisoners across the state, California's Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) program is one of the most well-established and researched program of its kind in the country.<sup>47</sup> Empirical studies of the benefits of prison art programs are few and far between, and the AIC has offered unique opportunities in this regard.<sup>48</sup>

There are numerous other fascinating prison theatre programs, such as Prison Performing Arts in Missouri, Geese Theatre Company in the UK and US, *Compagnia della Fortezza* in Italy, and William Head on Stage in Canada.<sup>49</sup> It exceeds the scope of this study to investigate them all in depth. And of course, historically performance has engaged issues of capture and confinement in a number of ways that exceed the field of applied theatre. One of the earliest recorded accounts of theatre in a penal setting is presented in Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* (1988), based on a novel by Thomas Keneally. Set in the 1780s in New South Wales, Australia, Wertenbaker's drama tells the true story of a group of Royal Marines teaming up with convicts to stage a production of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). In addition, scholars and artists are increasingly uncovering historical

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<sup>47</sup> See [arts.ca.gov/initiatives/aic.php](http://arts.ca.gov/initiatives/aic.php)

<sup>48</sup> Brewster, Larry. "Qualitative Study of the California Arts-in-Corrections Program." <<http://cac.ca.gov/arts-in-corrections/LegHearingMay2013/4-research%20a.%20brewster.pdf>> Accessed Mar 28 2018.

<sup>49</sup> See Prison Performing Arts, <http://prisonartsstl.org/>; Geese Theatre Company, <http://www.geese.co.uk/work/adults/prisons>; *Compagnia della Fortezza*, <https://www.atouchoflight.org/compagnia-della-fortezza>; and William Head on Stage, <https://whonstage.weebly.com/>

examples of theatre and performance in settings like the Southern slave plantation and the concentration camp.

The history of cagecraft is therefore as long and complex as the history of bondage and imprisonment. Artists use performance almost as an act of survival to reckon with their confinement. This aspect of making performance avails itself to all subjects, regardless of whether they currently find themselves locked in a physical prison. In the next section, I discuss how the lessons from prison performance might translate to a broad understanding of cagecraft as a practice of freedom within subjectival imprisonment.

### ***Carceral subjectivity***

It's a common enough argument that the assumption of subjectivity entails embroiling oneself in social relations of power, and that these subjectivating forces serve to confine and control as much as they allow for autonomy and freedom. G.W.F. Hegel's master-slave (or "lord-bondsman") dialectic from his *Phenomenology of Spirit* remains an incredibly influential model of subjectivity, finding purchase across cultural and historical contexts.<sup>50</sup> In narrative form, Hegel outlines a philosophical schema of the sublation of self-consciousness, which is experienced as a kind of subjectival capture. The lord, master, or "independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself" comes into contact with the bondsman, slave, or "dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another."<sup>51</sup> This

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<sup>50</sup> Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Foreword by J.N. Findlay. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. See also Singer, Peter. *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

<sup>51</sup> Hegel, 115.

meeting is obviously unequal and antagonistic to a degree. But what both subjects find is that their respective consciousness of themselves depends upon the recognition of the other, thus binding them to each other and to their individuated positions in the relationship irrevocably.

Jean-Paul Sartre's pithy assertion that humanity is condemned to be free perhaps best summarizes how this carceral metaphor recurs in twentieth-century subject theory.<sup>52</sup> Thus, subjectivity in modernity is frequently characterized as morbid or un-dead, or at the very least the result of violent social forces serving to imprison the subject. Judith Butler, perhaps the apotheosis of this line of thinking, rightly points out that this violence begets further violence in the world. Yet the question remains of how to conceive of the subject's responsibility for the violence it makes, without risking liberal concepts of individual autonomy:

Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them; they are not dupes or mechanisms of an impersonal social force, but agents with responsibility. On the other hand, these individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology or "evil." Both the discourse of individualism and of moralism (understood as the moment in which morality exhausts itself in public acts of denunciation) assume that the individual is the first link in a causal chain that forms the meaning of accountability. But to take the self-generated acts of the individual as our point of departure in moral reasoning is precisely to foreclose the possibility of questioning what kind of world gives rise to such individuals. And what is this process of "giving rise"? What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed? Where and how can such subject formations be contravened?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993. 509.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. 15.

In short, how can we hold the world accountable for the destructive things that happen in it? And how can we transform that world? This study asks only slightly more humble—perhaps because more local—questions, but these questions grow out of a desire to pursue this inquiry, an understanding of contemporary subjectivity as a metaphorically carceral phenomenon, and an interest in the peculiar nexus of that metaphor in an era marked by unprecedented political and criminal imprisonment.

*Carceral subjectivity* is a notion of what it means to be a citizen, human, agent, whose condition of existence is subtended by relations that characterize imprisonment, such as bondage, confinement, pain. It is a fruitful conception of how the subject is conceived, finding resonance in Marxist, ant-racist, and feminist discourses.<sup>54</sup> Rather than conceive of subjectivity as simply belonging in a binary with objectivity, we might note how constraint is itself productive of the subject. In theatrical terms, it is a way of conceiving of how the actor is constrained by the structure of the play (script, audience, set, stage, light, costume) and yet has some agency within this constraint. It is a way of conceiving of freedom that accounts for broader structures which must be reckoned with and indeed surrendered to. As Soyica Colbert has argued, boundless freedom is a liberal fantasy that is destructive, so re-conceiving of our relationship to our subjective confinement is crucial to producing visions of freedom that engage

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<sup>54</sup> For example, see Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 1952; Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics.” Trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture*. Vol 15, No 1. 2003; Althusser, Louis, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, 127-186; and Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

constraint ethically and generously.<sup>55</sup> This is perhaps a matter of common sense in some fields: Sociologists, for instance, view the subject as always already structured by outside forces. Figuring these forces as properly confining foregrounds the fear that attends to debates around prison, which more or less concern who “deserves” to be free or not. It also creates a situation to conceive of how making performance functions as a practice of freedom on the level of subjectivity.

Michel Foucault’s life-long work on power and subjectivity are foundational in my theories of unfreedom.<sup>56</sup> Foucault built on Nietzsche’s genealogical method to employ what he called “archeology,” in order to dig up the governing ideas of the day.<sup>57</sup> By tracking over time the development of a given idea, such as “madness” or “punishment,” Foucault was able to uncover how the history of ideas is highly contingent, subject to a complex of forces. These “epistemes” or “signatures” mark the limits of what counts as thought itself. They are discursive results of relations of power, rather than essential characteristics of human reason. To exceed the limit is to be labelled as criminal, external, deviant, and outsider. However, rather than regard this externality as rebellious or revolutionary, Foucault demonstrates that the structure of the limit itself *depends* upon its existence, and therefore the external is in fact part and parcel to the functioning of the status quo. For instance, morality, in Foucault’s

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<sup>55</sup> Colbert, Soyica. *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House, 1977; and Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 8, No 4, Summer 1982: 777-795.

<sup>57</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. See also Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: Random House, 1970.

method, is a category determined by mechanisms that depend upon historical and regional contextual factors. What is deemed (im)moral today grows out of the (im)morality of previous eras, but there is no essential moralism, as such. The goal of the archeological method isn't to deny the existence of a given episteme, but to lay bare its fundamental lacuna, emptiness, arbitrariness, or, indeed, its performativity. Despite the fact that Foucault can be criticized for being fatalistic, the performative aspects of his thought carry tremendous potential to empower creative artists to transform the world as we know it.

Theatre and performance make sporadic appearances in Foucault's writings, most notably in Foucault's famous analysis of the prison.<sup>58</sup> In this text, Foucault invokes Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for the Panopticon: it is a circular structure, in the center of which is the guard tower which is surrounded by a ring of the inmates' cells, to the effect that at any given moment the guards may see through the threshold of the cells and gaze upon the individual prisoners, but that they may not see the guards nor their fellow inmates. He describes this structure in explicitly theatrical terms: "By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible."<sup>59</sup> Foucault sees the main result of the Panopticon's institution as the production within the mind of the prisoner an

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<sup>58</sup> Caryl Churchill foregrounds this in her play *Softcops* (1984), an adaptation of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault (1977), 200.

unconscious policing mechanism that renders conscious her or his conspicuousness: a paranoid self-monitoring self-consciousness that corrects the behavior of the prisoner on behalf of invisible guards who may or may not be watching. Power here is bound up with the condition of visibility: to be visible is to be powerless, and invisibility constitutes power. Because the prisoner cannot determine whether she or he is being watched, the prisoner assumes that she or he is *always* being watched, and endeavors to be on her or his best behavior. Foucault's partial aim in articulating this system are to reveal how its technologies have proliferated outside the prison, in places and situations that one may not have expected.

The episteme itself—as a knowledge-power structure—is therefore a kind of performance. Judith Butler hones in on this idea, and develops it in a number of important directions.<sup>60</sup> If all knowledge is the result of relations of power and a product of contingency, rather than reflective of transcendent truth, then, Butler reasons, epistemology is a result of a kind of repetition. Anything regarded as factual or truthful can be thought of as citing or reiterating a previous thing that was regarded as such, *ad infinitum*. Most famously, Butler applies this principle to the category of gender. It is not as though gender doesn't exist, but that the condition of its legibility depends upon a repetitious lineage that at its core is empty. This analysis has been

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<sup>60</sup> See Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." *Theatre Journal*, Vol 40, No 4, Dec 1988, 519-531; and Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge, 2011. Jacques Derrida also contributes to this discussion as well, although his approach is too text-centric to be entirely useful in this study. See Derrida, Jacques. "Signature Event Context." *Limited Inc*. Ed. Gerald Graff. Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988. 1-22.

applied in any number of realms. This repetition is so all-encompassing that it frustrates notions of intentionality. One does not wake up every morning and choose to exist within an episteme. The script has already been written, you have already been cast, and your agency is always already constrained by the process. Any student of Shakespeare understands this implicitly. But, importantly, this constraint is often productive and pleasurable. It feels good to perform well, and this feeling serves to perpetuate the lineage. When a given subject performs badly or illegibly, that subject is punished. But rather than regard the object of that punishment as a heroic martyr, we should understand how the existence of that illegibility is in fact central to the functioning of the limit. This is why the prison is a fundamental figure for both Foucault and Butler, and for all those working in that tradition. It marks the limit that is nevertheless internal to the performance of what is regarded as normal. Thus, the carceral subject is also a performing one, always already trapped in a rehearsal of some measure of painful constraint.

### ***Trauma machines***

Theoretical investigations of time and space are central in conceptualizing both performance and imprisonment. More specifically, repetition is of crucial significance in theories of performance, subjectivity, and the prison, and also, of special relevance to this study, in psychoanalytic theories of trauma.<sup>61</sup> Sigmund Freud first thought through the phenomena of shell-shock, a malady which veterans of the World Wars

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<sup>61</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1961; see also Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996.

suffered, by connecting it to what he noticed as a tendency of people to repeat actions, no matter how harmful.<sup>62</sup> His patients placed themselves in situations time and again that they knew had harmed them in the past, and yet they compulsively played out the same painful scenarios in their lives. This drive intensified in soldiers who had suffered trauma. These observations are influential in the study of psychology, and repetition has come to characterize how it is understood and diagnosed. According to DSM-V, the traumatic event is “re-experienced” in a variety of ways.<sup>63</sup> In the common understanding, traumatized people are those who may be triggered if reminded of the original event, compelled to re-live its horrors.

I therefore mark the institution of the prison as a *trauma machine*. I argue that trauma machines serve to simultaneously structure, produce, and confine subjects in repetitions of historical violence. Like the theatre, the structure of the prison is deeply involved in repetition and recycling, bringing the past to life in the present. Memory imbues these places with special energy, which are then carried forward into the future in the same repetitious practices. Trauma machines therefore don’t only preserve the past, but they contribute to its further dissemination, serving as a vehicle for maintaining a continuous narrative of a culture. Trauma machines are productive, manufacturing both epistemic visions of pain and the subjectivities structured by them. Recalling Foucault and Butler, the machinery of trauma is always already internal to the functioning of the norm. It is crucial for artists working within and around the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “PTSD: National Center for PTSD.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs <[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/ptsd-overview/dsm5\\_criteria\\_ptsd.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/ptsd-overview/dsm5_criteria_ptsd.asp)> Accessed Mar 28, 2018

history of the prison to have a clear picture of how it appears to us in the present in order to foreground the reality of the trauma machine.

Rehearsals of violence, abuse, negligence, and corruption are endemic to the institution of the prison. Trauma machines are literally the stuff of writers like Charles Dickens, who represented the compulsions and repetitious behaviors attendant to trauma in works like *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). It is perhaps no surprise then that when Dickens made his tour of America, and later published his accounts, his reflection upon visiting Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia was singularly critical:

I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers; and in guessing at it myself, and in reasoning from what I have seen written upon their faces, and what to my certain knowledge they feel within, I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in which none but the sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow creature. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body; and because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh; because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore the more I denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay.<sup>64</sup>

Dickens observes both the physical and psychological effects of this punishment in terms that resonate with contemporary theories of trauma. Trauma is understood today as a kind of internal wounding, similar to “scars upon the flesh,” but only palpable in human expression. The prison, in Dickens’ formulation, is to blame for this internal

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<sup>64</sup> From Casella, Jean. “Charles Dickens on Solitary Confinement: ‘Immense Torture and Agony.’” *Solitary Watch*. Feb 27 2010.

<<http://solitarywatch.com/2010/02/27/charles-dickens-on-solitary-confinement-immense-torture-and-agony/>> Accessed Mar 28 2018.

violence, despite the fact that its effects are invisible, because it tampers with the “mysteries of the brain,” a suffering that is immeasurably worse than any previously conceived. Dickens’ exhortation to denounce this practice further presages later political movements of prison reform and abolition.

Trauma machines delineate institutions that both comprise and produce repetitive cycles of pain; the social performance of such systems is the surrogation of historical trauma.<sup>65</sup> Prisons and asylums are two obvious examples, but there is a constellation of others from history and around the globe that come to mind: slavery, arms manufacturers, oil companies, the military, etc. It’s this aspect that ties the prison and military industrial complexes together. Invoking theories of trauma helps account for the dynamics of repetition, as well as the violence of these entities’ as a perpetual deferral or attempt to return to some originary event that will never arrive.<sup>66</sup>

The prison both contains trauma and produces it, and if it is a machine it requires a very specific theoretical lens to unpack its moving parts. Building on work by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Manuel De Landa, in *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* offers the “irreducible social complexity” of assemblage theory as a new approach to ontology that would account for the reality of social entities such as the prison, independent of human

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<sup>65</sup> For more on how performance functions to replicate history, see Roach, Joseph, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

<sup>66</sup> See Caruth, Cathy ed. *Trauma: explorations in memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; and Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

consciousness.<sup>67</sup> He is working against what he sees as the unproductive idealism of a discourse that is traditionally binary: on one side, the individualistic philosophy represented most prominently today by neoliberalism, that says only the subject exists and that anything larger—e.g. race, gender, class, society—is a fiction; and on the other, the more collectivizing philosophy of Marxists and the like, that frequently views the subject as the fictional product of the aforementioned very real and powerful larger things.<sup>68</sup> De Landa refuses the terms of this debate, and argues that it's more accurate to define social entities—a category which for him includes the person, community, city, state, etc.—as “wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts.”<sup>69</sup> Ontological existence is therefore defined as a unified collection of many micro-actions and inter-actions, of affecting and being affected, on one plane moving between “material” and “expressive,” which characterize the roles played by the constitutive elements, and on the other between “territorializing” and “deterritorializing,” defined as the desire these elements have to either stabilize or destabilize the unity of the whole.<sup>70</sup>

Following this schema, the institution of the prison can be defined as an assemblage composed of many different elements. Prisoners, guards, and staff make up the territorializing personnel involved, but we might also consider prison visitors,

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<sup>67</sup> De Landa, Manuel, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London: Continuum, 2006, 1, 6. See also Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

<sup>68</sup> De Landa, 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

reformers, and abolitionists as involved in a deterritorializing capacity, to varying degrees. Each of these people has a material value, which they perform with their physical bodies, but they also have an expressive value, defined as symbolic and non-tangible, e.g. linguistic and non-linguistic performances. Their mutual interactions constitute the unified identity of the prison. There are therefore assemblages within assemblages, which resemble not so much a Russian nesting doll, but a complicated network of feedback loops. Following Jane Bennett's provocative juxtaposition of assemblage theory and new materialism in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, we should not only attend to the human in the assemblage of prison, but also to the non-human and conceptual elements, since these things also possess a conative affectivity.<sup>71</sup> On the material end, there are the bricks and walls of the structure, the metal bars, and the electricity powering the prison; on the expressive, the history of the prison, the narratives of penalty surrounding it, and the prison ghosts; on the territorializing end, the architectural blueprints, the rules governing behavior, and tax dollars funneled into the prison's maintenance; and on the deterritorializing, the environmental elements eroding the prison walls, the growing public resentment of mass incarceration, and my research.

Yet, recent critical theory's interest in assemblages frequently looks like bad politics, and omits any attention to inequality, to the conflicts within communities, and to the negative results of those conflicts to which certain parts of an assemblage are more susceptible than others. As Steven Shaviro writes in his blog review of De

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<sup>71</sup> Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 2-4.

Landa's book, if the theorist is not careful, they might exclude "any consideration of such things as power, domination [...] or the production, appropriation, and distribution of a social surplus."<sup>72</sup> As a rejoinder to this tendency, Shaviro offers Georges Bataille's theory of the excess that is non-recuperable into the economy and must therefore be spent ritually, erotically, and/or violently.<sup>73</sup> Assemblage theory can clumsily gather up things like this excess and then fail to critically attend to how power is distributed unevenly in society—which then renders the relatively powerless vulnerable to exploitation and violence. This uncritical gathering precludes any sort of practicable political action, as assemblage theorists are then unable to hold accountable those more powerful elements for benefiting from structures built on inequality. Bennett falls short in this respect, particularly when she writes about events like the New York City blackout.<sup>74</sup> She resists "placing blame," and instead opts for equivocation. This move ironically muddles a key aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, which Foucault saw as a project against "fascism": "And not only historical fascism [...] which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and

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<sup>72</sup> Shaviro, Steven, "De Landa, A New Philosophy of Society," *The Pinocchio Theory*, Accessed May 21, 2015, <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=541>>.

<sup>73</sup> See Bataille, Georges, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, New York: Zone Books, 1988.

<sup>74</sup> Bennett, 24-28.

exploits us.”<sup>75</sup> Conceptualizing the prison as a trauma machine reconciles its existence as assemblage with its violent power to distribute unequal concentrations of pain.

### ***Chapter breakdown***

The chapters that follow employ cagecraft, carceral subjectivity, and trauma machines in various ways. Each chapter focuses on a different case study organized under the very general rubric of prison performance. These case studies might at first appear as an entirely random assemblage of elements, only very loosely connected by my overarching critical framework. However, by selecting these disparate cultural objects, I approach the topic at hand from multiple angles, seeking to explore the prison performance’s practice of freedom from a variety of directions. The structure of this study might be compared to a spoked wheel, or, indeed, the Panopticon. Each object under analysis branches off from the central questions following its own path, thus providing the reader with a view of prison performance that can account for a diversity of experiences and subjectivities.

The first chapter draws upon five years’ work as a teaching artist in the Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in Upstate New York, where I co-facilitate a company of incarcerated poets and performers, the Phoenix Players Theatre Group (PPTG). PPTG was founded by incarcerated men with the aim of creating a space where they could be witnessed and where they could initiate a process of personal, cultural, and socio-political transformation. Through cagecraft, PPTG enacts utopian, world-making gestures from behind bars. This process involves fundamental

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<sup>75</sup> From the preface to Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, New York City: Penguin, 2009, xiii.

techniques of writing and performance, as well as psychophysical theatre exercises drawn from the teachings of Viola Spolin, the field of dramatherapy, games from Theatre of the Oppressed, and the rituals of rasaboxes. These techniques assist PPTG to engage trauma from the “bottom” up, empowering the incarcerated members of the theatre group to take charge of their own individual healing and mutual care. This chapter employs research from trauma theory—in particular the clinical practices of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk—to examine material written by the Phoenix Players themselves, in order to understand how collaborating to make prison theatre that copes with traumatic experiences constitutes a caged craft of self-narrating, self-teaching, self-caring, self-healing, and self-humanization.

The second chapter views Auburn Prison from a historical perspective, because it stands as the oldest continually functional maximum-security penitentiary in the United States. From the time of its initial construction in 1817, Auburn has acted as a laboratory of punishment and rehabilitation, a performance which has resulted in an intensification of white supremacy. These punishment practices originally served as a pornographic spectacle, staged for the benefit of outsiders. This chapter therefore examines the stories and images that structure the prison’s appearance to the outside world. I examine narratives and images surrounding and comprising Auburn Prison from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, focusing on three case studies: a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century dramatic performance of John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora* used for rehabilitation; photographs of a 1908 performance to entertain incarcerated people of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show; and mediatized representations of the early implementation of electrical execution, including the Thomas Edison film company’s

*Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901). These images reverberate across time and space, contributing to both constructing and disallowing the prison's reality as a trauma machine.

Chapter Three examines the dramaturgy of contemporary American playwright Naomi Wallace, particularly her prison play *And I and Silence* (2011). This poetic play tells the story of two women—one white, the other black—who first meet while serving nine-year sentences in a prison “somewhere” in the USA in the 1950s. Even after being freed from incarceration, the two protagonists remain caught in social prisons of racism and misogyny, their labor exploited and their bodies brutalized. Wallace's plays dramatizes how ideological structures—external systems that are often thought of as abstractions—penetrate and suffuse our lived realities, playing out on the viscera of the human body. Everything that happens “out there,” also happens within the body. In writing a play about prison, Wallace interrogates theatre's power to penetrate the barriers of the prison. Wallace's cagecraft foregrounds the notion that breaking the boundary of the body can break the boundary created by the cage of history, which resonates on a socio-political level. The prison in her drama poses questions about ethics that have political consequences. Wallace largely refrains from simplistic character judgments, choosing instead to trouble the perpetrator/victim binary, thus emphasizing people's capacity for change. Wallace's work asserts that self-transgression and transformation are inevitable. This transformation is precipitated by transgression, penetration, and, indeed, wounding.

The fourth chapter examines how prison artists performatively manipulate space-time in order to claim political power. In *The House That Herman Built*,

conceptual artist Jackie Sumell collaborated with Herman Wallace—a Black Panther and one of the “Angola 3”—to design the ideal home he would like to occupy were he not incarcerated. Wallace spent over 41 years in solitary confinement, locked in a six-by-eight-foot cell in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, a former plantation. This chapter first articulates how the American prison performs, like a haunted house, the space-time of trauma, and then pivots to theorize how the time of producing art is performed as a *dreaming*. The prison possesses its subjects, foreclosing on their futurity in a repeated performance of the past. This chapter concludes that the temporality of dreaming repeats, re-members, the subject’s encasement in the space-time of trauma—itself a repetition—but with a difference. This difference is that art, as dreaming, crafts for the imprisoned subject a new futurity. If the prison forecloses on the subject’s future, then this dreaming performs a rupture in that foreclosure. By materializing a temporal rupture in the repetition of the performance of the law, the dream-time of making art functions as activism.

Dreaming plays a critical role throughout this study as a way to conceive of the rupture afforded by art making with the space-time of the prison. Recalling Piper’s epigraph above, dreaming is similarly a limited transcendence or escape. Often dreams repeat the events of the past in order to help process them. Yet this repetition is wholly different, subject to its own rules and logic. Indeed, dreaming does not offer a total freedom, but a restructuring of how we conceive of ourselves and the world. Contrary to what one might think at first, dreaming is not an entirely individual, personal phenomenon. I’m not after Freud’s naval-gazing, but a different notion of the dream as collectively useful. This work draws in part on Robin D.G. Kelley’s research on black

surrealism. As he says in *Freedom Dreams*, “The idea of a revolution of the mind has always been central to surrealism as well as to black conceptions of liberation. By revolution of the mind, I mean not merely a refusal of victim status. I am talking about an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change.”<sup>76</sup>

This study similarly “considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces, not replacements for organized protest, for marches and sit-ins, for strikes and slowdowns, for matches and spray paint.”<sup>77</sup> Dreams perform in the world by envisioning new horizons of possibility, setting the stage for other political action. In the coda, I conclude that prison performance asserts its own kind of force, one with broad resonance on a historical and theoretical scale. I discuss Jesse Krimes’s *Apokaluptein: 16389067*, a monumental mural made while he was incarcerated in federal medium security prisons and completed after his eventual release. It is composed of 39 white prison bed sheets, torn in half, then printed with photographs from the *New York Times*, and extended, embellished, and blended using colored pencils. Krimes’s mural mixes performance and collage and uses the penitentiary itself as an aesthetic technology, a kind of cagecraft that explodes time for the viewer by foregrounding the labor of its own production. This mural perfectly underscores my overarching conclusion: that art is often an expression of survival, and its making can perform a powerful mode of resistance to the cages that contain us.

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<sup>76</sup> Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003, 191.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CAGECRAFT OF SELF-HUMANIZATION: COLLABORATING TO ENGAGE TRAUMA IN THE PHOENIX PLAYERS THEATRE GROUP<sup>78</sup>

*To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. [...] The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.*

*Cathy Caruth<sup>79</sup>*

*While our legislators and courts debate how many souls can be stuffed into a single prison cell, we have embarked on a quest to become better human beings and productive citizens.*

*Michael Rhynes, founder of The Phoenix Players Theatre Group<sup>80</sup>*

The Phoenix Players Theatre Group (PPTG) is a performance collective located in a maximum-security prison, founded by incarcerated men with the aim of creating a space where they can be witnessed and where they can initiate a process of personal, cultural, and socio-political transformation. In the words of the group's founders, "It is a *transformative theatre community*, which utilizes theatre to reconnect incarcerated people to their *full humanity*."<sup>81</sup> PPTG is relatively small and tight-knit and meets for a two-hour workshop each Friday evening in the schoolhouse inside the walls of the Auburn Correctional Facility in Upstate New York. The group members devise theatre pieces, rehearse scenes and monologues, discuss current events, and share personal

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<sup>78</sup> Much of this chapter was previously published in Fesette, Nicholas and Bruce Levitt. "Pedagogies of Self-Humanization: Collaborating to Engage Trauma in the Phoenix Players Theatre Group." *Teaching Artist Journal*, Vol 15, 2017, 100-113.

<sup>79</sup> Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 5-6.

<sup>80</sup> Rhynes, Michael. "Flames." *Auburn Phoenix Players*.

2009. <<http://phoenixplayersatauburn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PPTG-first-proposal.pdf>> Accessed June 26, 2017

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

stories. PPTG is one of few prison theatre groups that is run by its incarcerated members and not by an outside or institutional entity. Augmenting this model are several non-incarcerated volunteers who work with the group to help its members achieve their artistic goals. From 2013-2018 I was one such volunteer, and I assisted in PPTG's transformative journey, helping the incarcerated men in the group create the sort of theatre that interests them. I participated with and sometimes guided the incarcerated men in a process of training, workshopping, rehearsing, and performing original material written and developed based on their own lives, a key part of which is acting as collaborator and occasional audience to creative expression, in order that I could then share my experiences when I re-entered the non-incarcerated world.

Ultimately, the incarcerated men devise a 90-minute performance, mostly composed of solo pieces sutured together into a kind of theatrical collage. These are typically presented every 18 months to two years. Since its founding in 2009, PPTG has staged four performances, each for an invited audience of 80 "civilians," comprising educators, activists, scholars, artists, students, and community members who must pass through the Department of Corrections' security protocols—a procedure that takes weeks. PPTG's most recent performance, *This Incarcerated Life*, was first staged in May 2016. This devised work also marked the group's first performance for other incarcerated people: It was staged for those in Auburn pursuing their Associate's Degree through the Cornell Prison Education Program, of which most PPTG members are students. At the time of this writing, PPTG was in process of rehearsing their fifth production to be performed May 2018.

PPTG's theatre-training process, which catalyzes transformation, serves in this chapter as a contemporary case study of my theory of "cagecraft," which is more than just scholarly wordplay. Cagecraft, I argue, creates space for incarcerated artists to be witnessed as full human beings, an experience that has transformative effects individually and socially. Through cagecraft, PPTG enacts utopian, world-making gestures from behind bars. This process involves fundamental techniques of writing and performance, as well as psychophysical theatre exercises drawn from the teachings of Viola Spolin, the field of dramatherapy, games from Theatre of the Oppressed, and the rituals of rasaboxes. These techniques assist PPTG to engage trauma from the "bottom" up, empowering the incarcerated members of the theatre group to take charge of their own individual healing and mutual care. Unlike some educational and therapeutic programs, including those that use drama and performance to engage participants' imaginative and collaborative potentials, PPTG de-privileges the authority of so-called "experts"—for instance, the teaching artist volunteers, several of whom work at Cornell University—in lieu of a more democratic model of collective creation and decision-making. The incarcerated members of the group assert artistic agency through cagecraft in order to initiate a process of "self-therapy," setting their own goals and assessing their own progress on their own terms. The collaboration that happens in the room each Friday evening is dynamic because of the group's acknowledgement that the incarcerated men of PPTG are the experts on their environment and on their personal life journeys. The volunteers who venture into the prison to work with the group function to provide practical information about making theatre in addition to facilitating in the fulfillment of PPTG's goals. It's no wonder

then that Michael Rhynes, one of the founders of the Phoenix Players, rejected the notion of doing scripted or canonical plays, opting instead to devise work in collaboration with the other men in the group. Rather than submitting to some other playwright's scripted story of life, Rhynes pursues a method of dramatic storytelling that empowers the incarcerated to author their own view of the world and of themselves. As Rhynes explains, "One reason I created PPTG is because we're not allowed to have any input into our own transformation. I for one do not prescribe [sic] to what I call the 'Heart of Darkness' approach . . . I don't believe people from the outside of any situation should come in to solve problems without conferring with the people who are effected [sic] . . . PPTG is rooted in the authenticity of our lives."<sup>82</sup> I propose the theory of cagecraft as a model for just such a self-sustaining method of storytelling.

PPTG emphasizes the body in its endeavors, using physical acting exercises, improvisatory character-based games, and language and text explorations in order to stretch the body beyond its comfort zones and reroute habitual modes of behavior. This chapter employs research from trauma theory—in particular the clinical practices of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk—to examine material written by the Phoenix Players themselves, in order to understand how collaborating to make prison theatre that copes with traumatic experiences constitutes a cagecraft of self-narrating, self-teaching, self-caring, self-healing, and self-humanization.

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<sup>82</sup> Rhynes, Michael, *Letter in response to a proposed film dealing with at risk youth*. 2016. Personal correspondence.

### ***Deconstructing hierarchy***

In certain ways PPTG sessions resemble any intermediate to advanced-level solo performance workshop: Participants develop pieces with feedback from their peers. What makes this group unique is that PPTG has embraced deconstructing the hierarchy of creation, so that, while there are differing experience levels and positions of seniority in the room, the process remains largely collaborative in a collective model. This works against certain notions of the category of “applied theatre,” and offers PPTG members the opportunity to pursue goals of transformation and witnessing. Invoking Augusto Boal, Jan Cohen-Cruz problematizes how the “application” of the arts carries with it no small amount of “baggage,” and marks a need to perhaps jettison certain “strictures” that come with it.<sup>83</sup> Utilitarian understandings of prison theatre are fraught with problems, especially when they uncritically replicate the relation of power between incarcerated person and prison authority. Applied theatre artists are sometimes cast as experts with all the knowledge, and the incarcerated as subject to that expertise—with theatre techniques being “applied” to the bodies of the incarcerated. While PPTG employs some practices that are used in the field of applied theatre—for instance, devising, improvisation, solo performance, and the story circle—the group also resists theories and concepts of applied theatre that risk problematic power dynamics—such as the misguided notion that non-incarcerated artists are experts who can use their knowledge to rehabilitate the incarcerated. PPTG emphasizes process, craft, and artistic rigor in a collaborative

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<sup>83</sup> Cohen-Cruz, J. *Engaging performance: theatre as call and response*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 5-6.

model that serves to raise the bar for everyone—including the volunteers.<sup>84</sup> As the collective works on performance material, creativity circulates around the room in a feedback loop generated by the multiple participants, rather than by any one individual educator-artist. One imaginative leap inspires another, creating a kind of rapidly accelerating laboratory of artistic development. Participants offer assistance in helping one another reach their own best forms of cultural expression in structured commentary after the presentation of workshop material and in more informal discussions outside the presentation format.

Collective creation holds an important position in the history of theatre. According to Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva, the actual words “collective creation” (коллективное творчество) appear in print as early as 1907 in the writing of radical Russian theatre practitioner-theorist-activist Vsevolod Meyerhold as he attempted to articulate a “new” institutional model for theatre-making that would better reflect the Bolshevik revolutionary spirit.<sup>85</sup> Not only was theatre expected to engage in social issues directly, but also theatrical practice was increasingly expected to be exemplary of the kinds of social change theatre-makers espoused in their final productions. French dramatist Romain Rolland’s 1903 essay *Le Théâtre du peuple* (*The People’s*

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<sup>84</sup> Many of the group members are accomplished writers and scholars. In 2012, Rhynes was nominated for a Pushcart prize by aaduna, a non-profit company that seeks to identify and publish new and emerging writers and artists, especially creative people of color. For more information, see [aaduna.org](http://aaduna.org)

<sup>85</sup> Syssoyeva, Kathryn Mederos, “Groups, Communes, and Collectives, 1900-1945,” *A History of Collective Creation*, eds. Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 15. See also Meyerhold, Vsevolod, “First Attempts at a Stylized Theatre,” *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial, New York: Routledge, 2007, 265-273.

*Theatre*) also made an influential argument for a collectively devised theatre. He believed “that the stage and auditorium should be open to the masses, should be able to contain a people and the actions of a people.”<sup>86</sup> Writing against what was for him, in *fin de siècle* France, the traditional or received ideal of the theatre as cultural apparatus *par excellence* of refinement and elitism closed off from the public, Rolland wanted to re-imagine it as open to the “masses” and functioning for their social and political interests. He exhorts authors and actors to discover the people and find a “new market for their wares,” calling for “a theatre of men, not merely a theatre of writers.”<sup>87</sup> I read Rolland as calling for the undoing of the traditional specialized jobs and functional categories in the theatre, replacing them with generalized laborers and theatre-makers: all the once-discrete roles exploded into a mixture of audience, performers, and authors. Rolland’s theatrical practice also reflected his commitment to these ideals of collective creation and his desire to experiment with alternative ways of authoring and producing performances: when he published the essay he also staged the “storming of the Bastille as a mass spectacle titled *Le Quatorze Juillet* [*The Fourteenth of July*].”<sup>88</sup> For Rolland no less than many other politically minded theatre-makers, collective creation offers a radical utopian potential to changing the insufficient and oppressive status quo.

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<sup>86</sup> Rolland, Romain, *The People’s Theatre*, trans. Barrett H. Clark, New York: Henry Holt, 1918; quoted in Syssoyeva (2013), 17-18. See also Bradby, David and John McCormick, *People’s Theatre*, London, England: Croom Helm, 1978, 32-33.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

More recently, the theories of Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal have been extremely influential in the practice of collectively-created, socially-engaged theatre.<sup>89</sup> Adapting Paulo Freire's concepts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Boal theorized that theatre should create a situation that undoes the boundary between performer and audience, thereby empowering the latter to make change in the world.<sup>90</sup> Like Freire's process of conscientization, Boal sought to turn participants into "spect-actors," who would not only serve as critical witnesses to situations of oppression and injustice, but would also take control in these situations actively. For example, in one of his innovative approaches, titled Forum Theatre, the performers first stage a scene of oppression, such as a boss abusing a laborer. After the scene plays out, the audience is then tasked with re-directing the scene so that the laborer might achieve a better outcome. Audience members can make suggestions to the performers, or step into the scene themselves as actors. The laborer might quit, but then he would have no money. He might argue with the boss, but then he might be beaten. This theatre format creates a dialogue with the audience that opens up the real-life situation of oppression for revision. It models a dialectical praxis that the spect-actors can carry on in their lives outside the theatre. Later, Boal revised his techniques so that they not only applied to economic oppression of laborers, but also to more psychological issues, called *The*

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<sup>89</sup> Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. McBride, C.A. New York: Theatre Communications Group. 1993.

<sup>90</sup> See Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Ramos, M.B. New York: Continuum. 1970.

*Rainbow of Desire*.<sup>91</sup> Boal adapted his Marxist theatre training to the level of therapy, and taught people how to take control of what he called the “cop in the head.”

Drawing on Boal, PPTG’s cagecraft contributes to members’ ability to manage their everyday lives in the prison. They learn how emotions manifest themselves in others, as well as themselves. They not only become aware of how to manage their emotional life, but also how to avoid situations that might be detrimental: There’s no need to engage with others whose emotions might be out of control.

### ***Witnessing***

Volunteers gain much personally and professionally from the experience, broadening each of our perspectives. We learn not just about the criminal justice system, but also what it means to be human in a larger sense. Or, as one member of PPTG describes the benefits of the group for himself, what it means to be “human again”—how one can reclaim one’s agency and power as a whole person. The men of PPTG are not only collaborators but are, in fact, the real researchers, digging into their own lives, excavating memories, assessing their traumas, and coming to “own” the reasons for their incarceration. The men also uncover and assert the notion that they are more than their crime, that they are family men: fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, etc. The members of PPTG embody the fact that incarcerated people are intelligent and educable, citizens of a larger culture and not bound in society’s confining notions of them—or to put it in Rhynes’ words, “we are *in* Auburn but not *of* Auburn.”<sup>92</sup> By

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<sup>91</sup> Boal, Augusto. *Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson, New York: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>92</sup> Phoenix Players Theatre Group. “Mission.” Retrieved from <http://phoenixplayersatauburn.com/mission/>

translating the personal into performance pieces to be witnessed, the men not only come closer to completing the cycle of their transformations but also offer something to the broader culture. They embody the centrality of witnessing to human subjectivity, as Kelly Oliver has theorized.<sup>93</sup> They demonstrate that the theatre offers profound opportunities to be witnessed by the other, and that this situation creates the condition for humanity itself. Their theatrical works are acts of adventurous love, as they dare to communicate their lives to a world that would rather forget them. By coming to such an intimate understanding of the root causes of the decisions that led to their imprisonment, by sharing those discoveries with the public, by putting themselves and their lives on display, and by developing theatre techniques that assist them in becoming exemplary performers, they engage their audiences in becoming witnesses. They not only “entertain and educate” through theatre but help to translate their world into something that audiences can reflect on and experience more directly.

This element of bearing witness is central to the nature of theatre in general and is an especially common goal in prison theatre groups and other performance-based practices that seek to engage with the law. For example, Catherine Cole’s examination of how performance functioned for South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission uncovers how witnessing, storytelling, testimony, televisual mediation, and public display work in a semi-judicial context.<sup>94</sup> Cole demonstrates how the juridical narrative of the “trial” cannot contain certain embodied

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<sup>93</sup> Oliver, Kelly. *Witnessing: beyond recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2001.

<sup>94</sup> Cole, Catherine M., *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission: Stages of Transition*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

performances—dance, song, gesture, etc.—and that these affective elements of subjective escape deserve scholarly attention because they participate in the circulation of cultural memory as much as traditional legal testimony. By eschewing evaluating the Commission’s efficacy in the expected way, instead opting for a performance analysis, Cole is able to parse out the cultural significance of witnessing and not simply its legal efficacy.

It should be noted that prison walls are designed not only to keep people inside, but also to keep people out. Inviting the non-incarcerated to venture beyond those walls to act as a witness is thus a main goal of PPTG. We might understand this goal to be in line with Cole’s: A criminological approach to working in incarceration cannot help but miss those affective and embodied phenomena that slip out through the cracks in the prison walls. These walls structure and contain an historical narrative of penalty, but a performance-based approach suggests that there are other narratives that squeeze, dodge, skirt, and overwhelm containment.

### ***From rewriting space to rewriting pain***

Rhynes writes, “If one digs deep, one will discover the underlying reason for most youth crime is some sort of pain. In order for PPTG members to transcend past mistakes, they have to confront their pain.”<sup>95</sup> Rhynes echoes Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, founder and medical director of the Trauma Center in Brookline Massachusetts and professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine.<sup>96</sup> In *The Body Keeps*

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<sup>95</sup> Rhynes, Michael. *Introduction to PPTG for New Members*. Personal correspondence. 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Van Der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books. 2014.

*the Score*, Van Der Kolk credits the expanding fields of neuroscience, developmental psychopathology, and interpersonal neurobiology with creating expansive new knowledge about the effects of trauma, abuse, and neglect on the human brain. Trauma “produces actual physiological changes, including a recalibration of the brain’s alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and in alterations in the system that filters relevant information from the irrelevant.”<sup>97</sup> Further, Van Der Kolk reports that “traumatized people [...] keep repeating the same problems and have such trouble learning from experience [...] that their behaviors are not the result of moral failings or signs of lack of will power or bad character—they are caused by actual changes in the brain.”<sup>98</sup> In contrast to the penal “common sense” of today, which affirms a simplistic cause-and-effect narrative that attributes crime to personal, moral failing, Rhynes’ assertion and Van Der Kolk’s findings suggest that there are more complex mechanisms at work in human decision-making within the anatomy of the brain itself, resulting from social and environmental factors that are numerous and, in some cases, nebulous. As Van Der Kolk says, “In today’s world your ZIP code, even more than your genetic code, determines whether you will lead a safe and healthy life.”<sup>99</sup>

Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues in *The Golden Gulag* that mass incarceration is a spatio-geographical solution to economic, social, and political problems.<sup>100</sup> Prison

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 348.

<sup>100</sup> Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulags*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

theatre and other prison art making practices might then be thought of as aesthetic engagements that seek to problematize that solution. How does space function for prison theatre artists? How do artists committed to social change use and re-use space? As Jill Dolan describes in *Utopia in Performance*, theatre often uses certain aesthetic strategies to performatively interpolate between the audience and stage a hopeful, momentary “no-place” in which social change and a better future can be imagined.<sup>101</sup> Her examples include devised and solo performances, as well as scripted and choreographed theatre pieces. Dolan is careful to explain that this utopic interpolation exists as an ongoing *doing* that resists closure, and not a moment of fixed capture: “Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the ‘what if,’ rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the ‘what should be,’ allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, a process.”<sup>102</sup> In order to is key to engage with and rewrite the social, political, and personal spheres, it is important to establish a space of resistance to enclosure and capture.

The creation and maintenance of a special space removed from the everyday milieu is a recurrent theme in theatre for social change, particularly in an incarcerated setting. These spaces are used for the development of new material, rehearsal, and oftentimes performance, but they also often serve a social, even convivial function. For example, mid-to-late century off-off-Broadway spaces like the Performance

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<sup>101</sup> Dolan, Jill, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

Garage, Caffè Cino, the WOW Café, and others were sites for a myriad of avant-garde, experimental, and outsider artists seeking to change material and/or cultural reality through alternative performance practices. These sites often blended the professional and creative with the personal and social, as artists collaborated to craft radical theatre works at the same time that they crafted radical communities where they might exercise marginalized identities without fear of bourgeois surveillance and police interference. These spaces served aesthetic purposes both in theatrical terms and in the everyday performances of self and community. When we consider incarcerated theatre makers, we see a very similar cordoning off of a special space, though it might be said that this practice has a particularly dramatic meaning in the prison setting.

In his writing on prison theatre in the UK, Baz Kershaw suggests that finding and practicing theatre in such a space within the prison setting is a radical resistant and perhaps even transgressive act that can lead to the creation of willful and powerful subjects.<sup>103</sup> Intervening on the post-modern, constructivist view of the individual subject, Kershaw wants to reconcile human free will and the subject's historical contingency. Kershaw theorizes "freedom of oppression," in which performance "can significantly contribute to the collective and individual creation of autonomous subjects, especially through an engagement with systems of formalized power in an effort to create radical freedom."<sup>104</sup> For Kershaw, the oppressed subject who creates

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<sup>103</sup> Kershaw, Baz. "Pathologies of Hope in Drama and Theatre." *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Balfour, Michael. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2004, 101-143. Digital copy.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

theatre reckons with the overwhelming power of the institution and thereby uncovers the potential for radical political action. Indeed, the space for creativity and freedom finds itself because it is encased within a space of exclusion and confinement; freedom and oppression are co-constitutive in Kershaw's model. Rather than view this reductively or pessimistically as the co-optation of the freedom of theatre practice, Kershaw suggests the opposite: it is oppression which is co-opted by the transgression and transcendence of theatre making.

However, Van Der Kolk's primary question remains: "How can people gain control over the residues of past trauma and return to being masters of their own ship?"<sup>105</sup> The incarcerated, like the men of PPTG, suffer trauma repeatedly: first, in childhood or adolescent crises, then in the offense that led to their incarceration, and finally within the prison system itself, where the ongoing trauma continues, isolating them from the outside world, and their friends and family. As feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman has argued, captivity models uniquely brutal realities regarding trauma, in that it is a repeated performance of violence and terror.<sup>106</sup> Further, trauma doesn't only manifest in interpersonal relationships, but is experienced on a social, political, and cultural level. The structural racism of mass incarceration itself is traumatic on a broad scale, devastating entire communities through abduction and rendition. The prison functions to attack human tragedy with traumatic encounter, which never fails to result in further tragedy. In an institution in which the human body is forcefully

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<sup>105</sup> Van der Kolk, 4.

<sup>106</sup> Herman, Judith. *Trauma and recovery* (2015 edition). New York: BasicBooks. 2015.

monitored and controlled by both the corrections staff and the peculiar sociality of the general prisoner population, directed precisely and authoritatively through verbal and administrative directives, architectural design, and the surveilling gaze and hypervisibility of confinement, and in no uncertain terms coerced to behave in certain ways and adhere to certain performances, then the redemptive effect of creating a space for creativity and humanity becomes all the more intense. Van Der Kolk proposes: “the imprints from the past can be transformed by having physical experiences that directly contradict the helplessness, rage and collapse that are part of trauma.”<sup>107</sup> Given this knowledge of how trauma rearranges the brain, Van Der Kolk confirms what Rhynes intuited when he first formed PPTG: that pain begets pain, and this cycle of pain will continue until it’s dealt with honestly and compassionately in a way that empowers the individual body in pain.

It is no wonder then that Rhynes rejects the term “rehabilitation” and favors the concept of “transformation” as the journey that the incarcerated must travel. Rehabilitation implies that someone else can “fix” or “restore” an individual to be a productively functioning member of society. Rhynes intuits that this kind of restoration project that permeates the notion of the intent of incarceration is, at best, incomplete, and in all probability, false. The notion of “rehabilitation” assumes that the person labeled as “criminal” just needs to “give up” criminal or anti-social behavior in order to be returned to society. In fact, Van Der Kolk’s assertion that trauma actually alters the brain means that traditional norms of “rehabilitation” are

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<sup>107</sup> Van der Kolk, 4.

largely ineffective. Traumatic experiences literally rewrite the neurological pathways in the brain, resulting in changes in human behavior. In order to heal trauma, these pathways must be engaged again in a kind of transformative rewriting process. Van Der Kolk offers several examples of embodied techniques that enact such change, and through its ritualized rhythms and communal action, theatre is one of the most powerful.<sup>108</sup>

***Community, transformation, power, self-discovery***

One such rhythmic ritual PPTG enacts is the motto, a kind of mantra that the group recites at the open and close of each meeting:

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

Originally written by one of the group's founding members, Shane, the motto captures the group's transformative aesthetics of personal and social change, and resonates with other models of engaged theatre, such as El Teatro Campesino and the Black Revolutionary Theatre, as examined by Harry Elam.<sup>109</sup> Reading the motto deeply provides an occasion to understand the ethos of PPTG. There are four key elements imbedded in the motto: community, transformation, power, and self-discovery.

*Community* for the group functions to mark its limits and is defined on a model of attendance and participation. The recitation of the PPTG motto itself can be understood as crucial to the performance of this community—in the sense that it's a

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 332-348.

<sup>109</sup> Elam, Harry. *Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 1997.

repeated activity—as are the group’s other recursive practices, including attending the Friday evening workshops themselves. The collective intonation of the motto literally resonates the community into existence. Once members have been invited to participate, they are expected to attend the workshop sessions every Friday night. Members can be excused from attending some workshops if they have other obligations—such as trailer visits, urgent phone calls, or make-up classes for the Cornell Prison Education Program. The importance of attendance is a recurring topic of discussion in the group, and if a member misses repeatedly or without good reason, the group may bring it up for discussion. Perhaps because of the prison setting, the bounds (and therefore bonds) of the community are strictly policed by the PPTG members. The community is formed in its reiterated enactment on Friday evenings. Though members can and do interact outside of the workshop, it’s in that space that the community is most directly embodied. PPTG has had to negotiate a lack of permanence as an institutional fact of imprisonment. Over the course of its existence, members have left the group for several reasons: the most common being that they have become “medium eligible” and have been transferred to a medium security facility. In another case, a member was transferred to another facility as a result of disciplinary infractions. One or two potential members have attended for several weeks, and then have chosen to stop attending because they were unprepared to participate in PPTG’s process. One member has been released and has re-entered the outside world. And finally, sometimes inmates are “lifted” without warning and moved to other facilities. In the case of Michael Rhynes, his transfer in 2015 was occasioned by a much-publicized escape from another New York State prison. He was

one of a group of long-term Auburn residents transferred to other facilities—seemingly to disrupt their familiarity with the prison and the staff at Auburn. The members of PPTG who attend the Friday workshops do so in an atmosphere of systemic unpredictability, and they make a conscious choice to be present in the room each week, with the awareness that this group exists only because they do so. Performing a sense of community within the prison’s instability is therefore key to the group’s functioning.

PPTG defines *transformation* against the rehabilitative mission of the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. Indeed, one of the members of the group, David, bristles when the term “program” is applied to PPTG, which would identify it as an institutional measure. Programs intend to rehabilitate the incarcerated offender and prepare them for life after prison. As explored above, the issue with the model of rehabilitation is that many prisoners were never “habilitated” to begin with, so what is there to return to? Transformative rituals permeate PPTG’s practice. In addition to the ritualized recitation of the motto, group members frequently reflect on the potential personal applicability of theatre exercises like bioenergetics, characterology, rasaboxes, and Theatre of the Oppressed. The theories of Boal and Paolo Freire, particularly their commitment to awakening the oppressed to change their surroundings, as opposed to appealing to the oppressor, are quite useful in this regard. Paulo Freire describes the path to social change as moving from image to word to action. Without seeing what needs to be changed and how it should change, one cannot articulate in language what needs to be then done collectively or individually to make that change reality. PPTG’s approaches to performing are

therefore not simply aesthetic tools, but social and political ones as well.<sup>110</sup> In the incarcerated setting, as in the outside world, understanding when the social “script” is dangerous and knowing how to change it is an invaluable skill. Many of the members of PPTG were convicted of violent crimes and have accepted responsibility for them. Through the rituals of performance, they attempt to transform the damage they’ve caused in society. Sara Warner suggests that performance practices can recuperate the fabric of the “social drama,” ruptured through crime.<sup>111</sup> In this way, prison theatre might be seen as “restorytive,” rewriting the social script through performative reparation. For PPTG, transformation is a communal practice: a recurrent process one undertakes with others. PPTG’s transformation comes from within and is undertaken daily and by all members who wish to participate. This key concept of transformation works in two directions: It originates within the participants to repair and restore the aspects of their humanity fractured in incarceration, and at the same time it works from without, helping to alter public perception of the men who are reductively labeled “criminal.” As Rhynes writes:

We seek atonement for catering to our base nature, because we acknowledge that the choice to do right or wrong has always been within our power. We wish to atone for those human beings for whom we’ve caused so much pain and suffering. We wish to atone to society for not living up to our organic contract by loving and caring for our neighbors. We wish to atone to our families for failing to reach our potential and their dreams for us.

We who are PPTG make a conscious decision to walk into the flames of your pain, suffering suspicions of our motives, disbelief of our goodness,

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<sup>110</sup> See Boal (1993) and Freire (1970).

<sup>111</sup> Warner, Sara. “Restorytive Justice.” *Razor Wire Women*. Eds. Lawston, J. & Lucas, Ashley. Albany: SUNY Press. 2011.

your downright anger, and your grief, in hopes of being recreated in your loving, compassionate, and empathetic images.<sup>112</sup>

PPTG's motto means *power* in the sense of "empowerment." Power is a loaded term in prison, particularly when considering the relationship between volunteers and incarcerated people. The incarcerated often see those coming in to lead programs as conducting a "missionary" project. PPTG makes a concerted effort to approach the power imbalance honestly, and, as much as possible, to make space for the incarcerated members to empower themselves. Following Freire, PPTG facilitators negotiate a dialogical relation with group members, and, conversely, members strive to engage in theatre work as dynamic and powerful collaborators. For instance, while facilitators lead many theatre games and warm-up exercises, many are invented by the incarcerated members themselves. Some of the most powerful moments in the workshops are the result of original approaches to theatre training developed by the incarcerated artists, such as Nate's "funny voices" circle, in which one-by-one participants step into the center, improvise a speech from an odd or sad character with a unique dialect or vocal affectation, and then pass it along to another participant, who in turn develops their own "funny" character. This game brought a tremendous amount of levity, but also stretched the performers beyond their habituated selves through intersubjective play. Participants felt empowered to transform themselves and to invite others to transform along with them. We undid the traditional relation of spectator/actor as the voices passed from body to body. Playful action can unburden

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<sup>112</sup> Rhynes, Michael. "Flames." *Auburn Phoenix Players*. 2009. Retrieved from <http://phoenixplayersatauburn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/PPTG-first-proposal.pdf>

PPTG members for a moment from the situation of their confinement. Indeed, it can be argued that the communal play is liberating, and that this liberation is a major source of power in performance.

*Self-discovery* is another basic aspect of theatre that PPTG employs. It's an element that aligns theatre with therapy, though the group doesn't understand therapy in the conventional sense, but rather in a democratizing engagement. Van Der Kolk suggests that one "avenue" to addressing and healing trauma is "bottom up: by allowing the body to have experiences that deeply and viscerally contradict the helplessness, rage, or collapse that result from trauma."<sup>113</sup> PPTG's emphasis on storytelling dramatizes this "bottom up" approach by encouraging participants to confront their pain and past traumas through embodied performance. By opening up a space for its incarcerated members to use their bodies and emotions in ways not usually permitted in prison, PPTG encourages them to stretch outside the paradoxically uncomfortable comfort zone of punitive incarceration, and to reach their full potential as human beings both in the eyes of non-incarcerated society and of the participants themselves.

### ***Techniques of transformation***

The final two lines of the motto might be seen as aspirational or self-actualizing, and therefore exist sometime and place in the future. Yet, Jenn Stephenson writes that "autobiography is a uniquely powerful political act. Rather than impossibly documenting the backward-looking narrative of one's life, autobiography is

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<sup>113</sup> Van der Kolk, 3.

understood here as an evolving process of self-creation and transformation. Through the invocation of performative power, it is possible to remake one's identity and write a new future or magically even a new past."<sup>114</sup> Though there is a futurity about the motto, there's also a profound reckoning with the past. As Stephenson argues, this looking backward affects the present world, creating a space for agency and change. It's through reflective remembrance that the members of PPTG claim active creative power to shape new selves and build new worlds. Playing with memories like this opens a space of intense openness, freedom, and joy. By making space for these affects—particularly joy—PPTG makes space within the otherwise joylessness of confinement for new experiences, opportunities, and memories. This space has the potential to reckon with trauma by literally rewriting the brain, a process that works not only individually, but also collectively and socially. Scans of the traumatized brain show that the parts associated with fear and alarm light up when the subject is presented with certain triggering sounds or images.<sup>115</sup> The activation of these portions of the brain result in unwanted and often painful physiological reactions. This demonstrates that for the traumatized the world is literally experienced with a "different nervous system"; attempts to maintain control over the chaos often result in additional physical symptoms, such as chronic pain, fatigue, and other autoimmune diseases.<sup>116</sup> Further, research by sociologist Kai Erikson suggests that trauma can be experienced on a communal level, and that this altered sense of self affects social and

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<sup>114</sup> Stephenson, Jenn. *Performing Autobiography: Contemporary Canadian Drama*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2013. 4

<sup>115</sup> Van Der Kolk 42, 68-73.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

cultural groups, not only individuals, serving to bind communities together and characterize their entire spirit.<sup>117</sup> Theatre can provide a safe and supportive “container” in which an individual’s past can be revised, and the traumatic memories that awaken the parts of the brain eliciting terror can lose their potency.<sup>118</sup> The same applies to the traumatized tissues of the community. Rhynes describes his own transformation this way: “My transformation came by way of dealing with the real reason I was in the streets—through the drama of remembering my deeply buried joy and pain. Once my joy and pain was uncovered by PPTG techniques, I began to write about the missing parts of my life. Then I began to perform what had been hidden. Before I started PPTG, I would have sworn on pain of death there were no happy periods in my childhood. Now I know there were.”<sup>119</sup>

Rasaboxes is one of the most important techniques for PPTG, initially brought to the group by Paula Murray Cole, a professor of theatre at Ithaca College. This form was originally developed by Richard Schechner, and he published the theoretical component in “Rasaesthetics” in 2001.<sup>120</sup> In this essay, Schechner looks to the Sanskrit text the *Natyasastra* by Bharata-muni as a uniquely inspired alternative to Western performance styles and aesthetics. He writes, “An aesthetic founded on rasa

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<sup>117</sup> Erikson, Kai, “Notes on Trauma and Community.” In Caruth, C. (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 183-199.

<sup>118</sup> Van Der Kolk, 302.

<sup>119</sup> Rhynes (2015).

<sup>120</sup> Schechner, Richard. “Rasaesthetics.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, 45, 3 (T71), Fall 2001, 27-50. See also Minnick, Michelle and Paula Murray Cole. “The Actor as Athlete of the Emotions: The Rasaboxes Exercise.” *Movement for Actors*. Eds. Nicole Potter, Mary Fleischer, and Barbara Adrian. New York: Allworth Press, 2016, 285-297.

is fundamentally different than one founded on the ‘theatron,’ the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic.”<sup>121</sup> He initially compares the text to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, understanding the latter to be more invested in dramatic plot and the visual aspects of theatre. Audiences come to the theatre in order to develop knowledge through seeing, which is a model of epistemology in the West more generally. Objective observation is the preeminent mode of knowledge generation. Schechner offers *rasa*, translated variously as “flavor,” “feeling,” or “juice,” as a new way to conceive of performance. Such a shift in understanding means a corresponding shift in how audience members—or “partakers”—would attend to performance. The event is better understood as a “banquet,” than as a “day in court.”<sup>122</sup> Schechner is identifying the basis of western theatre with Foucault’s panoptic regime. The western theatre has a disciplinary architecture which regiments bodies, whereas *rasa* is a different organization. It’s not without structure, but that structure has a different orientation to the body. For Schechner, theatre in the West entails an artificial segregation between elements of human experience, and he’s after a more holistic, almost gestalt aesthetic. The form of the “box” structures the process for training. It strategically employs constraint in order to create a situation of free-form experimentation. The end goal is still a kind of “mastery” of emotion. Schechner’s notion of the “brain in the belly” resonates with Van Der Kolk’s notion of “bottom up” treatment for trauma, and

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<sup>121</sup> Schechner, 29.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

therefore makes this psychophysical approach to actor training ideal for working in prisons.<sup>123</sup>

There are eight rasas that PPTG uses to explore various emotional states and their physical and vocal expression. We begin by laying out eight squares of poster paper, upon which all the participants free associate in writing and drawing what this emotion entails. Sringara can be understood as a kind of desire or love, and in fact forms the basis for the performance of all the other rasas. Hasya means laughter and humor. Karuna is sadness and weeping. Raudra is rage. Vira requires heroic vigor. Bhayanaka is fear or shame. Bibhasta means disgust. And finally, adbhuta entails wonder or surprise. After conceptualizing on paper what all these states of emotion mean, one by one the participants step into them by literally stepping onto the box formed by the decorated poster paper. The actor then adopts the physicality and spirit of that emotion. For example, if one were to step into hasya, one might grab the belly and break into laughter. Typically, these experiments begin quite clichéd, but as the exercise develops, performers grow more adventurous and inventive.

Another technique PPTG uses is a theatrical approach to characterology, adapted from Alexander Lowen's work in *Bioenergetics*.<sup>124</sup> A student of psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, Lowen sought to discover how the body develops over time to reflect and represent psychological structures. This development is deeply informed by an individual's pattern of coping and defense mechanisms to deal with (or avoid) painful situations. The theory assumes that bodies are composed of economies

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>124</sup> Lowen, Alexander. *Bioenergetics*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

and concentrations of energy. General characteristics of physicality can be traced to how an individual organizes, holds, and expends their energy. Lowen identifies five very general character types, which PPTG employs in order to explore performing character onstage: schizoid, oral, psychopathic, masochistic, and rigid. Each of these structures has distinct physical characteristics, psychological tendencies, and personal historical factors that combine to differentiate the type. Lowen has a tendency to be prescriptive in his text, but PPTG uses his theory in order to experiment with playing different characters, rather than as a disciplinary tool. While these character types may provide the opportunity to reflect on one's own physical and psychological patterns, they're not terribly useful in a diagnostic sense. The group instead uses them as a form of play. For example, a warm up might begin with all the members walking around the room, filling the space with bodies. Then, someone will shout a character type and everyone will immediately shape themselves to fit. If someone calls out "schizoid," then everyone will close themselves off, slump their shoulders, shuffle, and look at the floor. If someone calls out "psychopath," then the group does almost the exact opposite: performers will make an uncomfortable amount of eye contact, dominate the space, and touch each other in an aggressively chummy way.

### ***Textual pastiche/freedom***

PPTG members frequently cite the freedom they feel in the meeting room as perhaps the most important aspect of their work with the group. It is a space where they can feel human. The sometimes-anarchic workshop dynamic of the group reflects this. Though there is a narrative of process that is consistent and planned, there are many Friday evenings that proceed informally, extemporaneously, or even casually.

There have been nights when the group has tabled theatre and performance work in order to have an open discussion on a topic that's particularly pressing. When developing the pieces, members are free to call out feedback and pose questions to the author of the piece after he's finished presenting it. This chaos exemplifies the social function of the PPTG space, where the men feel free to shake off disciplinary stricture and make theatre. The pieces they make themselves can reflect this anarchy as they play with pastiche of image, word, and music.

PPTG scripts move fluidly from personal remembrance, to monologue, to scene, to song, to poem, to something else, sometimes within a single piece.<sup>125</sup> For example, David's "Ghost Bus," from PPTG's 2014 performance *An Indeterminate Life*, shifts registers several times. This short monodrama meditates on the buses that constantly travel the country, carrying inmates from prison to prison. The piece starts with personal storytelling:

One day, I believe back like in 1999 (I was twelve then) during the summer time, me and my mother were going to the grocery store; we saw a bus come out of nowhere. This bus was like a greyhound bus except it was not. Everyone around us stopped what they were doing and just stared at the bus. The bus had dark tinted windows and it was grey. For some reason everyone knew that that bus didn't belong there. And as soon as the bus faded away, everyone continued to go as they pleased. But for some reason, that bus haunted me over the years.

This is a story about that bus and many places. Listen . . .  
Can you hear?

The dramaturgy here resembles much of the personal stories developed in PPTG, using direct audience address and self-narration. Through simple description, this

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<sup>125</sup> For an extended archive of writings, videos, and performance pieces, see the PPTG website: [www.phoenixplayersatauburn.com](http://www.phoenixplayersatauburn.com)

section of the piece transports the reader to a scene from David's childhood, just as the bus he remembers transports prisoners across the state and country. At the time, he didn't understand what the bus was or who was inside it, but the stunned silence of the pedestrians shocked him and remained with him for years. Indeed, his memory of the event is the catalyst for the story, perhaps because years later he found himself on that bus, imagining another 12-year-old boy on the street watching, stunned. Immediately following this introduction, David surprises the audience by singing:

*(Song)* I've been gone for so long  
That I've done forgot my song  
I've been waiting by the moment  
Hoping for everlasting moments  
Praying that I never know  
But I know I gotta go . . .  
To a place where I never want to know.

The sudden shift to music upsets the audience's expectations, signaling that we are privy to David's thoughts and feelings. The resonant sound washes over the room, carrying the audience into a different affective space. The song has its own temporality, separate from the opening narration, and seems to exist in the present or perhaps out of time. He's been "gone" from the everyday world "for so long" that, ironically, he's "forgot" the song. Singing these lines is a performative act of memory, reclaiming the music in himself, and the quality of melody serves to bring the audience in on the act. He waits every moment, "hoping for everlasting moments," stranded in the tension between ephemeral immediacy and the desire for eternity. Perhaps he's praying that he can stand on that street corner with his mother forever and avoid going to where he knows he ends up: in prison, "a place where I never want to know."

Then David suddenly drops out of song to the percussive poetry of hip hop. The rhythm here chugs along, serving to engage the audience members corporeally in their bodies, as in a group dance. In this section, he jumps back and forth between verse and song, embracing a poly-vocal musicality:

*(Poetry)* On cold summer nights  
Lie pot smoking kids  
With jump roping scarred limbs  
Ghetto lives Blue/Red Bright lights  
Everyone takes flight  
I and one by one  
Everyone disappears about the same time  
On cold summer nights.  
Can you hear?

*(Song)* Where are you taking me?  
Where am I going?  
Wherever it is I don't want to go  
I said I don't want to go  
Lord please don't let them take me  
Lord please tell somebody that this is wrong  
Lord please tell somebody that this is my song.  
Lord don't let this go on.

*(Poetry)* Year after year that song  
Is played along sidewalks  
Ballparks and summer thoughts  
Year after year gun shots and  
Mug shots make my place  
Our space a waste  
According to constructed stats  
And misconstrued facts  
Televised on News screens  
Seen by privilege who apparently  
Don't want me on their streets  
Or do they instead  
In some cage behind their rage  
In upstate?  
I still see this bus again and  
Again taking neighbors, friends, thoughts and  
Dreams--One by one they  
All disappear somewhere faraway from here.

Somehow I can still hear them cry

David imbues the verses with thick description of life on the urban sidewalks of his youth, painting in tactile consonants and free-flowing rhymes a portrait of the “streets.” The poetry engages actively with the social, mobilizing a political critique against the inequalities of American capitalism and the apathetic TV-viewing public, too bloated with privilege to interrogate the sensationalized narrative of crime and violence that led to the criminalization of neighborhoods like David’s. The song takes the form of a plaintive prayer, a plea to God to stop his abduction. We’re told this is a song that is played “year after year” on “sidewalks” and in “ballparks and summer thoughts.” And despite the aggressive police siege of urban life, “gun shots” still multiply.

After this, David continues shifting between verse and song, repeatedly pleading with God to stop the carnage and to “remember him.” He describes for the audience how his story is similar to many others, and the piece closes by returning to the register of prose narration:

In 2008 I was on that bus looking out at my old neighborhood, heading to Auburn Correctional facility. That bus was the D.O.C. state bus that transfers humans from downstate to upstate similar to slave ships from east state to west state.

Saving history for the end, David zooms out from the local and personal situation of his rendition into captivity to contextualize it within the history of racial terror.

Specifically, he compares his own rendition on the Department of Corrections’ bus to the white sails that brought black Africans as slaves to build America. As has been

examined by many theorists, trauma poses historical problems.<sup>126</sup> Reckoning with trauma engages history on a personal level, and therefore in certain circumstances self-therapy might be figured as a radically political act, as feminist therapists such as Laura S. Brown have argued.<sup>127</sup>

The United States is currently the biggest incarcerator in the world. This historical fact grows out of the country's violently racist past.<sup>128</sup> Mass incarceration is built on the history of state sanctioned violence against black, brown, and indigenous bodies. It's crucial that this be recognized as mass trauma, perpetrated repeatedly across generations, and not swept under the rug as some easily-corrected historical accident. The "ghosts" on David's bus are therefore not only the specters of incarceration, but also the ghosts of long-dead humans systematically destroyed in Circum-Atlantic commerce. Using a montagic style of writing, David invokes his own memories to engage with a larger cultural memory, often ignored in the everyday lives of the non-incarcerated. The piece therefore reclaims not only the song he lost, but also the song of an entire people, captured and remanded to white slave-owners, and in the process reckons with the reality of racial terror today. For David too, it's a

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<sup>126</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016; LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

<sup>127</sup> Brown, Laura. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." In Caruth, C. (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 100-112.

<sup>128</sup> Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016.

therapeutic reclaiming or reset of the past, so that he can begin to recalibrate a new future for himself before he became a passenger on the “Ghost Bus.”

PPTG engages trauma by assuming that there’s a radical pedagogy inherent in the creativity of the collective. Thus, in several ways, we find the truth of Shoshana Felman’s comments on trauma and pedagogy, that “in the age of testimony—teaching, I would venture to suggest, must in turn *testify*, make something *happen*, and not just transmit a passive knowledge, pass on information that is preconceived, substantified, believed to be known in advance, misguidedly believed, that is, to be (exclusively) a *given*.”<sup>129</sup> Teaching signals in itself a kind of transformative crisis. Teaching artists must seek to initiate such a situation in both themselves and in their students. But as we can see with David’s powerful testimony to the historical situation of the ghost bus, incarcerated theatre artists can themselves act as teachers, bearing witness to the traumatic event of mass incarceration and fomenting change within audiences. By creating a space in which participants might unburden themselves of trauma through a performative commitment to creative expression, the PPTG process eschews the model of education as a passive transmission of dead knowledge. Instead, the theatre group empowers incarcerated artists themselves to generate knowledge in an active and lively collaboration—a model that, through the embodied transmission of personal testimony, aims to transform the world.

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<sup>129</sup> Felman, Shoshana. “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching.” In Caruth, C. (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 13-60.

## CHAPTER 2

### VISIONS FROM THE TRAUMA MACHINE: A PERFORMANCE AND MEDIA HISTORY OF AUBURN PRISON

*The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at this moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.*

*Michel Foucault*<sup>130</sup>

Originally constructed in 1817, the Auburn Correctional Facility (figure 1) in New York currently stands as the oldest continually functional maximum-security penitentiary in the United States.<sup>131</sup> From the beginning, Auburn has acted as a laboratory of punishment and rehabilitation, a performance that has resulted in an intensification of white supremacy. White supremacy is a global power structure, political imaginary, and social organization that violently positions “whiteness” as a central understanding of what constitutes civilization, rationality, and indeed the “human.”<sup>132</sup> It’s not the irrational outlook of a few outliers, but an all-encompassing ideological, epistemological, cultural, institutional structure within which we are all born and to which we are all in some way complicit. The prison was initially built at a time when a number of major punishment reforms occurred across the country. Originally constructed in competition with the coeval institution established at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia—in which prisoners were confined all hours in solitary cells—at Auburn the officials enforced two complementary ideals: absolute

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<sup>130</sup> Foucault, Michel, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias.”

*Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*. Trans. Jay Miskowiec. March 1967. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Rothman, David J. “Perfecting the Prison: United States, 1789-1865,” in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 100-116.

<sup>132</sup> Rodríguez, Dylan. “White Supremacy.” *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. Ed. Bryan S. Turner. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017.

silence and congregate labor. In this “Auburn System,” inmates were held in solitude at night, and during the day were forced to work for the profit of local businesses. At all times, they were forbidden from communicating with each other. A choreography of violence saturated their lives: Inmates marched in lockstep, with their heads facing in the same direction; they were beaten, whipped with cat o’ nine tails, and tortured with an early form of waterboarding called “showering.”



**FIGURE 1: Auburn Prison, 1821**

The systems developed in these prisons were adapted and adopted across the nation and were held up to foreign visitors as the pinnacle of modern punishment. The walls of the prison were first built with special openings so that public audiences

might gather and watch the prisoners at work.<sup>133</sup> These punishment practices served as a kind of pornographic spectacle, staged for the benefit of outsiders. Viewed through the wall apertures, the Auburn System appeared as an eerie pantomime or kinoscope. In many ways, this limited vantage still characterizes how punishment within the prison appears to us today. This chapter examines the stories and images that structure this appearance.

Though the novelty of these new systems of imprisonment eventually wore off, the penitentiary remained a source of voyeuristic interest. For example, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the time when authorities at Auburn began experimenting with electrical execution (a matter to be discussed in detail below), the prison was one of the most popular tourist attractions in New York State. Travelers would disembark from the train station adjacent to the facility to gawk at its walls before continuing on their journeys.<sup>134</sup> Were the prison not still operating today, it would likely have followed the path of Eastern State, which closed in 1971. That prison has since become a museum, hosting historical and artistic exhibits for over 240,000 visitors each year.<sup>135</sup> Studying the prison through the lens of performance foregrounds how violence, in the words of Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, “dominates contemporary world-making.”<sup>136</sup> This chapter discusses how the cultural life of the prison, comprising performance and media, contributes to both constructing and disallowing its reality as a *trauma machine*. Drawing on Marvin Carlson’s concept of

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<sup>133</sup> Tocci, Laurence, *The Proscenium Cage*, Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2007, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Whissel, Kristen, *Picturing American Modernity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 154

<sup>135</sup> “‘America’s Most Historic Prison’ Names Gateway Its Ticketing Solution Provider,” August 23, 2017. <<https://www.gatewayticketing.com/community/eastern-state-penitentiary/>> Accessed Jan 11, 2018.

<sup>136</sup> Anderson, Patrick and Jisha Menon, “Introduction: Violence Performed,” in *Violence Performed*, eds. Patrick and Jisha Menon, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 1.

the “memory machine,” I argue that trauma machines serve to simultaneously structure, produce, and confine subjects in repetitions of historical violence.<sup>137</sup> Like the theatre, the prison is deeply involved in repetition and recycling, bringing the past to life in the present. Memory imbues both these places with special energy, which carries their structures forward into the future in the same repetitious practices. Trauma machines therefore don’t only preserve the past, but they contribute to its further dissemination, serving as a vehicle for maintaining a continuous narrative of a culture. Trauma machines are productive, manufacturing both epistemic visions of pain and the subjectivities structured by them.

This repetition traps subjects in cycles of violence while also disavowing the trauma the repetition produces. It is crucial for artists working within and around the history of the prison to have a clear picture of how this history appears in the present in order to foreground the reality of the trauma machine. This chapter examines how the images of the prison circulate over time as repetition, citing both past and future performances, serving to envision the present as a morally redemptive space of epistemological certainty and technological efficiency. Representations of this redemption have repudiated the racist and sexual violence foundational to the history of the penal system. Both live and media performance, through structures of repetition, have colluded to imagine, for the benefit of a broad audience, the prison as a meaningful space. Time and again, when theatre, photography, and film have depicted or otherwise encountered the prison, they represent the punitive regime as redemptive of the individual, thereby instituting a moral order for the democratic polis.

My analysis enacts, in part, a performative gesture. Building on studies of media, film, and literature, I examine narratives and images surrounding and

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<sup>137</sup> Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2001.

comprising Auburn Prison from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I focus on three case studies, which deal with the history of Auburn in related but distinct ways: a dramatic performance of John Augustus Stone's *Metamora* (1829) staged as a rehabilitative project; photographs of a popular performance of the Wild West to entertain incarcerated people; and mediatized representations of the early implementation of electrical execution. These images all center on Auburn prison, but reverberate across time and space, codifying our carceral episteme digressively, rather than representing a linear historical narrative or progressive evolution. Punishment draws on the past and future in equal measure, confounding traditional senses of time and causality. At the same time, the prison stages a denial: Carceral logic claims that the prison sentence is the inevitable and necessary consequence of a crime. The logic from the television program *Baretta*, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time," is still dominant. Acts that are deemed criminal are conceived of in entirely linear, cause-and-effect terms. They're often thought of as entirely rational, self-possessed choices—performances that function on the level of a business transaction. This oversimplification of the dynamics of human action erases the complicated fact of human behavior. Rarely are people entirely possessed of their own motivations for all their actions, and when they are, there are a set of constraints into which we're all born that severely limit what choices are available to us. To contest this linearity, a critical performance historiography must therefore foreground the temporal disorientation of the prison and its historical contingency.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> My historiography is guided by the notion of temporality articulated by Tracy Davis: "Performative time is a distinct way to account for people's location in history. It allows for nonlinearity, or nonseriality, as a factor in perception as well as the teleology of time's asynchronicity, polychronicity, and achronism, overturning a straightforward concept of temporal succession [...] [it] participates in the past yet is ongoing: it has a fulcrum in the present yet receives appreciable force from both past and future." From Davis, Tracy, "Performative Time," in *Representing the Past*, eds.

### ***Foundations of white supremacist prison reform***

The modern history of penality is a racist narrative of technocratic reform. Understanding how the prison envisions this reform is the first step in imagining a world without it. Dylan Rodríguez, adapting Raymond Williams' theory of the structure of feeling, describes how the culture of the prison conspires to shape our everyday lives: "the visual production of white supremacist violence on racially pathologized bodies is a material cultural practice that inspires an affect of (national) familiarity while forming accessible sites and moments that symbiotically link the complex production of terror (as a socialized and socializing structure of feeling) to disparately located processes of communal identification."<sup>139</sup> This culture—which includes phenomena such as genre film and TV, prison tourism, and photography—joins other material histories of the cultural remnants of global violence—such as the photos from Abu Ghraib, stolen valuables and artifacts from Vietnam, and the festivities surrounding lynching—to comprise both archive and repertoire of white supremacy. Rodríguez's commentary resonates with sociologist Michelle Brown, whose examination of tourist attractions, photography, and film uncovers how the cultural life of punishment creates a model of subjectivity called "penal spectatorship."<sup>140</sup> American white supremacy thus maintains itself in part by producing communities of like-minded spectators to the state's enactment of punishment and violence.

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Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010, 149

<sup>139</sup> Rodríguez, Dylan, "(Non)Scenes of Captivity: The Common Sense of Punishment and Death," *Radical History Review*, Issue 96 (Fall 2006), 15. See also Williams, Raymond. "Structures of Feeling." *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 128-212.

<sup>140</sup> Brown, Michelle. *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*. New York: New York University Press. 2009.

Taking up Rodríguez's and Brown's theatrical metaphor, I view the prison as a theatre that repeatedly stages a codified set of relations of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation that characterize the everyday experiences of carceral subjects. These structures aren't "out there" or "back then," in the graveyard of history, but live with us in the present inside the body. However, there is a tendency to focus inordinately on terror in foreign contexts and ignore terror that is produced in the domestic sphere by institutions like the prison. Images of violence "out there" function to create an American community, while images of violence "at home" are disavowed. Regarding the American prison, Rodríguez calls cultural productions—such as photographs—which depict the state's domestic terrorism "(non)scenes," in that they remain simply unread as the constitutive violence of modern life, despite the fact that citizen-subjects are saturated with their appearance. Seeing an image of American captivity does not mean one understands the reality it depicts. The prison, in this formulation, is not a distinct site where violence can be seen, categorized, and eradicated, but should be understood as a more slippery set of conditions that structure American life. Its violence is in some sense always already disappeared. The very fact of the performance of violence's disappearance creates the condition for its historical disavowal in the present.<sup>141</sup> This disappearance resonates with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma.<sup>142</sup> For Caruth, the traumatic event is always already unknowable; it is characterized by deferral, as a never-quite-arrived. Trauma is itself a disappearance and can only be approached through its compulsive repetition over time.

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<sup>141</sup> Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked*. New York: Routledge. 1993

<sup>142</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996.

On March 9, 1787, physician and politician Benjamin Rush articulated one of the earliest visions of the penal philosophy upon which Auburn Prison was founded.<sup>143</sup> He gave his address in Philadelphia in the home of Benjamin Franklin. Drawing on the penological writings of Cesare Beccaria, Rush argued that punishment in the nascent American Republic should no longer comprise public displays of violence, and should be replaced by the inevitable confinement of the offender in a private location.<sup>144</sup> This “house of repentance” would have a civilizing, reformatory mission, and replace more spectacular technologies of capital punishment, such as the lash and pillory. Early penologists like Rush eschewed spectacle because they understood how powerful such displays of punishment were for the audience. Spectacle destroyed rationality. Public punishments drew massive crowds, which were aroused by the drama of capital punishment. Rather than deterring crime, public punishment in fact provoked crime by stoking the emotions of the common man.

Further, the new punishment would have a properly liberal purpose to rehabilitate offenders, criminals, and ne'er-do-wells to be socially functional, moral individuals. This rehabilitation would be modern, uniform, and mechanized, so as to emphasize the American ideals of equality and liberty. In addition, the modern prison would benefit society in an economic sense—it would be profitable. The unfreedom of the prison was distinct from the unfreedom of slavery, yet they both shared a profit-making motive. The architects of the Auburn System came to adapt this philosophy most effectively, pioneering the use of inmate labor to fill the coffers of local

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<sup>143</sup> Sullivan, Robert, “The Birth of the Prison: The Case of Benjamin Rush,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol 31, No 3, Americas (Spring 1998), 334.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* The eighteenth-century criminologist Beccaria was one of the first philosophers to discuss abolishing capital punishment. He envisioned a way of dealing with crime that would be more rational, and his principles guided many of the punishment reforms in the modern era.

businesses. Capitalist labor extraction and humanitarian liberalism are thus wedded in the foundation of the penitentiary.

However, despite the fact that this new model of punishment would in theory move away from spectacle, relying instead on mechanized and mechanistic practices that de-emphasize severity in favor of the inevitability of punishment, the penitentiary, as it would eventually be named, would still strike fear into the souls of those who beheld it in explicitly dramatic terms. Rush's description of the prison exemplifies the drama of the new prison:

Let a large house, of a construction agreeable to its design, be erected in a remote part of the state. Let the avenue to this house be rendered difficult and gloomy by mountains and morasses. Let its doors be of iron; and let the grating, occasioned by opening and shutting them, be increased by an echo from a neighboring mountain, that shall extend and continue a sound that shall deeply pierce the soul. Let a guard constantly attend at a gate that shall lead to this place of punishment, to prevent strangers from entering it. Let all the officers of the house be strictly forbidden to discover any signs of mirth, or even levity, in the presence of the criminals. To encrease the horror of this abode of discipline and misery, let it be called by some name that shall import its design.<sup>145</sup>

The “gloomy” entrance to the prison is removed from civilization, defended by the shadows of mountains. The creak of the prison gates “pierce[s] the soul.” Joy and happiness are strictly forbidden. Overall, the *mise en scene* of the penitentiary would be directed toward striking fear into the hearts of all who beheld it. Rather than use spectacular violence to frighten the public into obedience to the sovereign, the penitentiary modeled itself as a technology of the soul that nevertheless employed “horror” as a mechanism of control.

Historically, this technology has focused its energies disproportionately on black, brown, immigrant, and indigenous subjects. Though there is some dispute

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Sullivan (1998), 339.

among ante-bellum historians as to whether incarcerated populations in the North would have been segregated by race, there is little doubt that capturing and confining the ethnic and racial other was one of the prison's primary functions. As Kahlil Gibran Muhammad examines in *The Condemnation of Blackness*, the ghosts of slavery materialized in the North precisely on the question of criminality.<sup>146</sup> Blackness was formed as violent and criminal, in supposedly objective realms like penology. Misread crime statistics, which ignored broader social and economic contexts, came to define and confine black subjectivity. Freedom then, even in the North, was for black people an allowance to be restricted and controlled. In the South, the restriction was rationalized through pseudo-sciences like phrenology. In the North, it was through the crime control mechanisms of penology.

The oldest extant prison narrative by an African American, *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*—first discovered in a Rochester estate sale in 2009—written 1858-1859 while Austin Reed was incarcerated in Auburn Prison, support this data analysis, offering a humanistic view of how drama and racism converged in 19<sup>th</sup> century prisons.<sup>147</sup> Reed's story complicates the common narrative, found in a broad range of scholarly accounts, which say that the prison rose to replace slavery as the dominant mechanism of racialized social control. There's no question that it functions today as such, but Reed's tribulations took place in the North before Emancipation, and long before Jim Crow. Similar to other examples from the genre of prison literature, such as Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, Jack Henry Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast*, or George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, the memoir documents

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<sup>146</sup> Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Reed, Austin, *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, ed. Caleb Smith, New York: Random House, 2016.

Reed's dramatic recollections and personal reflections of his experiences in confinement.

Reed crafts his narrative with a public readership in mind, employing picaresque writing techniques and frequently addressing his audience directly. He relates his story episodically, describing dramatically the events that led to his capture and conviction, and the events that befell him afterward. Like *Hamlet*, the tale begins with the death of his father, whose dying exhortation, that Reed avoid the “snares and temptations of the world,” comes to haunt the hero.<sup>148</sup> Despite his father's warning, Reed is soon ensnared in the New York House of Refuge in Manhattan, the first juvenile reformatory in the USA, and then eventually in Auburn. It's no wonder that Reed, in the title of his memoir, marks himself as “haunted.” He's possessed, not only by the memory of his dying father's final words, but by the ghosts of racism.

While still a youth in reform school, Reed performed as a Native American assassin in a theatrical production for the benefit of a group of Philadelphia visitors interested in juvenile delinquency and correction.<sup>149</sup> The play was likely an adaptation of John Augustus Stone's *Metamora* (1829), a racist melodrama that depicts its titular tragic hero as a “noble savage,” who, recalling Medea, is driven to murder his family to assert his agency against forces that seek to control him.<sup>150</sup> Why would they stage this particular tragedy, if not to make a statement about the racialized other? It seems as though the desire of prison authorities was to stage a racist notion of redemption *for* the racialized other—namely, Reed. First produced in Jacksonian America—during which time the Indian Removal Act forcibly resettled tens of thousands from their ancestral homelands, resulting in thousands of deaths—*Metamora* was an immense success and toured the country. According to Reed, the reform-school production

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45.

<sup>150</sup> Smith, Caleb “Editor's Introduction,” in Reed (2016), xxix.

offered an opportunity to display his acting chops and “clear silver voice for singing,” winning good favor with the white administration. In the climax of the play, Reed, fully-costumed and with his face painted red, crept up on the male actors playing his wife and child and pretended to cut their throats while they slept. They had rigged a small bladder filled with red liquid beneath the victims’ chins, so that when Reed dragged his knife across, gore spilled over the stage.

*Metamora* was originally written for the white American actor Edwin Forrest, who also performed the title role in *redface*.<sup>151</sup> Forrest had previously achieved much success playing roles in blackface, such as Othello. His legacy represents the more “respectable” side of minstrelsy popular at the time—a form just as popular in the North as in the South. In the tradition of Forrest, the sartorial trappings and excessive violence of Reed’s performance also bring it in line with minstrelsy. However, rather than view the performance as an expression of cross-racial sympathy, I follow Douglas Jones in considering how minstrelsy, as a theatrical genre, comprises “virulent racism and fashioning of white supremacy.”<sup>152</sup> This performance expressed the anti-black, anti-indigenous, and proslavery imagination of the North, codified in the practices of the prison. The prison authorities cast the racial difference between Reed and *Metamora* as a criminally violent identification. As Jones writes, “*any* process of identification (or purposive copying) can never be wholly mimetic but is always modified by the producer’s desire, expectation, and fear. These revisions become more clear within the representational (e.g., theatrical) frame because there the *conscious* alterations and disavowals of the object are emphasized.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Martin, Scott C, “Interpreting *Metamora*: Nationalism, theater, and Jacksonian Indian policy,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, Spring 1999, 19, 1, 83-84

<sup>152</sup> Jones, Douglas A. Jr., “Black Politics but Not Black People,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 57, Number 2, Summer 2013, 22.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

In my adaptation of Jones' formulation, the "producer" is not just Reed, the performer, but the authorities who cast him in the role. It is their fantasies that Reed performs, and he translates them in an egregiously gory vision of indigenous familicide. In the words of cultural historian Scott C. Martin, this performance of *Metamora* "demonstrate[s] the capacity of antebellum popular culture to incorporate a variety of images of an ethnocentrically defined other, some sympathetic, into a larger narrative of white superiority and dominance."<sup>154</sup> In his account, Reed relates no small amount of bemused enjoyment of the experience because it offered a respite from the daily grind of the reformatory. But Reed's surrogation of indigenous killer thereby reinforced visions of both Indian violence and his own as a black man. This performance is unlike "traditional" minstrelsy, wherein white performers lampoon black subjectivity in a cartoonish display. It's also unlike Mardi Gras Indian performances, which publically and flamboyantly celebrate the confluence of indigenous and black agency and power in conflict with white supremacy.<sup>155</sup> Reed's prison performance worked in line with the overarching disciplinary project of the reform school—a project which, re-invoking Muhammad, criminalized and controlled blackness in the North prior to Emancipation, despite its rehabilitative aims. Reforming deviance, viewed at the time as the vanguard of modernity, therefore also trafficked in a poetics of racist violence and terror.

Cultural narratives, including those produced in theatrical performance, have historically depicted the prison as a space of inevitability and efficiency, where meaning and knowledge of humanity is produced and individual transformation possible while at the same time reproducing visions of white supremacy. In these narratives, we find what literary historian Caleb Smith in his text *The Prison and the*

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<sup>154</sup> Martin, 83.

<sup>155</sup> Roach, Joseph. 1996. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press.

*American Imagination* terms the “poetics of the penitentiary.”<sup>156</sup> In the American imaginary, the prison serves as a sort of “theater for the performance of its society’s founding political myths,” namely, those of the individual’s salvation by the hand of the state.<sup>157</sup> Reed’s prison performance rehearses this myth: By using theatre to metaphorically allow Reed to succumb to what is seen as his innate criminal violence, the prison casts itself in a salvific role, pulling him back up to probity and civilization. The prison claims to manufacture Reed as a functional subject, but in the process, employs a performance of racism.

What’s in question is not the validity of redemption, rehabilitation, or the capacity for individuals to change. In quantitative and qualitative research, it’s been demonstrated repeatedly that prison education, arts programs, veterans’ groups, faith-based mentorship, violence reduction organizations, and other such initiatives are enormously important in the lives of a great many incarcerated people—not to mention the fact that such programs greatly reduce rates of recidivism and increase prisoners’ chances of success both during and after incarceration. The oft-cited fact is that around 95% of people currently doing time will be released, and it’s a truism that that time should help benefit the incarcerated so that they aren’t permanently damaged upon reentry. It’s emphatically not my position that reform efforts should be abandoned.

### ***Repetition, reenactment, trauma in prison performance photography***

In 1914, prison reformer Thomas Mott Osborne founded the Mutual Welfare League. The former mayor of the city of Auburn, Osborne is most famous for spending one week incarcerated in the prison under an alias in order to experience how prisoners lived. Following this experience, he was appointed warden of Sing Sing

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<sup>156</sup> Smith, Caleb, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009, 6.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

prison in Ossining, New York. The League is largely credited as introducing the “‘new penology’ of culture and education as a preparation of criminals for citizenship.”<sup>158</sup>

The League still operates today under the name The Osborne Association. Among the League’s first initiatives were “honor camps” that took inmates outside prison walls to work in the community; parades and festivities with music and public speeches; and greater access to sports and other entertainments. Prison authorities arranged so that the League’s events were photographed for both publicity and posterity. A 1908 performance of Buffalo Bill and the Wild West Show at Auburn Prison for an audience of incarcerated men should be seen in this context as a diversion for the cultural enrichment of inmates.

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the use of penitentiaries like Auburn continued to rise, well-intentioned efforts to ameliorate the project of incarceration have resulted in superficial improvements in the lives of those confined, rather than in substantive transformation of the underlying structures of neoliberalism and white supremacy. This rise is tied to the history of race in the United States: hyper-criminalization and imprisonment have come to reenact the violence of enslavement and Jim Crow. These modes of social control of African Americans are, with an ever-increasing intensity, how the government seeks to control immigrants of color. In the “colorblind” era after the election of President Barack Obama, shifting notions of race, criminality, and poverty created a situation in which, as Soyica Colbert writes, “blackness began to appear to be a chosen affiliation rather than a biological inheritance.”<sup>159</sup> A deep and pervasive transformation is necessary for

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<sup>158</sup> Helfman, Harold M., “Antecedents of Thomas Mott Osborne’s Mutual Welfare League in Michigan,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol 40, Iss 5, 1950, 597.

<sup>159</sup> Colbert, Soyica Diggs, *Black Movements*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017, 8.

mass liberation, one that seeks to repair the ravages of racial and economic inequalities, as well as offer more robust opportunities to heal the very real human tragedies that occur. A transformation like this isn't possible if the approach resurrects racist ghosts to manufacture rehabilitated subjects.



**FIGURE 2: Buffalo Bill and the Wild West Show posing with warden George Benham in front of prisoners in the Auburn yard, 1908**

Some historical photographs documenting a performance that “Buffalo Bill” Cody and his Wild West Show staged in the yard in 1908 demonstrate how performance can produce meaning about the prison that obscures its white supremacist

foundations (see figure 2).<sup>160</sup> The trauma of indigenous genocide was seen by a wide audience through its reenactment in performances like the Wild West Show, which served to continue its cultural circulation through the mythologized figure of Buffalo Bill. The Wild West Show came to the city of Auburn to perform two shows for the general public on July 30. According to Auburn Correctional Facility counselor and unofficial historian Michael Pettigrass, their prison performance was just “for fun,” but I’m interested in looking at these photos to reveal how both performance and photography, in the context of the prison, revivify the ghosts of racialized violence.<sup>161</sup> By practicing a critical necromancy of my own, my analysis reads the ghosts in the images that bear witness to and also disavow the prison’s status as a place of trauma.

The photographer was positioned at the east end of the yard, looking down on the assembly. Two tall lines of trees frame a central stone path. Newly-installed electrical wires crisscross among the treetops, and a pole dangles a round incandescent light bulb above. The audience, composed of hundreds of inmates in shirtsleeves and suspenders, sit in rows on either side. In one action photo, a single rider rears back on his horse as a group of American Show Indians wearing feather headdresses watch from the foreground, their backs to the camera.

As Kristen Whissel describes in *Picturing American Modernity*, the Wild West Show should be understood within the context of the war reenactment.<sup>162</sup> From 1883 to 1913, Cody toured his Wild West Show around the United States and Europe, making stops in cities like New York, Atlanta, London, Rome, Paris, and at several world’s fairs. A former scout in the army, Cody’s later persona of Buffalo Bill was largely a fictional invention, cobbled together by dime-store authors and the

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<sup>160</sup> McHugh, Eileen, *Images of America: Auburn Correctional Facility*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2010, 42-43.

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in McHugh (2010), 7.

<sup>162</sup> Whissel (2008), 68-69.

impresario himself. The Show however was promoted as the faithful re-creation of historical events, dramatizing adventure narratives of frontier life punctuated by exhilarating feats of athletic prowess. Before the advent of film, live performance was often used to represent and circulate history for popular audiences. Despite the fact that much of the program was myth and folk legend, they preserved what Walter Benjamin might consider an aura of presence, by framing historical events narratively.<sup>163</sup> After the advent of the camera, audiences came to view both photography and cinema also to witness the reenactment of history. Buffalo Bill is particularly interesting because his performances exist on the cusp between theatrical and filmic reenactment. He not only staged live performances, but also took part in early photographic and film experiments. By virtue of the fact that these events had passed in history, even the mediatized presentation of the Wild West preserved an auratic quality. The conflict and conquest in the Wild West Show legitimized the violence of the white frontier mentality, dramatizing genocide with a simplistic adventure narrative. Show Indians stand in as symbols of the untamed and unbound that is, in a benevolent gesture, dominated and controlled by the white male hero. In prison, its exhibition modeled a perverse and racist rehabilitative logic, which said to prisoners: master your own “savage” inclinations, just as Buffalo Bill defeated these Native peoples.

There is a wealth of scholarly and artistic material on the Wild West Show that supports the claim that what is reenacted is a white supremacist narrative of civilizing frontier life, despite the fact that the Indian performers themselves were treated fairly. For example, Arthur Kopit’s play *Indians* (1968) presents the Wild West Show in self-reflective, Brechtian style, interrupting the action periodically as a critical commentary

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<sup>163</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” 1935. Trans. Michael W. Jennings. *Grey Room*, 39, Spring 2010, 11-37.

on Buffalo Bill's myth-making.<sup>164</sup> In the play, Buffalo Bill is caught between his respect and compassion for American Indians and his own narcissistic and nationalist desire to embody and popularize the narratives of white supremacy. Kopit represents this ambivalence sympathetically, but also shows how the Indian reenactment of these narratives should be viewed critically. In Chief Joseph's monologue relating how he got involved with the Wild West Show, he tells how reenacting his own defeat was offered as a respite from a prison sentence:

William Cody came to see me. He was a nice man [...] He told me I was courageous and said he admired me. Then he explained all about his Wild West Show, in which the great Sitting Bull appeared, and said if I agreed to join, he would have me released from prison, and see that my people received food. I asked what I could do, as I was not a very good rider or marksman. And he looked away and said, "Just repeat, twice a day, three times on Sundays, what you said that afternoon when our army caught you at the Canadian border, where you'd been heading, and where you and your people would have all been safe." So I agreed. For the benefit of my people [...] And for the next year, twice a day, three times on Sundays, said this to those sitting around me in the dark, where I could not see them, a light shining so brightly in my eyes! [...] After which, the audience always applauded me.<sup>165</sup>

In the context of incarceration, reenactment becomes a tool of power and control, serving to reinforce white supremacy. In order to open the prison cell and feed his people, Chief Joseph had to involve himself in a kind of minstrel performance of self-mythologization, a repetition that serves to obscure the very structures of inequality and violence that condition its possibility. His status as the real victim of the white frontier mentality that criminalized him lends him an aura that Buffalo Bill capitalized on. The directive "Perform...or else!" which Jon McKenzie discusses, is thus ghosted

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<sup>164</sup> Kopit, Arthur, *Indians*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1969

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

by historical events of racist violence.<sup>166</sup> Chief Joseph exemplifies what Suzanne Little has examined as the representational capacity of performance to diminish the reality of trauma, despite and in concert with the fact that reenactments often claim to present real events as they actually occurred.<sup>167</sup> In the case of the Wild West Show, the disappearance of the original violence was repeated in a repertoire of performance that served to instantiate white supremacy. Despite the fact that in the present, the performers were treated fairly, the reenactment of history positions this event within a rehearsal of trauma. This representation occludes the history of indigenous survival, resistance, protest, and resilience, the counterhistory of which we might read in events like the Occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes from 1969-1971, or in the cultural output of Indian activist and poet Leonard Peltier—who is unjustly serving two consecutive life sentences as the result of a trial that even Amnesty International has deemed unfair.

The prison photos of the disturbing civilizing narrative of Buffalo Bill's reenactments themselves reenact the rehabilitative mission of the prison. The photographic lens itself has a peculiar violence—as myriad thinkers since Benjamin have explored. Drawing on Susan Sontag, we might understand photography as enacting a kind of social control, very much in line with the project of incarceration: “[Taking photographs] means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.”<sup>168</sup> In some photos, both Show Indians and inmates are presented with their backs to the camera, faceless and vulnerable. In a more posed photo, the entire group, audience included, stands and faces the capturing lens. Indians and inmates are positioned slightly *behind* the more

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<sup>166</sup> McKenzie, Jon, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>167</sup> Little, Suzanne, “Repeating Repetition,” *Performance Research*, 20:5, 2015, 44-50.

<sup>168</sup> Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 4.

dominant subjects, surrendering space to the white “heroes” of the Western and criminal justice frontiers: Buffalo Bill and prison warden George Benham. At least in the photos I’ve seen, the Show Indians and inmates are grouped together as passive crowds, receptive to the spectacle of bravura horsemanship and the technological marvel of the photographic lens. Both groups are literally arrested in *negative* by the technology of the camera apparatus—as in the inverse colors of a photonegative—a process that exists on a spectrum with other technologies of punishment, such as isolation, shackles, the cat o’ nine tails, pillory, noose, needle, and electric chair. These technologies all function to render *negative* their subjects, exercising necro-power and stripping people of living presence.

I don’t intend here to strip the Indian performers of their agency. Neither do I want to cast performance and photography in essentialist terms as tools of oppression. But these narratives and images of the marginalized have subtended white supremacy’s self-disguise as a project of rehabilitation. Historian L.G. Moses in his book *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* offers a critically useful intervention on this point.<sup>169</sup> Moses provides a careful, detailed history of Indian involvement in the Wild West Show in order to examine how these performers were involved in a deeply vexed and ambivalent debate at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century around the Indians in American society, which he sees as centering on their imagery.<sup>170</sup> This debate—which took place between white showmen like Cody who wanted to capitalize on the public’s fascination with and anxiety over the West’s indigenous inhabitants, and white reformers, who paternalistically sought to educate and assimilate American Indians into white “civilization”—resonates in many ways with the re-fashioning of punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, discussed above. Even when

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<sup>169</sup> Moses, L.G., *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

objecting to the racist stereotypes, reformers, who declared themselves to be the American Indians' true ally, at the same time infantilized them. For example, in 1891 the *Christian Register* published an editorial, arguing, "It is the duty of the government to educate the Indian out of his old traditions, and not to go into partnership with a circus to perpetuate them. Let the friends of the Indian protest loud and strong against this procedure."<sup>171</sup> Even by their "friends," Indians were seen as inherently backwards, and the migratory and theatrical environment of the Wild West Show would only serve to amplify their atavistic debauchery.

In addition, I don't want to strip incarcerated theatre artists and enthusiasts of their agency either. As Rosemarie Bank argues, debates over the representation of Native life crystallized the anthitheatricalism of modernism—a tradition I might be accused of rehearsing above, in my interrogation of what is reenacted in the prison for the putative enrichment of the incarcerated.<sup>172</sup> My questions are not the expression of a moralistic handwringing, but rather deep concerns over which stories and images are repeated by whom and why. I want my discussion here to allow for a re-consideration of a number of prison performances that rely on the creativity of carceral subjects themselves to effect a dynamic suspension of the repetitious capture of prison space-time. For example, I'm fascinated by a set of photos from around 1915 depicting "living statues" experiments undertaken by the Mutual Welfare League, in which an ensemble of performers re-create a scene from history or literature.<sup>173</sup> These resonate with the later performances of the "Living Newspaper," developed in the Federal Theatre Project to bring important news of the day to life for public audiences—often

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>172</sup> Bank, Rosemarie, "'Show Indians'/Showing Indians: Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and American Anthropology," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Volume 26, Number 1, Fall 2011, pp. 149-158

<sup>173</sup> McHugh (2010), 89-90.

with a populist or Marxist message. In the photos of the Auburn living statues, we see several scenes: soldiers in battalion formation, a group of explorers hunting the frontier, a Christian scene of prison-house redemption, and a tableau of Ancient Greece combining both wartime struggle and Olympic victory. While the narratives of these scenes seem to repeat rehabilitative stories of loss and mastery, the frozen movement of the statue performs a momentary break in the repetition of punishment. Rather than surrendering the body to the disciplinary movements of imprisonment, these statues subject the body to a kind of arrest that pauses the day-to-day routinization of life effected in confinement. Simultaneously, this arrest—reenacted by the technology of the photograph—takes the carceral subject out of time, allowing him to connect with both past and future beyond the spatio-temporal logic of the prison. The living statue is a repetition of arrest that paradoxically transcends visions of carcerality.

### ***Disavowing trauma in representations of electrocution***

Cultural representations of punishment have frequently remained complicit in this process to obscure the realities of penal violence. At the same time that modernization was revolutionizing the way subjects visualized history in the technology of the motion picture, there was also a radical revision in the way executions were performed. Electricity was first instrumentalized for use in execution at Auburn Prison in 1890, which replaced hanging as the predominant mode of state killing until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when gas inhalation and lethal injection came in use. The advent of film offered a powerful new avenue for representing state violence. As Daniel LaChance argues in *Executing Freedom*, many of these representations served to minimize, obscure, or consolidate the punitive, retributive power of the death

penalty.<sup>174</sup> Employing cultural criminological methods, LaChance looks at how films and television shows, from *Dirty Harry* to *Dexter*, have represented the vigilante fantasies of middle-class whites, which translated in public policy to support state-sanctioned killing. These visualizations of freedom as a negative construct—in which liberty is imagined as an agency free *from* constraint—as opposed to a positive one—the subject is provided sufficient resources, which enable freedom to fulfill their desires—conspire paradoxically to reinforce the public’s death drive.

In this schema, it is better to be executed than captured in the bureaucratic machine of the state because the death of the condemned has a cleansing force for both the individual and society. This death was depicted as efficient, heroic, and redemptive: “Rather than pandering to Americans’ resentment of the criminal [...] they crafted a vision of the death penalty as spiritually beneficial to the condemned as well as the community his crime has harmed.”<sup>175</sup> For LaChance’s countervisualization of the death penalty, it’s crucial to understand how popular representation produced a vision of execution as itself productive of meaning. The performance of the death penalty was imagined as nourishing the community by buttressing modernist conceptions of efficiency, painlessness, and mechanized uniformity.

Judah Schept, in “(Un)seeing like a prison: Counter-visual ethnography of the carceral state,” rightly points out that one of the key ways the prison controls historical knowledge about itself is by structuring how it comes to be seen.<sup>176</sup> This can be compared to the cop on the street who says, “Move along, nothing to see here.” The prison, in various ways, institutes a scopic regime, which determines who can see

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<sup>174</sup> LaChance, Daniel, *Executing Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>176</sup> Schept, Judah, “(Un)seeing like a prison: Counter-visual ethnography of the carceral state,” *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol 18 (2), 2014, 198-223.

what, where and when. The authority of the prison determines what is seen as true and real about the prison. As Nicholas Mirzoeff defines it, this regime cannot be properly called censorship, but in fact is deeply influential in how subjectivity itself is envisioned.<sup>177</sup> Drawing on a nineteenth-century term for how control was maintained on both the slave plantation and the war battlefield, Mirzoeff calls this regime *visuality*: the “authority to tell us to move on and that exclusive claim to be able to look.”<sup>178</sup> This definition is in distinction from Maaïke Bleeker’s more generalized understanding of *visuality* as an all-encompassing theory of looking.<sup>179</sup> I am guided by her understanding of *visuality* as informed by dynamics of memory, and link it to Mirzoeff’s analysis of power and authority. There is no “just looking” at a prison, and our vision is always already constituted by these vectors of our subjectivity. An enhanced visualization of the prison is sometimes granted provisionally by state and correctional authorities, but is tightly channeled: architecturally, bureaucratically, physically, and culturally. Even when one visits the prison, one’s vision is carefully monitored and controlled. This seeing is closely connected with history; *visuality* is the “visualization of history.”<sup>180</sup> The authority over what can be seen is also the authority over a historical narrative.

Despite the fact that there isn’t any difference in the function or effects of state killing, representations of electrocution held up this practice as fundamentally more modern and therefore beneficial for civilization than earlier practices. This disjunction between the reality of death by electricity and its representation characterizes a more general denial in how execution was represented. For example, one of the innovators

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<sup>177</sup> Mirzoeff, Nicholas, “The Right to Look,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 37, No 3, Spring 2011, 473-496.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 474.

<sup>179</sup> Bleeker, Maaïke, *Visuality in the Theatre*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 1.

<sup>180</sup> Mirzoeff, 474.

of early cinema, Thomas Edison, was also a key player in the development of the electric chair. Edison was vocally anti-capital punishment, yet, concludes historian Mark Essig, without Edison, New York State would never have abolished hanging and replaced it with electrocution.<sup>181</sup> Essig describes how Edison helped implement electrocution as a means of scoring points in the “War of the Currents.” In order to prove the deadly force of Nikola Tesla’s alternating current, Edison’s company conducted a series of public experiments at his lab in New Jersey in the summer of 1888. In these experiments, Edison applied alternating current to animals in order to calculate the electrical threshold at which a given body mass died. Dozens of dogs and other animals were tortured and killed. In order to further equate alternating current with death in the public’s mind, Edison wrote directly to the 1888 New York State Death Penalty Commission, recommending Tesla’s dynamo for use in electrical execution.<sup>182</sup>

Shifting visions in punishment practice signal broader shifts in notions of humanity. In 1888, when legislators officially revised how New York State would kill its condemned, they also revised a notion of the modern subject. This legislation was motivated by a more general modernization, characterized by the move from the spectacle of the public square to the inevitability of the private death chamber, and by the concomitant aversion to displays of pain and suffering. Punishment as spectacle is no clearer than in the phenomena of the public execution. Prior to 1888, hanging was an almost unfathomably popular community event, sometimes gathering thousands of people in celebration.<sup>183</sup> Anti-death penalty advocates frequently lean on humanistic discourse that paints the spectacle of suffering as “barbaric”—as something that only

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<sup>181</sup> Essig, Mark *Edison and the Electric Chair: A Story of Light and Death*, New York: Walker and Company, 2003, 288.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

the less “compassionate,” “humane” parts of society take part in. In modernity, physical cruelty characterizes savagery; civilized people don’t seek to inflict or feel pain, only the uncivilized, childish, and insensate do that. Sensitivity to pain is viewed as a fundamental virtue of the modern subject; modernity itself can indeed be characterized by this desire for the reduction of pain. This discourse belies the brutal realities of penal practice, effacing entire histories of pain that are fundamental to modernity.

In November 1901 Edison Studios released a short feature film that dramatizes the idealized scene of the modern electrical execution. *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* opens with a slow-pan of the prison walls, captured from across the train tracks in the City of Auburn. The silent film then proceeds to re-stage—on a set with actors—the electrocution of US President William McKinley’s assassin, the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, executed at Auburn a month before the film’s release. Guards lead Czolgosz down a corridor into a room where the electric chair, medical experts, warden and executioner wait. They calmly strap him into the chair, securing the chair’s metal cap on his head. The executioner then checks that the wires powering the chair are connected, and leaves the scene through a door on the upstage wall. After a moment, the warden signals with his index finger to turn the current on, and Czolgosz’s body struggles and strains against the straps holding him down. He lowers back to his seat after about five seconds. Suddenly, he rises again, his hands clenching and unclenching rapidly, and then lowers once again after about five seconds. Once more he rises, bulging against the restraints, then suddenly slumps in the chair after only a couple of seconds. Two men listen to his chest with a stethoscope, then turn away, nodding: the chair has successfully killed the condemned. The whole feature gives the impression that the viewer is witness to a dispassionate, calculated execution. Aside from the momentary tension in his fists, there’s no

indication that Czolgosz experiences any pain as the electrical current passed through his body and killed him. He's simply put in the seat and rendered dead.

However, in reality, death in the electric chair was far from the simple extinguishing of life, and could be quite gruesome. The world's first electrocution, of William Kemmler at Auburn in August 1890, was particularly brutal.<sup>184</sup> After electrocuting him for 17 seconds, officials declared Kemmler dead, and Alfred Porter Southwick, the death penalty reformer and dentist who designed the chair, tellingly exclaimed, "We live in a higher civilization today." Two minutes later, Kemmler came gasping back to life, and, in a panic, the executioner again flipped the switch, this time electrocuting the body for between one and two minutes. According to witness accounts, Kemmler experienced a tremendous amount of pain before dying, and as they watched his suffering, some onlookers wept and vomited. While it might be argued that the use of the electric chair in Kemmler's execution was still experimental, and that therefore subsequent electrocutions would have been far less painful for the condemned, Essig establishes that by the end of the twentieth century over 4,500 people across the US had been killed in the electric chair, most of them subject to excruciating pain.<sup>185</sup>

Edison Studios' filmic *Execution* largely fails to reenact the pain of electrocution in service to the humanitarian performance of modern civilization. Further, despite the fact that the death penalty has been used more often against black men, tying it historically to the practice of lynching, filmic representations have sought to expiate the electric chair from this association with white supremacy.<sup>186</sup> Even in films such as *The Green Mile*, which might seem to represent the death penalty as a racist tool of an unjust state, the imminence of electrocution is presented

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 251-53.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 277-28.

<sup>186</sup> LaChance, 105.

as an opportunity for the empowerment and self-transformation of a black man.<sup>187</sup> At the same time, this violence occasions a catalyst for redemption for the white prison guards, who are expiated from racial sins.

LaChance concludes that the meaninglessness of the violence of capital punishment will ultimately occasion its end, writing, “In the cultural life of capital punishment, pure imagination has long masked, and thus sustained, the stark realities of state killing, balancing our most illiberal form of punishment with humanist invocations of negative freedom and spiritual redemption.”<sup>188</sup> However, Joseph Roach’s assertion that violence is always performative, and therefore meaningful, troubles this conclusion.<sup>189</sup> Violence always has an audience, “even if that audience is only the victim, even if that audience is only God,” and violence is always making a point for that victim’s benefit.<sup>190</sup> Electrocution performatively produced an understanding of the world that was then taken up by its proponents, such as Edison. Therefore, the representational visualizations of punishment, despite the fact that they obscure its realities, are also productive of the prison’s power. The performances of mass incarceration similarly claim a painless and civilized punishment, while simultaneously repeating tremendous harm, in order to re-inscribe the power and authority of the prison.

Thus, claiming one’s right to look, regarding the prison, can be understood in a performative light.<sup>191</sup> Performatively claiming a way of looking which attends to that

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 192.

<sup>189</sup> Roach, 41.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>191</sup> For Nicholas Mirzoeff, the power of the right to look escapes visual technology altogether. “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. As such, it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity” (473). This small thing,

which is not immediately given to be seen 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 its ghosts as well as the cracks, fissures, and failures in what is given to be seen. Judah Schept writes, "A counter-visual ethnography looks for what is not 'there' [...] the ghosts of racialized 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."<sup>192</sup> A conscious effort to understand and contest these structures entails a particular performance of looking.

In closing, I turn to Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* (1928) to offer an example from dramatic literature that could occasion this performative interruption. In the next chapter, I consider dramatic literature and issues of gender in the work of playwright Naomi Wallace more closely, but *Machinal* also provides an occasion to consider how gendered violence, alongside white supremacy, is crucial to structures of imprisonment. This history is frequently allowed to remain "invisible," as Lisa Biggs has written, despite the fact that rates of incarceration for women are growing faster than any other demographic.<sup>193</sup> From 1825 to 1934, a section of Auburn Prison was used to imprison women, a population which was largely ignored by the Mutual

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making eye contact with another person, is figured not as transcendent, but as a truer sense of reality than that which is structured by power and authority. I might compare the power of the right to look to the intersubjective potential of live performance itself, which is most effective when it is interruptive. However, as any theatregoer knows, this potential is only very rarely realized and exists only momentarily.

<sup>192</sup> Schept, 203.

<sup>193</sup> Biggs, Lisa, "Serious Fun at Sun City," *Theatre Survey*, Vol 57, Iss 1, Jan 2016, 4-36.

Welfare League, in part because it was regarded as shameful to confine women in proximity to men in the first place.

Treadwell was inspired to craft *Machinal* by the electrocution of Ruth Snyder, who with her lover conspired to murder her husband and received the death penalty. The photograph of Snyder in the electric chair, snapped concomitantly with the executioner's pull of the lever, offers viewers today a haunting portrait of violence, concentrated on the body of a woman who was "compelled to crime," in Beth Richie's formulation.<sup>194</sup> As Katherine Weiss argues, Treadwell's play is as much about the machine of the execution itself as it is about the mechanistic dynamics of work, home, marriage, motherhood, pleasure, and gratification within which the heroine is trapped.<sup>195</sup> The mechanism of the electric chair, rather than offering deliverance from these constraints, is figured as just another tool of gender entrapment.

Unlike other dramatic representations of execution, such as Elmer Rice's drama *The Adding Machine* (1923), Treadwell's play ends abruptly after the young woman's electrocution. Despite the fact that it's written in the non-realistic style of expressionism, *Machinal* presents a reality closer to the truth than many representations of the carceral. The priest's final line, begging for Christ's mercy, is just another machine of everyday life, coming at the end of a repetitive benediction that carries on throughout the scene. The young woman's final words, "Somebody! Somebod—" are cut off by the killing current. There is no final moment of salvation or fantasy, for either the young woman or society, only her death and his rote recitation. By foregrounding the mechanistic and constraining features of the institutions that serve to automate gender, the ending of *Machinal* endeavors to shock audiences to life. The final moment doesn't seek to produce a redemptive meaning,

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<sup>194</sup> Richie, Beth, *Compelled to Crime*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>195</sup> Weiss, Katherine, "Sophie Treadwell's 'Machinal': Electrifying the Female Body," *South Atlantic Review*, Vol 71, No 3, Summer 2006, 6.

but endeavors to reveal the structures that cannot be transcended. This revelation ruptures the repetition of trauma in the machine of the prison, dreaming of a future in which we might transform these structures.

## CHAPTER 3

### “THAT’S FREEDOM’S HEAT”: CARCERAL SUBJECTIVITY IN NAOMI WALLACE’S *AND I AND SILENCE*

*We are already and always complicit, interconnected, and related to the stranger, the Other, the unfamiliar.*

Naomi Wallace<sup>196</sup>

This chapter examines the dramaturgy of contemporary American playwright Naomi Wallace, particularly her prison play *And I and Silence* (2011). Wallace writes historical dramas that focus on themes of embodiment and class consciousness. She has said that when she goes to the theatre, she hopes to see something that changes her, surprises her, and gives her “the courage to be a more dangerous citizen.”<sup>197</sup> These are good lenses to understanding her own work as a dramatist. Growing up in Kentucky, Wallace immersed herself in the sights and sounds of rural, working-class America. Her point-of-view as a dramatist is deeply guided by this experience. Her plays eschew telling stories of “great” men and women, and instead focus on the struggles of everyday people.<sup>198</sup> In plays like *One Flea Spare* (1995), *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998), *Slaughter City* (1996), *Things of Dry Hours* (2004), *Night is a Room* (2014), *War Boys* (1992), and *In the Heart of America* (1994), Wallace dramatizes how ideological structures—which are commonly thought of as external

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<sup>196</sup> Wallace, Naomi. “Let the Right One In.” *American Theatre* 30.1 (January 2013): 88, 90-94.

<sup>197</sup> YouTube. “Interview Naomi Wallace.” Published May 2, 2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XmHQD2u1v4&t=386s>> Accessed Mar 29, 2018.

<sup>198</sup> For more on Wallace see the collection Cummings, Scott T. and Erica Stevens Abbitt, eds. *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace: Embodied Dialogues*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013.

abstractions—penetrate and suffuse our lived realities, playing out on the viscera of the human body. Everything that happens “out there,” also happens within the body. Indeed, her narratives dramatize how class—in tandem with other ideologically-structured categories like gender and race—is embodied in how people speak, love, attack, defend, and otherwise perform in the world.<sup>199</sup> Identity difference and social distance are crucial tools for understanding this aspect of her dramaturgy—they are the “cages” against which she rages. She frequently writes across boundaries of identity, telling the stories of characters who differ from her personal experience in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and region. This is part of her belief in the power of theatre as an act of “self-transgression.”<sup>200</sup>

In writing a play about prison, Wallace interrogates theatre’s power to penetrate these cages. Wallace’s cagecraft foregrounds the notion that breaking the boundary of the body can break the boundary created by the cage of history, which resonates on a socio-political level. The prison in her drama poses questions about ethics that have political consequences. The prison as a spatial metaphor often symbolizes some of the deepest-held political myths—that we are self-contained individuals; that violence is an adequate response to violence; that justice can be found in violence; that judgments about individuals can be boiled down to black and white,

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<sup>199</sup> For more on the lived reality of ideology, see Althusser, Louis, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, 127-186. See also Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso Books, 1989.

<sup>200</sup> See Wallace, Naomi. “Let the Right One In.” 2013, 257-265; and Wallace, Naomi. “On Writing as Transgression.” 2008, 281-286. Both from *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace*. Eds. Scott T. Cummings and Erica Stevens Abbitt, 2013.

good and evil. Wallace largely refrains from simplistic character judgments, choosing instead to trouble the perpetrator/victim binary, thus emphasizing people's capacity for change. Wallace's work asserts that self-transgression and transformation are inevitable. She says, "the body is not static in any way, it's in continual movement, continual transformation, the body itself and the signs it takes on."<sup>201</sup> This transformation is precipitated by transgression, penetration, and, indeed, wounding. The outside must cross the boundary to come inside and vice versa.

### ***Freedom and desire in And I and Silence***

*And I and Silence* tells the story of two women, Dee and Jamie—one white, the other black—who first meet while serving nine-year sentences in a prison "somewhere" in the USA in the 1950s.<sup>202</sup> The scenes alternate between the "present" outside prison, as they bunk in a small room and struggle to maintain steady employment, and the "past" nine years earlier inside the prison, where and when they first dream about and quite literally rehearse their lives after release. Over the course of the nonlinear narrative, Dee and Jamie's interracial lesbian love blooms, even as they descend into despair and suffering, eventually committing suicide. The different time periods are interwoven so that as the women, full of hope, approach the date of their release in the past, they also approach their deaths in the present. This juxtaposition is both disorienting and deeply moving.

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<sup>201</sup> Quoted in Machon, Josephine. "Naomi Wallace and the Politics of Desire." From *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace*. Eds. Scott T. Cummings and Erica Stevens Abbitt, 2013, 93.

<sup>202</sup> Wallace, Naomi. *And I and Silence*. New York: Broadway Play Publishing Inc. 2013.

As has been noted by Claudia Barnett, Wallace’s plays stage a “drama of captivity,” and while the action of many of her works transpires in jails or other physical situations of confinement, *And I and Silence* is the closest to belonging to the genre of prison drama—though Wallace balks at such categorization.<sup>203</sup> History, for Wallace, serves as a tool for reflecting on politics today, posing critical questions for interrogation and analysis. Adapting a formulation by historian Robin D.G. Kelley, we might identify *freedom* and *desire* as principle themes in Wallace’s history plays. She dramatizes how the struggles and dreams of and for these twin forces characterize the movement of history. She doesn’t explore them in their sentimentality, but instead reveals their productive centrality in the dynamics of social organization and the contours of power. Kelley writes, “Love [...] is not a thing one can adopt or embrace; it’s a process of making community, nourishing relationships, remaking oneself over and over again. But she also reveals love’s dark side—the pain, betrayal, violent passions, loss, the social oppressions that blunt, deform or outright destroy love.”<sup>204</sup>

*And I and Silence* is about this “dark side” of desire—how the prison perverts and destroys the community’s responsibility to care for its members. Wallace has said, “Desire serves the need to end one’s singular state. It creates the space in which to reimagine oneself. That alone ends loneliness.”<sup>205</sup> Wallace engages the history of the

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<sup>203</sup> Barnett, Claudia. “Physical Prisons: Naomi Wallace’s Drama of Captivity.” *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theater*. Eds Thomas Fahy and Kimball King. New York: Routledge. 2003. 147-165.

<sup>204</sup> Kelley, Robin D.G. “The Facts of Love.” From *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace*. Eds. Scott T. Cummings and Erica Stevens Abbitt, 2013, 238.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in Gornick, Vivian. “An American Exile in America.” *The New York Times Magazine*. Mar 2, 1997. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/02/magazine/an-american-exile-in-america.html>> Accessed Mar 29, 2018.

American prison, particularly its codification of white supremacy in the form of class-based sexual violence. The history of the prison is deeply bound with race and class-based social control. Indeed, the prison system might be seen as an institutional expression of the desire to control the Other. In turning to the history of American imprisonment, Wallace digs into structures of racism and misogyny, uncovering how they're lived corporeally. In her figuration, the history of the prison is a betrayal of the human capacity for mutual care and collective empowerment.

Kelley writes, "*And I and Silence* asks the question no scholarly text could ask or answer: how do human beings under those [prison] conditions muster the capacity to sustain life, imagination, and love?" (238). Similar to Genet's *The Maids* (1947), many of the scenes in Wallace's script depict the women as they role-play, rehearsing for their lives in the outside world and performing the roles of master and servant. Their tragic love, which crosses boundaries of both race and heterosexism, recall Roach and Maggot from *Slaughter City* and Dembi and Adjua from *Things of Dry Hours*.

When they first meet, Jamie is guarded and reticent, having resigned herself to doing her time inconspicuously, and the bolder Dee is quite insistent that they become friends. There is the added barrier of race between them: Jamie, who is black, understands that white people aren't trustworthy, least of all when they act friendly. Though Jamie gradually warms to her new companion, the challenges of maintaining an interracial friendship are a source of tension. Dee also struggles against the constraints of the prison itself, is the frequent subject of disciplinary action, and is several times thrown in the "box." Eventually this results in her being transferred to a

different prison, away from her friend. However, before her move, Dee and Jamie vow to find each other after they're released.

In the present, they live together in a small room and pursue employment as housemaids. They attempt to kindle romantic relationships with men who are cousins, or otherwise closely connected, so that they can live together for the rest of their lives. However, life outside is difficult, and they have little to no money. Though they each find jobs, their masters abuse them, physically and sexually. Slowly the food runs out. As things get worse for the women, they grow closer sexually, and they consummate their erotic relationship close to the conclusion of the narrative. In the end, starving and in despair, the women follow a suicide pact, stabbing one another and dying in a tragic embrace.

Wallace, a poet, has taken her titles from writers such as John Donne and William Carlos Williams. She pulls the title of *And I and Silence* from a piece by Emily Dickinson, whose life of confinement—though in crucial ways different from political or criminal imprisonment—informed her work quite deeply. As literary theorist Caleb Smith argues, Dickinson belongs to the genealogy of writers whose work is co-constitutive with the prison's central place in the American cultural imaginary.<sup>206</sup> Her poetry echoes and magnifies the penitential protestant ethos that drove punishment reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The speaker of the poem tells the story of a funeral procession in her mind, describing the feeling of descending into madness.

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<sup>206</sup> Smith, Caleb. *The Prison and the American Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2009.

The lines unfold vertiginously, and the mourners seem in attendance for rational thought. But it's also a poem about confinement, evoking the terror of solitude:

I felt a Funeral, in my brain,  
And Mourners to and fro,  
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum—  
Kept beating—beating—till I thought  
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again  
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
*And I, and Silence*, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down—  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing—then—<sup>207</sup>

Wallace draws her title—as well as the short epigraph to the play—from the fourth stanza of the poem. The speaker compares “all the Heavens” to the ringing of a bell, and “Being” to the ear that hears the tolling. Life, reality, existence, essence, or however one defines it, is but an attendance to, or resonance of, the action of the

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<sup>207</sup> Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 3, 2017.  
<<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45706>>. Italics added.

universal—divinity, totality, or the cosmos. The fact of being itself is grounded in the repetitive song of entities beyond human comprehension or understanding.

Specifically, being is a state of grace, a sonority that cannot be grasped but only heard. The speaker identifies themselves as alongside “Silence,” therefore without this life-giving tolling. Cut off from the “Heavens,” the speaker belongs to “some strange Race”: “wrecked” and “solitary.” A question surrounds this silence: Is this state of silence willing on the part of the speaker, or is it coerced? The repetition of “treading” and “beating” evokes the pounding of a migraine. Each stanza resonates with foreboding sounds that presage the final drop into the abyss where “knowing” is “Finished.” The speaker, unable to see the proceedings inside her head or hear the bell’s toll, nevertheless hears the “creak” of the casket as they carry it to the grave. Thus, the speaker is cut off from the sound and music of the world, but not from the world’s awful *memento mori*.

Caleb Smith identifies Dickinson’s ambivalent relationship with confinement: on one hand, it brutalizes the body and soul; but on the other, it’s a space for meditation, reflection, and prayer.<sup>208</sup> The horror of confinement drives the individual to connect with others, both imagined and real. The imagined voices of strangers and visitors, hallucinations of self-division and multiplicity, offer the speaker a transcendent escape. The real voices, whispering through the bars, remind the speaker of her connection with other people. In this poem, Dickinson describes the subject as divided, both listening to the funeral inside her own head and also trapped, silent

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<sup>208</sup> Smith, 134-135.

inside the coffin. She figures her “Being” there as merely hearing, listening to the heavenly makers of the sound; she’s alone with “Silence” personified, both members of a “strange Race” segregated from others, invisible witnesses to divine song. Prefiguring Du Bois’ double consciousness, the speaker bears witness to the feeling of embodying oneself and simultaneously the perception of others. She is both alive subject and dead object as the mourners view her. We can imagine the “and...and...” of Wallace’s title extending infinitely, enacting a self-reproducing multiplicity. The multiple subject is central to Wallace’s play, which dramatizes how this “strange Race” has everything to do with both queerness and race.

Dee and Jamie share the same outsider status as the speaker in Dickinson’s poem, cut off from the grace of society, abused at the hands of its most predatory members. They are alone with Silence. As Josephine Machon points out, the repeated moments of silent waiting in the play repeat in space and time Jamie and Dee’s oppressed status.<sup>209</sup> Silence onstage allows for reflection on the narratives of the body—in both stillness and movement, in solitude or with others. “The repetition of the silent, still, looking, and waiting conveys *in one and the same moment* a waiting for freedom, an acceptance of the here and now, expectancy, postponement, time passing, time held, and—most potently—a longing for the other to arrive and complete the picture, the partnership.”<sup>210</sup>

Dee and Jamie don’t drop into a funereal grave, but they trade fatal knife wounds in the end of the play. In the same moment, their past selves are on the stage,

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<sup>209</sup> Machon, 94.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

sharing a tearful farewell. The heat of freedom therefore cuts across time and burns. Affect accrues, obtaining different meanings across bodies, refracting and morphing with dizzying significations. The effect of seeing all four women onstage is striking, spreading the narrative across actresses, and deconstructing embodiment into multiple temporalities. The multiple subjectivities stack up alongside and on top of each other. This dramatizes the “and...and...” of the title. They are past *and* present, captured *and* free, suffering *and* caring, alive *and* dead, I *and* she, speaking *and* silent. For Wallace, this spreading represents a radical desire to undo the fiction that human beings can ever stand disconnected and unfeeling from one another. These disorienting final moments stage how the wound—whether it occurred in the past or has yet to happen—affects all subjects, conditioning their embodied experiences in the world. Wallace shows the wound in order to articulate a framework of complicity and attachment for the audience. Like Dee and Jamie, we exist alongside, in, and through each other. These relations imbue our bodies with meaning not only in the present, but in the past and future as well. This wounding bears witness to the potential of mutual attention and care.

According to Machon, this moment “communicates the brutal harshness of the impossibility of freedom in a society yoked by economic and ideological inequality alongside the reminder that aspirations for personal freedom and social change remain presently possible if the dream is *enabled* to be achieved.”<sup>211</sup> Wallace represents this dark wounding in order to bear witness to Dee and Jamie’s hardship. She also wants to

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 95.

dream of a future where economic and ideological inequality are melted into a more compassionate sociality. The stacking of past and present not only demonstrates how the past is never past, but how the present loops back to penetrate past. Not only is their freedom in the past present at their deaths, but these deaths haunt their past release. This temporal blending is like a dream, in which a wound is an act of love that presages a better future.

***From critical memory to critical history***

In Wallace's plays, events are never really past/passed. Instead, she views history as cyclical and open to revision. What's past/passed continues to structure our lives in the present and lays the groundwork for what's possible in the future. For example, the setting of *In the Heart of America* has a disorienting temporality in which all American wars mix together with personal memories. Similarly, in *Slaughter City*, characters representing the eternal capitalist and revolutionary are locked in a struggle that in the present of the play proceeds in the setting of the slaughterhouse.

Wallace sets *And I and Silence* in the 1950s to interrogate how misogynist, racist, classist violence in that time reflects on the contemporary moment. What has changed and what has remained the same? Wallace frequently cites historians like Marcus Rediker and Howard Zinn as inspirations.<sup>212</sup> Harvey Young, in his influential study of black embodiment, explains that this critical technique of looking backward foments critical thought looking forward: "Critical memory invites consideration of past practices that have affected the lives and shaped the experiences of black folks. It

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<sup>212</sup> Greene, Alexis, ed. "Naomi Wallace." *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists*. Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, Inc. 2001. 459-463

looks back in time, from a present-day perspective, and not only accounts for the evolution in culture but also enables an imagining of what life would be like had things been different. The appeal of critical memory is that it grants access to past experiences of select individuals. At the same time, it does not blind us to their (or our) present reality.”<sup>213</sup> Specific events and experiences repeat across bodies, altering slightly from era to era, and, inasmuch as this “repetition with a difference” is itself a performance, historical actors in the present can rehearse social change within its trajectory. This technique problematizes so-called socio-political “progress,” and instead seeks to understand what might be buried by a discourse of progress as benefitting all historical subjects equally. Set before the revolutionary victories of the Civil Rights era, “The ‘50s” in *And I and Silence* represent a moment of insurmountable gender, race, and class oppression. Against the prevailing common sense, during the economic boom of post-war USA—sometimes referred to as the “Golden Age of Capitalism”—people suffered.

For instance, in an early scene, which depicts their first meeting in prison, Dee prevents Jamie from leaving her cell to go to the mess hall for lunch in order to introduce herself. There’s the barrier of race between them: Jamie spits out “White block” when Dee identifies where she lives, and says, “Blue eyes make me cold.”<sup>214</sup> Dee persists, offering Jamie a cigarette and a candy, and, perhaps to provoke her into

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<sup>213</sup> Young, Harvey. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 2010. 19-20.

<sup>214</sup> Wallace, 9.

opening up, says that she knows the circumstances of why Jamie is in prison. Jamie and her brother attempted to rob a grocery store, which ended in his murder:

YOUNG JAMIE: Marcel. His name was Marcel. He had a piece of wood in his pocket, made it look like a gun. We went into that grocery store together. Man in the store had a real gun. Shot Marcel in the neck.<sup>215</sup>

When considering the violence that Jamie's brother Marcel suffered, it would appear that there's a great deal in common between the 1950s and the present. Jamie's tragic story recalls the murders of young African Americans at the hands of police and armed bystanders. Marcel could be Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown. Whiteness today protects itself by locking up or murdering blackness, and Wallace uses critical memory to observe this fact's historical antecedents.

A poignant exchange at the end of Scene Five, set in the present after they've been released, offers an additional example: Dee says, "Every time you walk in that door," and Jamie answers, "Yeah. Me too."<sup>216</sup> On a superficial level, this is a simple expression of connection between close friends, happy to be reunited and free after years of incarceration. They feel a sense of relief at their capacity to come and go from place to place as they please. But this short exchange belies a profound anxiety that Dee and Jamie, as interracial female roommates, struggle with on a daily basis. In the 1950s, it was a tremendous risk for two women, black and white, to live together.

It's in fact a risk just to be black in public, as Jamie frequently tells Dee. As she says later in the play, "I walk the street alone to work I never know what's flying

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Wallace, 25.

through the air. Piss pot from the second floor. Dog shit. People cursin' me, white people, your people, stick out a leg and trip me."<sup>217</sup> While Charles Isherwood, in his *New York Times* review, surmises that the play must be set in the Southern USA because of the racism, one must point out that that region doesn't have a monopoly on bigotry. Racism in the North was, and is today, just as prevalent as in the South, it simply manifests with a different cultural valence.<sup>218</sup> Regardless of where in the USA Dee and Jamie live, the relief they feel when Jamie walks safely through the front door is because, when Jamie's out on the street, she's the potential victim of racist and misogynist violence, just as her brother was.

As Saidiya Hartman argues, after Emancipation, it's freedom itself that structures the experience of black individuality as "burdened" or "indebted," binding the black body to a subjectivity that subjugates on a deeper level.<sup>219</sup> Despite the fact that Jamie has been released from prison, she remains constrained by the terror of this freedom. Therefore, it would be a mistake to see the subsequent decades between the 1950s and today as solely progressive. As scholars like Michelle Alexander have argued, it might be said that Civil Rights struggles set the stage for mass incarceration.<sup>220</sup> Indeed, one of Wallace's aims in staging a prison story is to dramatize how things *haven't* changed or progressed.

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<sup>217</sup> Wallace, 33.

<sup>218</sup> Jones, Douglas A., Jr. *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

<sup>219</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>220</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press, 2012. 40-43.

Notions of guarding communities against the ravages of crime are deeply bound up with notions about race. As Khalil Gibran Muhammad argues in *The Condemnation of Blackness*, the notion that black subjects are inherently criminal is “the most significant and durable signifier of black inferiority [...] since the dawn of Jim Crow.”<sup>221</sup> Since Emancipation, blackness has come to be synonymous with crime. Muhammad’s study focuses on how criminological statistics refashioned blackness as crime, but also it’s undoubtedly true that cultural narratives, circulated through theatre and performance genres such as the prison drama, contribute to manufacturing this social fiction. *And I and Silence* makes plain these narratives by comparing the 1950s to the contemporary moment.

### ***Embodying multiplicity***

Invoking Fred Moten’s study of the aesthetics of blackness reveals how *And I and Silence* stages how Dee and Jamie’s outsider status is embodied as multiplicity.<sup>222</sup> As Moten articulates, doubleness and blackness are interchangeable. The hybrid movements of blackness comprise montage, improvisation, splitting, resisting, breaking, and blurring. The aesthetics of blackness structure the play: the chronology is scrambled, and the narrative shifts across different bodies repeatedly. Unlike some other dramas that take place cross-temporally, such as *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, in which one actor plays their role across ages, performing both the younger and older

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<sup>221</sup> Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2011. 3.

<sup>222</sup> Moten, Fred. “The Case of Blackness.” *Criticism* (Spring 2008), Vol. 50, No. 2. 177-218; Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2003.

versions of the character, *And I and Silence* employs a more conventionally “filmic” dramaturgy: Wallace splits the roles of Dee and Jamie between two actresses. In the past, teenagers perform the roles, and in the present, women in their mid-to-late twenties take over. This allows the parallel events to unfold onstage simultaneously, making the final scene particularly poignant, as we see the hope and optimism of the younger characters juxtaposed with the despair of their older selves. This dramatic technique resonates with Judith Thompson’s *Perfect Pie* (2000), the musical *Fun Home* (2013)—adapted by Lisa Kron from Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir—or Tarrell Alvin McCraney’s *In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue*—the play Barry Jenkins adapted for his film *Moonlight* (2016).<sup>223</sup> In these other examples of temporal spread, different actors perform moments in the protagonist’s life nearly concurrently. The narrative of interracial lesbianism of *And I and Silence* in some sense combines elements from these different works.

Melting time by spreading the narrative across different bodies effectively deconstructs a major function of the prison: the control and constraint of the subject’s time. It’s through the spatio-temporal mechanism of incarceration that the USA attempts to correct what is seen as an inherent criminal deviance of blackness and queerness. As Jean Genet points out, “we’re still busy setting limits on black people’s Time and Space. Not only is each one of them forced to withdraw more and more into himself, but we put them in prison as well. And when we have to, we assassinate

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<sup>223</sup> Thanks to Andrew Dilts for suggesting McCraney’s unstaged play to me as a reference point at the Philosophies of Incarceration and the Incarceration of Philosophy conference at Villanova (March 2017).

them.”<sup>224</sup> Blackness, in response to this spatio-temporal violence, refashions itself as unconstrainable in the ways that Moten describes. That which is ontologically located “in the break” cannot be captured and confined.

### ***Rehearsing for survival***

According to Lindsay Cummings, Wallace’s characters are performance artists, engaged in rehearsal to change the world around them.<sup>225</sup> These rehearsals create spaces for radical empathy. Characters look backward in time in order to rehearse for tomorrow, and stage performances like Dee and Jamie to unite in a project of social change. Cummings describes how rehearsal functions in Wallace’s plays to stage the hope and desire of the “subjunctive”:

Wallace’s characters use rehearsals to work out what it means to live in the world and what it would take to change that world. These rehearsals are social encounters in which one character is changed through his or her interactions with another. They open the way to intimate relationships—to the love and friendship that make us vulnerable to others. New worlds and identities are not built alone in these plays, but with and through others. Thus it is in the affective and analytical state of rehearsal, where the self is actively under construction, that we might find the conditions for social change.<sup>226</sup>

It’s in the imaginative “as if” of the subjunctive mood, in which the knowledge of reality is unsettled, that social revision opens as possibility. This is of course the creative power of performance itself. In rehearsals, theatre artists actively foster an environment in which reality can be unsettled in order to open a multitude of

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<sup>224</sup> Genet, Jean. “Letter to American Intellectuals.” *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews*. Ed by Andrew Dichy. Trans by Jeff Fort. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2004. 30.

<sup>225</sup> Cummings, Lindsay B. *Empathy as Dialogue in Theatre and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 124.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid*, 133-4.

possibilities for performance. Cummings demonstrates that Wallace's characters themselves are theatre artists of a sort: They use rehearsal in order to create a subjunctive space for social and personal change. These rehearsals are embodied and erotic, as the desires for change and for sex converge.

Jamie's mother, Betty, was a maid when she was still alive, and the two women endeavor to follow her employment path after they're released. In Scene Six, Jamie stages a lesson in being a housemaid. She teaches Dee how to "flitter" her rag around to properly dust with "style." She models the proper dusting action for her friend, and tells her to hold the rag like a bird. Dee prefers trees, and Jamie says, "They go together, birds and trees."<sup>227</sup> These two connected images, birds and trees, recur throughout the play, and can symbolize several things, "flitter and dust," freedom and stability, labor and luxury, and, perhaps most notably, Jamie and Dee themselves. Just as the bird nests in the tree, the women build nests in each other, offering support and mutual recognition. This scene ends with a tender image of hope: Jamie poeticizing about dusting as she dances around the room for her friend's benefit, dreaming of their lives together after their release

In *And I and Silence*, Dee and Jamie frequently engage in rehearsal to change the trajectory of their lives. Similar to *The Maids*, when one girl adopts the persona of the high-class employer, the other correspondingly plays the servant. Dee and Jamie use a walking stick as a prop to mark the erotic power of class differentials. It recalls Wallace's play about a 17<sup>th</sup>-century plague house *One Flea Spare*, in which the high-

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<sup>227</sup> Wallace, 30.

class man, Mr. Snelgrave, uses his stick to provoke and torment the other characters. In one memorable moment, he forces the low-class man, Bunce, to suck the end of the stick. In *And I and Silence*, Dee says she gives it to Jamie so that she can walk around like a “fancy,” high-class lady. The walking stick serves as an important prop for the pedagogical performance of class, gender, and race that they rehearse repeatedly. In Scene Three, after a moment in which both of the women posture and pose as their respective characters—Jamie the lord and Dee the housemaid—Jamie manipulates the improvisation to address a more pressing problem:

JAMIE: Show me, Miss Dee.

DEE: Yes, sir. Would you like a cup of coffee, Sir?

JAMIE: No. I’d like. A piece of cake.

DEE: (*As herself*) Give me the bread.

(*JAMIE hands DEE the piece of bread.*)

DEE: Here’s a piece of cake, sir.

JAMIE: What kind of cake?

DEE: Coffee cake. With almonds, Sir.

(*JAMIE nibbles the bread.*)

JAMIE: This cake is stale. How dare you serve me stale cake!

DEE: But I just baked it.

JAMIE: Stale! You eat it. You eat it or I’ll hit you!

(*JAMIE brandishes the stick. DEE takes the bread and eats it. She’s hungry. With satisfaction, JAMIE watches her eat.*)<sup>228</sup>

Before this performance, Dee had refused to eat, instead saving her pennies in order to buy Jamie a gift: the walking stick. But in the course of the game, Jamie, brandishing the stick threateningly, forces Dee to take care of herself and eat the bread. Dee has no desire to care for herself outside the performance, but in giving Jamie the stick so that they might play again, she expresses a different desire, which results in her care. In

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<sup>228</sup> Wallace, 13-14.

performance, they flow between inside and outside the fantasy, making specific clarifications and directing the other to perform certain actions so that the fantasy can continue. The scenarios are violent and erotic, and the women rehearse these sado-masochistic fantasies in order to take care of each other. The performances serve a pedagogical function, as in role-play, in which the participants develop mechanisms for managing difficult and unusual scenarios, but the scenes also perform a more immediate salutary function.

The songs Jamie and Dee sing and the musical games they play exemplify how they seek to reform their surroundings:

JAMIE: That Jamie's got a bead for dirt and dust.  
She'll polish up your metals, kill the rust.  
DEE: She stands up straight, sure keeps her eyes polite.  
She's not stupid but then she's not too bright.  
JAMIE: No, no, her brain is just the perfect size  
and she knows who's the boss, who's always wise.  
DEE: She carries her own bucket and a brush  
and she won't say two words if you say  
JAMIE: Hush.  
DEE/JAMIE: Hush.<sup>229</sup>

The call-and-response couplets recall Shakespeare's fools and clowns, Lewis Carroll, or the improvisational stylings of old-school hip-hop emcees like Melle Mel and Kurtis Blow. The players agree upon certain rules and structures and then challenge one other to follow them as inventively as they can, skillfully extemporizing nonsense verses. Jamie and Dee are having fun, but the subject matter of these and other rhymes in the play is noteworthy: They toy with their viability as employees. The couplets

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<sup>229</sup> Wallace, 2.

function as a sort of curriculum vitae, and in fact the women refer to this bit of word play as Jamie's "letter of reference."<sup>230</sup> These words are not only for fun, but also establish and celebrate Jamie's value, in silly and whimsical ways, surely, but there's a current of seriousness here as well. This resonates with what Alice Walker says in her essay on Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American female poet: The power of the words is that they keep alive the "notion of song" as it passes between bodies.<sup>231</sup> This gains added significance when Dee admits that she cannot read or write, despite spending nine years in prison and ostensibly having the time to learn. The role-play and word games allow her access to the transmission of culture. Because she's illiterate, performance is her primary mode of engaging, understanding, and remembering the world around her. Performance studies scholars such as Richard Schechner, Dwight Conquergood, and Diana Taylor have long understood the importance of performance for marginalized people, in that it works against text-centric epistemologies which privilege gender, race, and class hegemony.<sup>232</sup>

### ***Melting gender imprisonment***

*And I and Silence* figures mass incarceration as inherently and inevitably functioning as an agent of homophobic, misogynist, racist, classist, ableist social

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<sup>230</sup> Wallace, 2.

<sup>231</sup> Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South (1974)" *Ms. Magazine*. Accessed April 6, 2017. <<http://www.msmagazine.com/spring2002/walker.asp>>.

<sup>232</sup> See Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, New York: Routledge, 1995; Conquergood, Dwight, ed. E. Patrick Johnson, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013; and Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

control, containing bodies in order to individualize and destroy them. It cannot be reformed, only survived. Wallace dramatizes for audiences that, even after their release, the two protagonists remain caught in social prisons, their labor exploited and their bodies brutalized. They remain “frozen in time”—an evocative phrase Victoria Law coins to describe the experience of those caught in the USA’s criminal justice system.<sup>233</sup> *And I and Silence* dramatizes a rejoinder to the logics of confinement that, following Jessica Benjamin, offers an “intersubjective” alternative to this carceral freeze.<sup>234</sup>

Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love* combines critical approaches that are for various reasons often held apart. Benjamin’s aim is to reconcile Freudian and feminist approaches to subjectivity and domination in order to demonstrate how our received understanding of the former creates the conditions for and in fact necessitates the latter. She argues that to understand subjectivity as we currently do is to understand interpersonal relationships as inherently existing in states of dominance and subordination. By denying the dependency of subject-formation on others, idealizing “separation” and solitary independence, we in fact re-affirm fictions of autonomy that create the conditions for domination. Benjamin’s intervention is to transform our relation to the subject’s dependence on others; rather than understanding the constraints of civilized society as negative or repressive—as, in different ways, certain

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<sup>233</sup> Law, Victoria. “The Nonviolent/Violent Dichotomy.” *The New Inquiry*. April 3, 2017. Accessed April 5, 2017. <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-nonviolentviolent-dichotomy/>>.

<sup>234</sup> Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Random House. 1988.

strains of both psychoanalysis and feminism have a tendency to do—she proposes these constraints as productive, or in fact as not exactly “constraining” at all. These forces are then seen as constitutive of subjectivity and of the psyche itself.

In Wallace’s theatre, subjects marked woman often embody an intersubjective praxis. The women in *And I and Silence* conjure “freedom’s heat” to thaw the temporality of imprisonment. This burning recalls Antonin Artaud’s injunction that theatre artists should be like victims being burned at the stake, signaling through the flames.<sup>235</sup> The individual subject is revealed to be an illusion and is in fact always already multiple: entangled, complicit, interconnected, and related with other subjects, as Wallace describes in the epigraph to this chapter. The spectator is transformed in Wallace’s drama. The erotic of being together watching one another melts the jailhouse bars of individualism, uncovering the theatre’s capacity to make space to witness and realize new social arrangements and political futures.

Wallace is interested in gender, race, and class domination, and how the experiences of these subject positions connect across bodies and times. Indeed, Wallace stages these subjectivities as intersecting. She follows Paul Gilroy, who, in his suggestive expansion of Stuart Hall’s dictum that race is the modality in which class is lived, writes, “gender is the modality in which race is lived.”<sup>236</sup> The role-plays depict the relations of domination between master and servant, and Dee and Jamie rehearse how to manage abuse. They rehearse when and where the women should

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<sup>235</sup> See Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and Its Double*, New York: Grove Press, 1958.

<sup>236</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. New York: Verso Books. 1993. 85.

draw “the line” with their employers, and what they should do if it’s crossed. Yet, these rehearsals also serve to foreground for the audience the social imprisonment the women experience. In one scene, lord-Jamie instructs maid-Dee to lick her knee. When she moves to do so, Jamie disrupts the rehearsal, breaking character and kicking Dee away:

JAMIE: No! That’s the line. That’s the line. You say “No!” You say no.  
DEE: But he’ll fire me.  
JAMIE: Doesn’t matter.  
DEE: It does.  
JAMIE: We learned this, Dee. Years ago. We can’t forget—  
DEE: The line. Right. And if he tries to make you lick his knees then  
JAMIE: I run and run and run and run. But I don’t forget—  
DEE: —my bucket and brush.<sup>237</sup>

Jamie and Dee both know that life for housemaids is under near-constant threat of sexual coercion and rape. Jamie’s goal in the role-play is to rehearse how to fight back or escape. But Dee has a slightly more complicated concern that she’ll lose her job, betrayed in both her willingness to lick lord-Jamie’s knee and in her resistance to saying “No.” Wallace, in dramatizing this struggle, seeks to analyze how subjects are shoehorned into relations of violence and coercion.

Reading Jessica Benjamin alongside this scene uncovers an important tension here that can’t be overlooked. She argues “that ‘power holds good’ not by denying our desire but by forming it, converting it into a willing retainer, its servant or representative.”<sup>238</sup> Power is “a system that transforms all parts of the psyche.”<sup>239</sup> In

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<sup>237</sup> Wallace, 14-15.

<sup>238</sup> Benjamin, 4.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

their rehearsals, the women simultaneously perform the violence of the male master, while enjoying erotic connection with one another. Does this simultaneity serve to capture the women in relations of sexual domination, or is their erotic a more subversive gesture?

For feminist critics and artists, female subjectivity is frequently characterized as a state of confinement, and for reasons that are empirically observable and/or experienced bodily by women and girls themselves. Implements of constraint attend female bodies across cultures and historical time periods; women are just as ubiquitously represented in narratives of bondage and forced labor. On a more figurative level, civil and human rights struggles for women are almost always described in terms that pitch them against restraint or moving beyond borders and boundaries. In the US, women are the fastest growing imprisoned population, and when prison culture and policy are discussed, the experiences of incarcerated women are frequently erased. The very formulation “women’s liberation” is carceral, prefiguring a state of femininity that is chained or bound in some way, necessitating an action of release.

*And I and Silence* is very much in line with this convention. In addition to moments in the housemaid rehearsals, the first scene ends with a powerful image that demonstrates this. The women soak their dresses in soapy water, hang them up to dry, and then stand in their buckets, letting the other wash their legs. It’s a happy ritual—recalling a similar scene in *Slaughter City*—as the characters make themselves “clean” and “spiffy.” Wallace frequently employs the dramaturgical technique of indexing the materiality of bodies with the materiality of things. The audience sees the labor of

personal hygiene and effort it takes to make oneself presentable to the outside world, particularly if one is poor and looking for a job. The image of a young girl's dress is central for Wallace, appearing in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, *One Flea Spare*, and her film *Lawn Dogs* (1997). For Wallace, the little dress indexes the typically unacknowledged labor of young women to look attractive and virginal. In her plays, dresses typically begin clean and pressed, but are during the narrative dirtied and removed, thrown to the ground or into the wind. The dress indexes the work the young female body is expected to do in society: to appear clean and pretty.

### ***Wounding as feminist gestus***

Drawing in part on the theoretical writings of Bertolt Brecht, such as his notion of “not/but,” Wallace emphasizes the dialectical dynamics of her characters' decision-making.<sup>240</sup> In Brecht's theory, the audience is given to understand, at each moment in which a character makes a choice, that that character had a dialectically opposite choice available to them. The events of the play, therefore, are not the product of inevitable or “natural” actions, but the result of an individual's interpretation of a situation and subsequent decision. This is how Brecht envisions the “doubleness” of the theatre: The antithetical option is made apparent as available to the character, but they chose to do something else.

We can locate a praxis of “not/but” throughout *And I and Silence*, in particular when Dee and Jamie choose death in the end of the play. However, while Wallace is

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<sup>240</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. London: Methuen, 1964, 144. In many ways, Wallace's dramaturgy incorporates aspects of both Brechtian and Artaudian theatre theory.

guided by Brecht, and the theories of dialectical materialism more generally, her dramaturgy invokes affect and desire that complicate his notions of a detached, highly-intellectual, Marxist theatre. As Colin Hamilton notes, in his review of her book of poetry *To Dance a Stony Field*, “In Wallace’s world, justice is often the question, but it has no dogmatic answer. Although she shares Marx’s vision, she won’t look past his neglect. Rather than dulling her poems to a worldly relativism or leading to the refuge of individual experience, her sense of complexity seeks out the voices—of soldiers, of priests, of the old, the powerless—which might express it.”<sup>241</sup> These political aspirations are not mere abstractions, but are felt in active bodies.

In Wallace’s drama, a performance of *wounding* finds its fully political connotations. As Carl Lavery writes in his examination of the politics of Jean Genet, “When the subject is wounded, love is what emerges.”<sup>242</sup> In Wallace’s dramaturgy, the wound—the puncture of the external—yields a rupture of difference that melts distance between subjects. The wound dissolves normative notions of time and space, which results in dramatic connections between characters across and through boundaries. The ethics of this movement provokes a political commitment to freedom and desire.

Wallace’s “feminist gestus,” as Shannon Baley argues, utilizes images of death and desire in order to broker a view of a more egalitarian world, “where bodies can be expanded, become fluid, and new horizons can be seen from what is possible, both in

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<sup>241</sup> Hamilton, Colin. “From this Place I Can Reach Up.” *The Iowa Review*, Vol 27, No 1, Spring 1997, 189.

<sup>242</sup> Lavery, Carl. “Ethics of the Wound: A new interpretation of Jean Genet’s politics.” *Journal of European Studies*, 33:2, 2003, 166.

the world of the play and on stage in production.”<sup>243</sup> Thus, Baley might argue that Dee and Jamie’s prison sentence and their traumatic experiences after release paradoxically gesture to a kind of utopia. *Pace* Baley, my sense is that *And I and Silence* stages a politics of desire that is directly tethered to suffering.

In plays like *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* and *In the Heart of America*, characters have survived the deaths of lovers and must cope with that guilt. They’re called upon to bear witness, to survive. *And I and Silence* is different, except if one wishes to view the presence of the younger selves in the final suicide scene as a kind of witnessing. Typically in Wallace’s plays, lovers don’t survive or die as pairs, even when they’re of the same gender. One character is always left alone. But this play upturns that trope. The final split scene, titled both Scene Eleven and Scene Twelve, poignantly stages this paradox, expanding and melting the boundaries of subjectivity as Baley describes. The action begins in the present, Jamie and Dee together in their room, freezing, exhausted, dehydrated, and wracked with hunger pains because they don’t have the money to buy food. They repeatedly comment on how cold they are, and we might read in this their situation of being “frozen” in carceral time, as well as their degraded psyches, deteriorating from hunger. They haven’t left their room in days:

DEE: It’s spring outside.

JAMIE: Is it?

DEE: Maybe.

JAMIE: Say it again.

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<sup>243</sup> Baley, Shannon. “Death and Desire, Apocalypse, and Utopia: Feminist *Gestus* and the Utopian Performative in the Plays of Naomi Wallace.” From *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace*. Eds. Scott T. Cummings and Erica Stevens Abbitt, 2013, 21

DEE: Maybe. Maybe.  
JAMIE: I'm getting spoiled.  
DEE: Maybe.<sup>244</sup>

Dee and Jamie relish in this “Maybe,” which represents the subjunctive mood of Wallace’s plays, as Cummings describes above. They enjoy together the potentiality of an unsettled, liminal world. This mood creates a magical space, where time and space cease to be deterministic, and possibilities remain open to them. They could be freezing to death, but it could also be spring outside, when and where winter thaws and new life begins to bloom. “Maybe” works like an incantation to conjure this space.

Then, young Jamie and Dee enter the room and “The two realities happen simultaneously,” further demonstrating this radical openness.<sup>245</sup> In the past, Dee has bribed a guard with peppermints in order to furtively visit her friend one final time before she’s transferred to another prison for disciplinary reasons. They’re meeting to bid farewell, and to finalize their plans to reunite after their release at a little room they’ve found. In the present, in that little room, “Dee pulls an elegant knife from beneath the mattress.”<sup>246</sup> As they prepare to commit suicide, Jamie (in the present) says, “There’s a spilling inside me [...] Like a pinprick inside me. A hole. And I’m pouring down that hole.”<sup>247</sup> She anticipates the mortal wound that will kill her, and it manifests affectively as a liquefying, a melting. There’s a moment when all four women play a musical rhyming game, as though they can hear each other across time.

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<sup>244</sup> Wallace, 51.

<sup>245</sup> Wallace, 52.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Wallace, 53.

Then in the present, the women stab each other with the knife. At the same time, in the past, Young Jamie says, “I can feel a heat in my chest [...] That’s freedom’s heat.”<sup>248</sup> It’s as if Young Jamie feels the heat of the blood, the freedom of mortality, as her future self ends. The heat of this freedom warms them across time, even as it ends their lives.

At the climax of Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s play *Love Suicides at Amijima*, Jihei—one of the titular lovers—asks “Can suicide ever be pleasant, whether by hanging or cutting the throat?”<sup>249</sup> A classic of Japanese banraku puppet theatre, the play tells the tragic love story of the young paper merchant and a concubine Koharu, who cannot be together owing to a confluence of social forces—including Jihei’s previous marriage. In the end, rather than live their lives apart, Jihei and Koharu commit suicide, so that they might remain together in death. In Masahiro Shinoda’s 1969 stylized film adaptation of the play—billed in English as *Double Suicide*—the black-clad, surreal stage-hands, who until this moment had assisted the dramatic action in various ways, stand silent witness as Jihei and Koharu commit mutual suicide. These stoic figures foreground the disinterested voyeurism of being an audience member to tragic performances, and in fact model how audiences should receive the deaths. Shinoda’s adaptation provides an answer to Jihei’s query: though Jihei may be wondering for himself and his lover whether their impending deaths might provide them an agential release, which might be called pleasant, for audiences,

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<sup>248</sup> Wallace, 55.

<sup>249</sup> Monzaemon, Chikamatsu. *The Love Suicides at Amijima*. Trans. Donald Keene. From *Traditional Japanese Theater*. Ed. Karen Brazell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 361

attending to these suicides provides a kind of theatrical pleasure and may in fact be necessary. Drawing in part on Nina Cornyetz's Brechtian analysis of the political poetics of detachment at work in the film, we might understand how the pleasure of entertainment—an element which Brecht himself ranked as foremost in making theatre—can be present for the audience when watching suicide onstage.<sup>250</sup> Further, we might inquire what lessons spectators should take from these fatal wounds. What remains in the wake of the fatal wound?

***Conclusion: Reflecting on directing The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek***

In the early months of 2017, I directed a production of *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* by Naomi Wallace at Cornell University, on one of the Department of Performing and Media Arts' main stages. Set during the Great Depression, the play tells the story of two teenagers, Dalton Chance and Pace Creagan, as they plan and rehearse a deadly race against a train when it crosses the 100-foot tall bridge over a dried-up creek located just outside Louisville. Like *And I and Silence*, the narrative plays with time and the plot unfolds in non-linear, cinematic episodes. One of the main arcs that initially drew me to the play centers on crime and punishment: Much of the action takes place in Dalton's jail cell. He claims to have murdered Pace, and the authorities are holding him until they can gather more evidence. In truth, she ran the train alone, and when he refused to watch her do it, she dove off the track to her death. Together with the cast of talented undergraduate actors and designers, I approached the play as a deeply erotic meditation on the disturbing, dangerous ways that human

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<sup>250</sup> Cornyetz, Nina. "Gazing Disinterestedly: Politicized Poetics in *Double Suicide*." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol 12, No 3, Fall 2001, 101-127.

beings struggle against poverty, marginalization, and despair, a recurring theme in Wallace's drama. We used the music of Max Richter as the production's soundtrack, specifically his song cycle *Memoryhouse*. The compositions evoked the scattered desolation of American poverty, and lent a meditative aesthetic to the production. At several points during the process, members of the creative team reflected on how eerily relevant the play, originally produced in 1998, felt to the current socio-political situation, in which frightened voters rolled the dice on a millionaire outsider, despite staggering evidence of racism, classism, ableism, misogyny, fraud, and a general moral bankruptcy. One student identified the production as the "centerpiece" of how he "grieved" after the election of Donald Trump. In a sense, like Pace, voters elected to play chicken with a train, rather than seize the means of production, as Gin, one of the other characters in the play and Dalton's mother, does. She defies law and order and helps organize a grassroots labor council that takes over an abandoned glass factory, in order to refurbish it and put people to work again. Much like during the 1930s, in the early years of the twenty-first century many parts of the United States are struggling in a number of ways. It's a time of tremendous progressive political energy, but also one of intense rage and fear. In my mind and those of my theatrical collaborators, the 2016 election was a catastrophically regressive outburst of the latter.

The stunning final scene of *Trestle* takes place out-of-time, occupying an uncertain world simultaneously past and present, waking and dreaming, alive and dead. In many ways it's similar to the final moments of *And I and Silence*, and comparing the two compounds Wallace's relevance and power. We staged the scene as a kind of dance, emphasizing the embodied presence of the performers. It begins in

Dalton's jail cell, and with his hands he makes shadow animals on the wall. This directly cites the prologue of the play, signaling to the audience, like the return of a familiar musical motif, that we're nearing the end. When he lights the candle to begin his private shadow show, we started to play Max Richter's "November," which underscored the rest of the scene. Suddenly, Pace appears and the lights shift. The audience is given to understand that she's either a memory or a ghost. She passes easily through the jail cell walking center-stage, breaking Dalton's concentration and pulling him out of his confinement. She wears a little pink dress, and holds one as well, placing it on the ground and commanding Dalton to lie down on top of it. When he does so, she steps away and directs him to touch himself as though he were touching her. She in fact says that when he touches himself he touches her. The dress on the ground doubles her body, and as Dalton rolls over on top of it to continue their erotic communion, she enters him—erotically and spiritually. As the concatenated strings of the music build gradually, arpeggiating dramatically to the final crescendo, Dalton and Pace orgasm together. Watching two teenagers engage in this surreal, virtual sex can seem unsettling, but the overall effect is quite moving, exemplifying the peculiar beauty and power of Naomi Wallace's dramaturgy. It recalls a line from *Slaughter City*: "When a worker comes, when we come, it's our body's way of saying: 'I am radiant and I am fearless and I will not be disposed of; I am not a piece of meat'" The subject is brought out of their confinement through an erotic encounter, and conjoined feelings of pain and pleasure serve to undo individuality. This encounter crosses the boundaries of time, space, mortality, subjectivity, and normative notions of embodiment itself, dramatizing the poetry of freedom and desire.

## CHAPTER 4

### CARCERAL SPACE-TIMES: ABOLITION DREAMS AND *THE HOUSE THAT HERMAN BUILT*<sup>251</sup>

*Repetition demands the new.*

Jacques Lacan<sup>252</sup>

*The future belongs to ghosts.*

Jacques Derrida<sup>253</sup>

The ghostly materiality of the body, within the context of the prison, offers an occasion to rethink the relationship between race and performance as a spatio-temporal category—an occasion deeply informed by inquiries into materiality in studies of both race and performance. For example, we find this inquiry in the interpellative psychological mechanisms described by Frantz Fanon; the hybridic cultural archeology of Paul Gilroy; performance's ontology as disappearance theorized by Peggy Phelan; the analysis of objects and subjects across time inter(in)animated by Rebecca Schneider; and the phenomenology of blackness discussed by Harvey Young.<sup>254</sup> Each of these accounts offers different notions of how performance and/or race assume and/or resist materialization over time. Materialization in these accounts

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<sup>251</sup> Much of this chapter is set to be published in the forthcoming anthology, *Time Signatures: Race and Performance After Repetition*, edited by Soyica Colbert, Douglas Jones, and Shane Vogel.

<sup>252</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*. 1973. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton. 1998, 61.

<sup>253</sup> Quoted in the film *Ghost Dance*. Dir. Ken McMullen. 1983.

<sup>254</sup> See: Young, Harvey. *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 2010; Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains*. New York: Routledge. 2011; Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked*. New York: Routledge. 1993; Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. New York: Verso Books. 1993; and Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 1952.

is figured—correctly, I think—as a kind of trauma. This chapter considers how the space-time of race and performance subtends a spectral materialization called the incarcerated body.

We might think of the body's materialization as not only or simply the result of biological presence or phenomenological thickness—sedimented through a history of habits, behaviors, and performances—but as composed of phantasmal realities, as Gayle Salamon argues in *Assuming a Body*.<sup>255</sup> Salamon theorizes a materiality that is constructed by various surfaces: phantom, physical, affective, social, and historical. Bodily coherence and legibility, then, are the result of an assemblage of mechanisms, visible and invisible, material and immaterial, fictitious and factual. In Salamon's words, "one is not born a body, one becomes one."<sup>256</sup> It is this becoming that the prison misapprehends. In this misapprehension, the bodies of black subjects, specifically, are constructed as criminal in the repetition of the symbolic schema of the law. The prison mimics in this way the space-time of the theatre, in which ghosts return to influence our understanding of past, present, and future. The prison figures futurity itself as restored behavior. To be imprisoned in its repetition is to have no future. Or perhaps it is more right to say, following Derrida, that futurity belongs to the prison's ghosts.

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<sup>255</sup> Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

Particularly in the highly regulated setting of the penitentiary, we can see how the body is both a doing and a thing done—to adapt Elin Diamond’s formulation.<sup>257</sup> The imprisoned body is both performing and is itself a performance. Carceral subjects have agency, of course, but inasmuch as they also have materiality, the conditions of their formation as subjects are the effects of highly-concentrated and reiterated relations of power. In the accounts of both Judith Butler and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body emerges not solely from biology or individual performance, but in a more complex engagement between sociality, imagination, history, and flesh.<sup>258</sup> Butler’s work in particular demonstrates how categories like sex and race function as bodily ideals materialized through time. The court and its rulings, inasmuch as they stand in for the “temporalized regulation of signification” of the symbolic realm, extend Butler’s theory.<sup>259</sup> What could be more performative—and yet more terrifyingly *real*—than the prison sentence? The iteration of this sentence over time makes bodies come to matter, in the symbolic construction of the law. The word of the sentence marks the body, constructing it through symbolic violence. “‘Race’ is thus thinkable as a kind of speech act,” as Ann Pellegrini says.<sup>260</sup> Through iterative ritual, the law discursively contributes to the materialization of the imprisoned body. The law’s physical and affective violence completes the process in prison.

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<sup>257</sup> Diamond writes, “performance is always a doing and a thing done” (1). See Diamond, Elin, ed. *Performance and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>258</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. 1945. Trans. Colin Smith, London: Routledge, 1962; and Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*. New York: Routledge. 1993.

<sup>259</sup> Butler, xxix.

<sup>260</sup> Pellegrini, Ann. *Performance Anxieties*. New York: Routledge. 1997, 98

This chapter addresses these issues by focusing on *The House that Herman Built* (2006), an artistic collaboration between Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace, who spent over 40 years in solitary confinement in Louisiana State Penitentiary.<sup>261</sup> Together, they designed a dream home in response to the prompt: “What kind of house does a man who has lived in a six-by-nine-foot-cell for over thirty years dream of?” The piece has been described as a kind of memory house—a mnemonic technique first developed by Cicero. What is remembered when the house exists both in the mind and in the world? Considering the extraordinary space-time of his incarceration foregrounds the spatio-temporal aspects of the art piece itself. Time might be thought of as a theory of capture, and art, crafted within confinement, dreams of freedom.

This chapter first articulates how the American prison performs, like a haunted house, the space-time of trauma, and then pivots to theorize how the time of producing art is performed as a *dreaming*. The prison possesses its subjects, foreclosing on their futurity in a repeated performance of the past. This chapter concludes that the temporality of dreaming works as a kind of cagedcraft to repeat, re-member, the subject’s encasement in the space-time of trauma—itsself a repetition—but with a difference. This difference is that art, as dreaming, crafts for the imprisoned subject a new futurity. If the prison forecloses on the subject’s future, then this dreaming performs a rupture in that foreclosure. By materializing a temporal rupture in the repetition of the performance of the law, the dream-time of making art—of cagedcraft itself—functions as activism.

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<sup>261</sup> *The House That Herman Built*. <hermanshouse.org> Accessed Apr 24, 2016.

Wallace is an all-too common figure in the history of the United States: a black man captured and socially disabled in isolation, his space and time constricted and controlled. His story dramatizes the unsettling and brutal conditions of criminal justice in the United States. In 1971, Wallace and Albert Woodfox were convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to serve 25 years in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, commonly known as Angola. They studied politics, organized a chapter of the Black Panther Party, and fought for prison reform. Their thoughtful petitions were treated with hostility by prison authorities. In 1972, they were convicted of murdering a corrections officer named Brent Miller, and they were placed in solitary confinement. The evidence was dubious, at best: The witness who claimed to see the crime was legally blind. Even Miller's wife later expressed concern over the conviction. Around the same time, Robert King was also placed in solitary confinement in connection with the murder, despite the fact that he wasn't even in Angola at the time. King served 29 years in solitary, and was eventually released from prison after he was exonerated. Woodfox and Wallace both served over 41 years. Woodfox remained in Angola until February 2016, when he was released, and lives currently a free man. Wallace was released October 1, 2013 on humanitarian grounds, and he died three days later of liver cancer. He lived the majority of his life in a six-by-eight-foot cell 23 hours a day, containing a cot, a sink, and a toilet. The figures of the "Angola 3," as they came to be known, capture the racist violence at the heart of punitive incarceration, and its simultaneously arbitrary and pernicious effects on human life. The length and severity of their punishment, and the speciousness of their convictions, sparked an international movement to free them.

The story of mass incarceration repeats across infinite bodies. Indeed, imprisonment itself models a structure of repetition. Paradoxically, though captured in an unchanging, institutionalized present, American prisoners are also bonded to the racist past of the penitentiary: its direct historical outgrowth from chattel slavery. As scholars such as Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have demonstrated, the system today is subtended by the histories of convict leasing, black codes, lynching, Jim Crow, and endemic police brutality and income inequality.<sup>262</sup> Since the 1970s, rates and populations of imprisonment have exploded in the USA independently of rates of crime—which have remained steady. The USA currently incarcerates more people than any other country in history, comprising only 5% of the world’s population, but confining over 21% of its prisoners. In terms of numbers, we have surpassed Stalin’s gulags—that other carceral chimera of history.

African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites. If people of color were imprisoned at the rates whites are, the US prison population would decrease by more than 40%. Yet we would still imprison more than any other nation. Prison labor is legalized slavery, and incarcerated people make pennies on the hour for working in farming, manufacturing, and service industries. The prison boom is not only limited to men: rates of imprisonment for women are increasing faster than those of any other demographic group. The horror of these statistics is compounded by the real experience of those living in prison, documented in prison literature

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<sup>262</sup> See Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003; and Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulags*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; and Alexander, Michelle. *New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press. 2010.

collections like *Fourth City*.<sup>263</sup> Overcrowding and institutional brutality, combined with systematic erosion of prison reforms (such as education and mental health care), make incarceration a living hell.

Angola is the largest maximum-security penitentiary in the United States. Founded in 1869, the prison continues the history of racial exploitation on which it was built.<sup>264</sup> Angola currently incarcerates over 6,000 men, around 80 percent of whom are African American. At 18,000 acres, the prison is larger than the island of Manhattan. Located in a remote area 30 miles from the nearest town, the Mississippi River bounds “The Farm” on three sides, and has threatened to flood the institution during bad weather. Angola itself was once a plantation, and has gained notoriety for carrying on this legacy of brutality and racism. It still bears the name of the African country from where most of the slaves were taken. It has also been known as the “Alcatraz of the South” and “the bloodiest prison in America.” Angola mostly comprises farmland, and the prisoners are kept in several housing units dispersed around the grounds, called “camps.” The camps vary in security level, including both lower-security dormitories and a death row. Twice a year, the facility hosts a rodeo, which gathers thousands of audience members to the prison. On these occasions, the institution’s normal vectors of surveillance and discipline intensify as the prisoners become objects for touristic amusement. In addition to working in other more typical

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<sup>263</sup> Larson, Doran, ed. *Fourth City*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. 2013.

<sup>264</sup> See Carleton, Mark T. *Politics and Punishment*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1971; and the film *The Angola 3: Black Panthers and the Last Slave Plantation*. Dir. Jimmy O’Halligan. Obstacle Illusions. 2008.

prison manufacturing industries, prisoners at Angola tend around 2,300 head of cattle, and crops of wheat, corn, soybeans, and cotton. These products are used to sustain the prison itself, and are also sold for a profit. Like the practice of convict-leasing, the farm runs on a trustee system. Incarcerated people are drafted to supervise the labor of their peers. Historian of Deep South punishment David Oshinsky observed that Angola is a holdover from before the Civil Rights era, calling the prison a “state of mind.”<sup>265</sup> In many ways, it operates under the most insidious form of penal nostalgia. It is what Achille Mbembe calls a “death-world”: “[a form] of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.”<sup>266</sup>

I turn to the prison as a critical site for discussing how the space-time of race is performed in part because of this history of violence. The temporality of incarcerated people is *arrested* in a state of suspended animation. As the non-incarcerated world shifts and changes—for the most part—in the passage of time, what we might understand as the normative milieu of temporal transformation, the time of the American prisoner remains locked in a loop, rehearsing centuries-old cycles of retributive pain. In this way, the prison serves as a space of temporal regulation. In terms of spatial regulation, incarcerated people are controlled by physically restraining their sociality—who they interact with, and when and where these interactions occur.

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<sup>265</sup> Oshinsky, David. “The View From Inside.” *New York Times*. June 11, 2010. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/books/review/Oshinsky-t.html?pagewanted=all>>

<sup>266</sup> Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics.” Trans. Libby Meintjes. *Public Culture*. Vol 15, No 1. 2003, 40.

Given the theory of materialization outlined above—in which the body is understood as a spatio-temporal construction performed in collaboration, concert, and conflict with others—in the constrained sociality of solitary confinement, how does the body come to matter?

For Colin Dayan, the imprisoned body is the “flesh-and-bones ghost”: the living dead.<sup>267</sup> In *The Law is a White Dog*, Dayan examines how the state makes and destroys its “negative persons” in the rituals of the law, through its symbolic regulatory practices—a kind of necromancy. In Dayan’s account, the prison sentence is a speech act with chthonic power to isolate the body and transform living subjects into phantoms. In this way, Dayan offers a way to think through the temporally constrained sociality of prisoners, in addition to the spatial restrictions of confinement. She theorizes civil death thusly:

The convict, though actually a living being, is not only dead but also buried by the law. The body is there, but restrained in prison. The external physical conditions are clear. The internal spiritual state is not. The physical person (solely body and appetite) has no personhood (the social and civic components of personal identity). What kind of spectral form remains? [...] What is more pressing, more spectacular than the realm of the flesh-and-bones ghost, the palpable specter watching over its own perpetual degradation?<sup>268</sup>

Dayan teases out the spatio-temporal contradictions posed by the body of the incarcerated: At the same time that the bare body is living, breathing and eating, the person’s social and civic identity is restricted. The body in prison is embroiled in a process of resurrection, an ongoing rehearsal of the past. Spatial techniques of capture,

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<sup>267</sup> Dayan, Colin, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

segregation, and isolation combine with the temporalities of duration, stasis, repetition, and reiteration in the prison sentence. As the material of the body degrades, undergoes disappearance even, the spectral subject waits and watches in attendance. Because of its interment in the haunted prison house, the carceral body is ghostly, even to the subject himself.<sup>269</sup>

This phantom materiality is both a product of history and also history's return in the present. The mechanism of solitary confinement, by severing the prisoner's social ties, serves to disable his claims to being a fully living subject. Without social connection and community, he assumes the materiality of a ghost, only visible in the imaginations of those who might remember his visage—including the imprisoned himself. As his physical body ages in incarceration, his "personhood," defined by Dayan as those aspects of being that are tied to external interaction, is frozen in time. To return to Herman Wallace, the person who first entered the solitary cell in 1972 watches over the biological body's degradation. In addition, this spectral effect characterizes his physical body as a black man in a prison thick with racist history. Blackness, in prison, is a returning. Wallace's body is trapped in a vortex of haunted matter, comprising histories of capture, bondage, and terror. His sociality, limited and channeled by the encounter with the violent apparatus of the institution, in fact comes to be defined by communion with the ghosts of memory and history. All this talk of

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<sup>269</sup> A personal anecdote: In my experience as a volunteer teaching artist in a prison—discussed in depth in chapter 1—incarcerated people have several times told me they feel like zombies. One man described how he knows he is aging, but at the same time he feels his old self, the person who first entered prison years before, watching over him.

ghouls and ghosts recalls both Alice Rayner and Marvin Carlson, whose interrogations of theatre and performance conclude that these are the privileged realms for thinking through the spectral.<sup>270</sup> We might also think of the Negro Resurrectionist from *Venus* (1997) by Suzan-Lori Parks. The prison misapprehends the revivification of history, mobilizing history's performative dimension to pillory bodies in the haunted present.

Haunting and repetition are also the temporalities of trauma, according to Freud.<sup>271</sup> He describes trauma as an unending, uncontrollable return that comes to possess the subject. The traumatized body behaves in unpredictable and often inexplicable ways, often betraying conscious command, manifesting physical symptoms that can only be corrected through treatment. The phenomenon of trauma is characterized through temporal confusion, during which the subject may not understand *when* they are, and these symptoms are experienced spatially as well: *Where am I?* Anecdotal and clinical accounts of traumatic recurrence describe the subject being transported or visited back in time *and* place. The space-time of trauma is a haunted house, a structure within which the traumatized subject is trapped, lost within its walls and hallways, visited by past specters. As one might infer from theories of the haunting of performance, the theatre is one example of how the ghostly space-time of trauma is codified. The prison is another.

It's no wonder then that Wallace and Sumell's work took the forms of both social practice and architecture. Just as clinicians like Bessel van der Kolk attempt to

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<sup>270</sup> Rayner, Alice. *Ghosts*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006; and Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2001.

<sup>271</sup> See Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1961.

“re-write” the traumatized brain through embodied therapeutic practices, so too do Sumell/Wallace attempt to re-imagine the materiality of the incarcerated subject’s body through the dream-time of architectural collaboration.<sup>272</sup> The sociality of their collaboration tells the story of how art dreams of and crafts a new futurity for a subject whose embodied future is foreclosed by the prison. The dream house endeavors to replace the haunted house. Sumell/Wallace endeavor to re-write his sentence of solitary confinement.



**FIGURE 3: The exhibition at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, MD (2015), with a miniature model of the house and replica of Wallace’s solitary confinement cell.**

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<sup>272</sup> Van Der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books. 2014.

Starting in 2002, Wallace corresponded with artist-activist Jackie Sumell. They first exhibited the conceptual art project *The House That Herman Built* in 2006 (see figure 3). The house has yet to be constructed, but Sumell exactingly produced digital and miniature models. They wrote each other, spoke on the telephone, and engaged in visits, amassing more than 300 letters and an extensive archive of blueprints, designs, architectural drawings, and photographs. Sumell gathered these materials—including 39 drawings, two models, a life-size replica of Wallace’s solitary cell, a CGI animated film, and a published book—into an art installation at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany. Since then, Sumell has exhibited *The House* 20 times in a dozen different countries. Occupying an entire room of a gallery, it’s a multi-media exhibition staging Wallace’s and Sumell’s labors. Posted on the walls are informative graphics and timelines about mass incarceration, solitary confinement, and Wallace’s life. A wooden model of Wallace’s dream home sits on a pedestal (figure 4), and a digital model is projected. Printouts of the blueprints for the house are also displayed for the viewers’ perusal. Wallace’s dream home is a large two-story structure, around 3,200 square feet in total, designed to take up the space in the world that he cannot.

I first encountered the work at a talk Sumell gave at a conference focused on prison art and activism at Rutgers in October 2014, almost exactly a year after Wallace died. Sumell is an American multidisciplinary artist and activist who works on institutional racism and the abuses of the criminal justice system. Her work connects mindfulness studies and social sculpture. A white woman, she grew up on Long Island where she was the first girl in New York State to play tackle football in an all-boys

league. In 2001, while working on her MFA at Stanford University, Sumell organized “The No Bush Project” to protest the presidency of George W. Bush, specifically his systematic erosion of pro-choice laws.<sup>273</sup> She issued a call to her female friends and acquaintances to shave their pubic hair and mail it to her. Once she had gathered 538 samples, representing the Electoral College, she displayed them as part of the National Organization for Women’s April 22 march on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Already in this project, we can see elements that she later employs in *The House that Herman Built*: social protest, collaboration across distance and time, a “literal” approach to conceptual art, and an emphasis on materiality.

As a graduate student studying art, she was first inspired to write to Wallace after attending a talk by Robert King. When he opened the floor up to questions and comments from the audience, no one said anything. The stories he told and the experiences he shared stunned the room into silence. Suddenly, Sumell blurted out, “What can I do?” King answered, “Write my comrades.” Resigning to do just that, Sumell began corresponding with both Wallace and Woodfox. Her first letter to them was itself a kind of art project about time: She duct-taped a disposable camera to her arm, and set her watch alarm to sound every hour in a day. When the watch beeped, she snapped a random, unfocused picture with the camera. She developed the film, compiled the 24 snapshots, and sent them to Angola with the message “*To Mr. Woodfox and To Mr. Wallace—here are 24 hours in my simple life.*” The durative nature of this project resembles in some ways a performance art piece: The aesthetic

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<sup>273</sup> Morgan, Fiona. “Bush’s pubic enemy No. 1.” *Salon*. Mar 28, 2001. <[http://www.salon.com/2001/03/28/bush\\_99/](http://www.salon.com/2001/03/28/bush_99/)>. Accessed Apr 24, 2016.

quality of the photo is incidental relative to the fact of its recording her life. She used technological capture in order to materialize the hours of her life for sharing. This piece makes time matter.

I remember distinctly the conceptual shift that formed the center of that talk at Rutgers. She articulated a theory of the “human doing” in contrast to the “human being.” We might read in this an Arendtian faith in the *vita activa* of humanity or a Certeaudian celebration of the *flaneur*’s tactical meandering—a conviction that it’s through human action that newness, resistance, and change are possible.<sup>274</sup> Her linguistic shift also marks a shift in the temporality of how she conceives of human subjectivity. Subjectivity is no longer something one *is*, but an ongoing process, an unfinished project to be committed to over and over again. This is in contrast to how the spatio-temporal project of the penitentiary functions to assume bodies, organizing them into discrete categories determined not only by gender, race, ethnic, and religious markers, but also by a single past action, the legal consequences of which result in a predetermined sentence of time. If, following Alice Rayner, we understand time as modality, as adverb, rather than linear or circular, then Sumell and Wallace’s collaboration to craft his dream home re-members the materiality of the body in the imperfect tense, something that in English might sound like “human doing.”<sup>275</sup> The

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<sup>274</sup> See de Certeau, Michel, *Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984; and Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>275</sup> Rayner, Alice. “Keeping Time,” *Performance Research*. Vol 19, Iss 3, Aug 2014. 32-36.

imperfect might characterize the temporality of dreaming, according to Bert States.<sup>276</sup> It is a kind of time travel, within which the past is re-visited, the present re-staged, and the future re-called. Dreams, through the time of the imperfect tense, muddy and render abstract the beginnings and ends of things. To extend this claim: in prison, the time of producing art itself is performed as a dreaming.



**FIGURE 4: Detail of the miniature on display in the Royal College of London (2009).**

*The House* itself remains a dreaming. Houses are meant to be walked through and lived in, but at this moment, one cannot walk through the house as a complete, “live” experience. What is left out of the experience? What might have Wallace’s

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<sup>276</sup> States, Bert. *Seeing in the Dark*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1997, 8-10.

house smelled like or sounded like? Herman's house only exists digitally, in virtual space. One must imagine walking through the house. I myself have not had the opportunity to see *The House* as it was first exhibited in Stuttgart, or subsequently when Sumell toured it around galleries internationally. As Sarah Bay-Cheng has argued, digital mediation doesn't necessarily limit the audience's reception of a work of art.<sup>277</sup> In fact, it can enhance one's affective and intellectual understanding. Particularly in this case, given the fact that the *only* way to visit the house that Sumell and Wallace designed is virtually. Even when exhibited in a gallery, the project requires that the audience make a kind of imaginative journey into Wallace's dreams. This virtual proximity paired with haptic distance is part and parcel of the work's message. Wallace is removed physically from the outside world, but his house can travel internationally.

Much of the exhibition's content is brilliantly depicted in the PBS film *Herman's House* (2012).<sup>278</sup> The documentary, produced and directed by Angad Bhalla, follows Sumell as she exhibits in galleries around the world and as she struggles to gather the resources in order to realize Wallace's architectural plans. The story is punctuated by phone interviews with Wallace himself, whose disembodied voice functions as a kind of meditative narration, and with interviews with various other people in Wallace's life, including his sister Vicky, Robert King, activist Malik Rahim—who first introduced Wallace to the Black Panthers—and several others. In

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<sup>277</sup> Bay-Cheng, Sarah. "Theater is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance." *Theater* 42:2, May 2012, 27-41.

<sup>278</sup> *Herman's House*. Dir. Angad Singh Bhalla. PBS. 2012.

one of the most interesting scenes of the film, Bhalla interviews several prison architects, who explain the history and logic behind prison design, and also provide their analysis of the blueprints to Wallace's house. They're astonished—one man calls it "bourgeois"—and they nearly unanimously remark on the lack of "free-flowing space." They call it "oppressive," and note that certain aspects of the house seem constricting, possibly even carceral, and that they would have expected a person who'd been imprisoned as long as Wallace to dream up something more open. One architect goes so far as to compare the dining room of Wallace's home to a prison day room, wherein inmates congregate. The architects' surprise at the design is telling, because it reveals a profound connection—or perhaps disconnection—between the planning of a prison's construction and its psychophysical effect on the confined. The fact that the design of the dream home resembles Wallace's surroundings shouldn't be shocking at all. In the film, Wallace himself seems taken aback that someone would have such surprise at the design. In his narration after the architect scene, he states, "You look at that house; you're looking at me." The house is a projection of his innermost desires and sensations, which are deeply influenced by his lived surroundings.

The temporality of dreaming itself constitutes an imperfect return to memory: both traumatic and salutary. The time of making art, as a dreaming, approaches materializing in the world what Toni Morrison called "rememory."<sup>279</sup> In literature, Morrison's story of the house at 124 Bluestone Road, from *Beloved*, is perhaps the

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<sup>279</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Penguin. 1987, 35-36.

most significant example of how the traumas, memories, histories, and fantasies of blackness are re-staged in haunting material form. Part of what's relevant to my inquiry is that Morrison employs the form of a house to re-member the past with a difference. This house is also haunted. I'm reminded of the oft-quoted speech by Sethe, on time:

“It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”<sup>280</sup>

Sethe's rememory materializes things that have passed, but, also, a place remembers a picture in the world. It's difficult for Sethe to believe in time because things remain, refusing to truly pass on. Rememory's capacity for materialization makes linear time itself suspect. *The House* also re-members in some ways the space-time of Wallace's incarceration, but it does so with a twist. This difference foregrounds Wallace's desires, agency, and life as an activist.

As a way to frame a virtual tour of Wallace's home, it is useful to recall Anne Cheng's similar exploration of Josephine Baker's imaginary dream house, designed by Alfred Loos.<sup>281</sup> For Cheng, Loos's design reveals a great deal about how the architect, as a middle-aged white European man, perceived Baker—and, indeed, his relationship with her. But what might the rooms of *The House that Herman Built* reveal about

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Cheng, Anne. *Second Skin*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011.

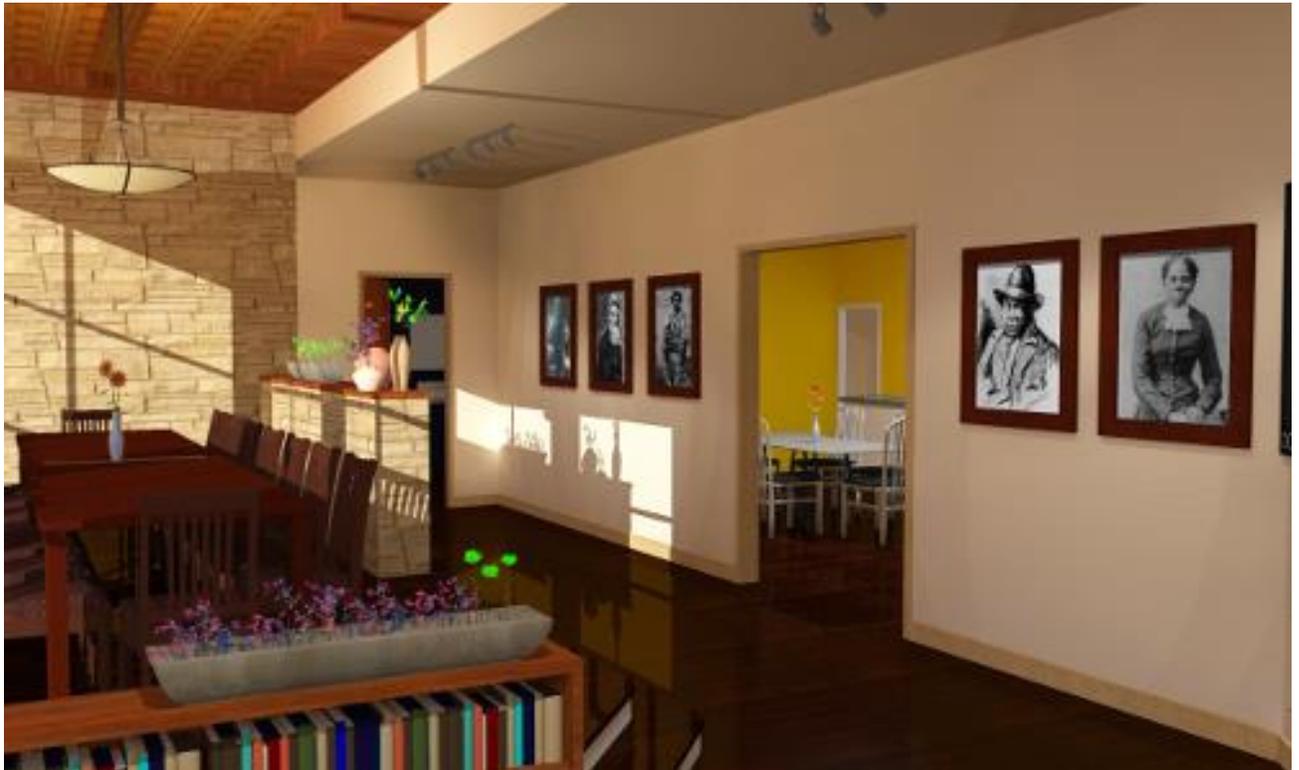
Wallace, who had a hand in designing them? What do they say about the relationship between Sumell and Wallace?



**FIGURE 5: Computer-aided design of the front of the home, with wrap-around porch, balcony, and lush gardens.**

Cheng’s meditations on how Loos translated Baker’s sexual and racial identity into the “dreamed covering” of the architecture help unpack some of Wallace’s designs, particularly his more extravagant inclusions: These include the 70s-style kitchen, painted yellow, with sprinklers in the ceiling, and a master bedroom, which takes up much of the second floor of the house, furnished with a king-size bed and decorated with African art, a chandelier, and a mirrored ceiling. French doors open onto a large balcony, packed with flowers. Inside the master bathroom is a six-by-nine-foot hot tub, just one foot longer than the cell he lived in for four decades.

Adopting Cheng’s theoretical lens, we might understand the design as a kind of inversion of the public inside the private. These rooms, typically domestic space, hidden from the world, are in *The House* directed outward, putting Wallace’s tastes and passions on display. They serve to exhibit the wealth of his imagination, and the rich cultural traditions closest to his heart.



**FIGURE 6: Computer-aided design of the main room, including the “wall of revolutionary fame,” featuring images of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, John Brown, and Harriet Tubman.**

When one enters from the birch wrap-around porch, one sees that the first floor is divided into several rooms which branch off the main sitting room through a set of corridors. There is one bathroom, two guest bedrooms, and a hobby shop. The

furniture is either made of mahogany or pecan. In the interest of security, Wallace includes a gun closet and an escape tunnel. There's also a long room with a conference table, with one wall dedicated to five carefully selected historical figures: Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, John Brown, and Harriet Tubman. Their portraits hang in a line on this "wall of revolutionary fame" (figure 6). Wallace wants to memorialize these abolitionists in part as a tribute to the Black Panther party.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was the most visible element of the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements. Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Party arose in the immediate wake of desegregation and the victories of Civil Rights activists.<sup>282</sup> The Party responded to the charge that black people should not only win the rights of citizenship, but should also gain real economic and political power. The Black Panther Party believed in community self-determination, and, for example, organized community services to feed starving children for free. Newton and Seale were deeply influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X; they believed armed struggle was necessary to bring about the cultural transformation necessary to end racism and bring about equality. They believed in self-determination and self-defense, especially regarding encounters with police. The Black Panthers' thinking also grew out of the postcolonial tradition: They figured America as occupied territory, with police and government entities acting as colonizing forces, and blacks and other minority communities as the oppressed. Indeed, the Black Panthers saw themselves as an international movement,

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<sup>282</sup> See Bloom, Joshua and Waldo E. Martin Jr. *Black against Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2013.

collaborating with domestic antiwar organizations and anti-imperialist movements abroad.

The Black Panthers were involved in anti-prison, decarceration, and abolitionist efforts. For example, Seale made a brief appearance at the Attica uprising, and the Panthers' influence is clear both in the rebellion's militancy and in its demands for autonomy and justice for incarcerated peoples. Angela Davis, one of the intellectual leaders of the prison abolitionist movement, was also affiliated with the Panthers. As Dan Berger, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein say, in their recent *Jacobin* article "What Abolitionists Do," abolitionists are not zealous utopians, letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.<sup>283</sup> Abolitionists are after "non-reformist reforms": they "have insisted on reforms that reduce rather than strengthen the scale and scope of policing, imprisonment, and surveillance." These reforms include many things that are not only pragmatic, but are already central tenets of activists concerned with policing and incarceration, such as ending cash bail, solitary confinement, and the death penalty; stopping new prison construction; decriminalizing drug use and sex work; and improving conditions for those living in prison. Contemporary prison abolitionists follow in the tradition of the Panthers because they share the overarching goal of seizing power to improve material conditions for people in the wake of historical injustice.

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<sup>283</sup> Berger, Dan, Mariame Kaba, and David Stein. "What Abolitionists Do," *Jacobin*. August 24, 2017. <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/prison-abolition-reform-mass-incarceration>>

This goal is apparent in Wallace's participation in the collaboration with Sumell. Never expecting that he would be released to live in the house that he designed, Wallace intended that it be used as a community center, a "people's house," as he calls it. Specifically, he wanted it to function as a place where at-risk youth in New Orleans might be mentored to avoid committing the crimes that led to his imprisonment in the first place. Imagination is always larger than physicality, and the interplay between the two reveals dynamic potentials in human creativity. The piece might be said to enact the radically moral world-making Elaine Scarry describes in *The Body in Pain*:

While imagining may entail a revolution of the entire order of things, the eclipse of the given by a *total reinvention of the world*, an artifact (a relocated piece of coal, a sentence, a cup, a piece of lace) is *a fragment of world alteration*. Imagining a city, the human being "makes" a house; imagining a political utopia, he or she instead helps to build a country; imagining the elimination of suffering from the world, the person instead nurses a friend back to health.<sup>284</sup> (171).

Scarry describes how world-making manifests through art making. Wallace dreamed of the world the Black Panthers struggled for, and designed a home in service of it.

I'd like to turn to another encounter, bound up with questions of trauma, which might serve to elucidate how the dreaming encounter between Sumell and Wallace functions as a fragment of world-alteration: That is the oft-discussed story of the dream of the burning child. Freud first analyzed this narrative as an example of how dreams serve as both wish-fulfilment, and to protect the sleeper from waking. In the

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<sup>284</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1985, 171.

story, a father, bereaving the recent loss of his child, takes his leave of the body for awhile. He retires to an adjoining room to get some sleep, leaving an old man to watch over the corpse. The father drifts off to sleep, and dreams that the ghost of his child comes to visit him, shakes his arm, and says, "Father, don't you see? I'm burning." The father wakes in a fright to discover that the old man next door has shirked his duties and fallen asleep himself, and a candle has tumbled onto the death-bed, burning both the sheets and the body. Freud reasons that the dream does two things: it fulfills the father's wish to have his son alive again—at least momentarily—and it also serves to postpone awakening, keeping the dreamer asleep for a little longer. The father, smelling smoke in his sleep, manifests the scenario of the dream so that the smell functions within the dream diegetically, rather than disrupt the sleeper.

Famously, Lacan re-read the dream, and, in pointing to the fact that the return of the dead child in fact does *not* prolong sleep but actually precipitates the father's awakening, describes how the return presages Freud's later work on repetition and trauma. The father's awakening is too late to save the burning child, which repeats his own lack of understanding, failure to save, and overall "too lateness" in protecting his real child from death. Cathy Caruth, performing a further re-reading, takes the dream as an ethical lesson.<sup>285</sup> Awakening represents in some ways a central problematic in regard to trauma. Despite the fact that "To awaken is [...] precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time," we have a responsibility to attend

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<sup>285</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996.

to that which we will always already have failed to see and to know.<sup>286</sup> For Caruth, trauma poses ethical questions in the domain of history. One awakens to a call one can only hear when sleeping, when dreaming. In other words, becoming “woke”—to take up contemporary social justice vernacular—means one has already arrived too late. She extends Freud to say that trauma is not solely repetition, but in fact a deferral, a belatedness, a never-quite-here. The actual traumatic event then is unreachable and unknowable, except as ghostly return—which recalls my earlier commentary on the space-time of race in the context of imprisonment. Trauma represents, in Caruth’s understanding, an ethical imperative to bear witness in the future to those events in history which threaten to be forgotten.

Wallace’s dream house similarly says: “wake up, leave me, survive; survive to tell the story.”<sup>287</sup> It does not attempt to engender an empathetic audience—though that may occur regardless—but to gather those who might survive to bear witness. Sumell, like the father, is “woke” in a way that is like the “performance of a speaking.”<sup>288</sup> The futurity of the dreaming of their artistic collaboration lives in this passing on of the story. This piece performs dreaming in order to awaken an audience. Even though they cannot fully awaken to the trauma itself, they might approach its truth by telling the story of the dream in the future. The piece as a dreaming re-members Wallace – mourns him, grieves for him. This dreaming, which necessarily fails to materialize liberation, nevertheless approaches freedom by rupturing the foreclosure of the future

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

effected in incarceration. If the temporality of dreaming is in some sense a repetition of the past, then it does not do so without performing some difference, some “departure” as Caruth says. The rupture of making art is just such a departure.

Sumell continues her abolitionist art works. In 2011, she collaborated with Albert Woodfox while he was still incarcerated to publish in *TDR* “Prison Industrial Complexity,” which is an abolitionist crossword puzzle.<sup>289</sup> It confronts the player with a black and white grid, and they must fill it in with their own knowledge about mass incarceration. This word game further emphasizes how art offers audiences a situation in which to play with the legal mechanisms of the racist criminal justice system. The clues include “Hunger strike that swept across 11 prisons in California in 2011 started here” and “30% of immigrant detainees are held in this US state.” In solving the puzzle, the player dwells with the historical realities of American penalty. The project takes the form of a playful diversion, but encourages serious thought on human suffering. It’s a seductive political provocation.

Today, Sumell focuses on the Solitary Garden Project, which asks “Can you imagine a landscape without prisons?”<sup>290</sup> Sumell corresponds with prisoners currently locked in solitary confinement to plant gardens outside the walls based on their designs. She’s currently working to implement this as a national program, teaching others how to cross the prison threshold and start their own solitary gardens. This project adapts her work with Herman Wallace, expanding it into the field of eco-art.

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<sup>289</sup> Woodfox, Albert and Jackie Sumell. “Prison Industrial Complexity.” *TDR: The Drama Review*. Volume 55, Number 4, Winter 2011, 2-3.

<sup>290</sup> *Solitary Gardens*. Accessed May 12, 2017. <<http://www.solitarygardens.org/>>

Surrounding his dream home are abundant trees and three gardens of gardenias, carnations, and tulips, which are the “easiest for [him] to imagine.” This detail was particularly important for Wallace, who wanted visitors to “smile and walk through flowers all year long.” Sumell continues today the hope of his desire. In the Solitary Garden Project, she connects prison abolitionist struggles and climate change, emphasizing that both affect the marginalized and disenfranchised most dramatically. What else is a garden but a dream for the future? Like houses, gardens are how dreams come to matter. Though composed of repetition, the reiterated acts of making a garden, like digging, weeding, and watering, proffer a break in the temporality of return by promising a new future.

CODA  
PROFANING GLORY

I'd like to discuss one final piece of cagecraft: *Apokaluptein:16389067* is a monumental mural made by Jesse Krimes while he was incarcerated in federal medium security prisons and completed after his eventual release (see figure 7). It is composed of 39 white prison bed sheets, torn in half, then printed with photographs from the *New York Times*, and extended, embellished, and blended using colored pencils. Krimes's mural is a product of the need to survive incarceration, and the work and its making perform a powerful mode of resistance to the U.S. prison system. When assembled and mounted on a wall, the work measures 15 by 40 feet, and depicts the classic Christian eschatological landscape: the three tiers of heaven, earth, and hell. In order to transfer the images from the newspaper to the sheets, Krimes developed a technique using plastic spoons and L.A. Looks hair gel: He sliced the graphic free using a contraband tool, smeared the sheet with the viscous gel, and carefully laid it over the excised image. He would then press the back of the spoon over the wet sheet, mashing the cloth and newsprint together until the photo's reverse bled through, the ink transferring successfully onto the sheet. He repeated this process hundreds of times, arranging images into the finished triptych. Each individual transfer took about 30 minutes to complete, and the whole work was conceptualized and completed over the five years he served.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> See Krimes's personal website, <http://www.jessekrimes.com/>; also, Brook, Pete, "Prisoner's 39-Panel Allegorical Mural Made From Bedsheets, Hair Gel and Stacks of Newspapers," *Prison Photography*, 5 March 2014, 21 May 2014, <<http://prisonphotography.org/2014/03/05/prisoners-39-panel-allegorical-mural-made-from-bedsheets-hair-gel-and-stacks-of-newspapers/>>.



**FIGURE 7: *Apokaluptein:16389067* on display in a gallery.**

Krimes cites as one of his main influences Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*, one of the more recent texts the Italian philosopher has produced in the larger *Homo Sacer* project.<sup>292</sup> Krimes says that his method of working is to read while creating, allowing the text to influence him intuitively and using the art to develop a deeper understanding of the philosophy.<sup>293</sup> Since the artist drew upon the material for inspiration and research, we can follow in his footsteps in order to develop a deeper understanding of both mural and text.

In this study, Agamben undertakes a rigorous genealogy of the theological concept of "economy," from the Ancient Greek *oikonomia*, meaning management of the household. In crude summation, Agamben concludes that power in the West

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<sup>292</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011.

<sup>293</sup> Krimes, personal communication.

articulates itself in the following way: National sovereignty (Glory) and government of men were first divorced from one another, then conflated, so that the glorious rituals constituting the former also condition the latter. This means that the center of the governmental articulation of power is empty—or inoperative—because nothing conditions the performance of power aside from performance itself.<sup>294</sup> This is not to say that the state is ineffectual or nonviolent. It is quite the opposite, in fact. The state, because founded on emptiness, must perform sovereign violence in order to reflexively assert its own governmental power; in other words, the state’s performances of power (Glory) produce its own power.

However, its emptiness also contains the potential for radical politics: “The empty throne, the symbol of Glory, is what we need to profane in order to make room, beyond it, for something that, for now, we can only evoke with the name *zoē aionios*, eternal life.”<sup>295</sup> We are told that the profanation of the symbol of Glory is an example of messianic action. I believe it is in the performance of making art that this action takes its clearest and most prevalent shape.

The mural points to the deep spiritual disquiet caused by incarceration. *Apokaluptein* is the Greek origin of “apocalypse,” which Krimes says is an accurate descriptor for his personal experience of incarceration and why he paired the word with his Federal Bureau of Prisons identification number, 16389067. *Apokaluptein* literally means “uncover” or “reveal,” according to the OED. This motivated Krimes’s choice of material, the prison-issue bed sheets, which he says stand in for the “skin of the prison, literally used to cover and hide the body of the inmate.” Krimes’s image transfers can therefore be considered a sort of tattooing on the prison’s skin, short-circuiting the uniform whiteness of the sheets with a traditional form of prison art.

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, xiii.

The bottommost level of Krimes's mural is perhaps the most striking, representing hell. It contains the greatest concentration of transferred *New York Times* photographs, and these images overlap in a complex collage. The bulk of the images are from fashion advertisements, thereby pointing to the perverse capitalist commodification at work in both the advertising and fashion industries. While most of the images are of women, there is a conspicuous absence of people of color and of any semblance of "difference," be it physical appearance or cultural. Krimes points out that this is because there are very few representations of people of color in advertising.<sup>296</sup> The corporate elites in these realms use demographic technologies to symbolically imprison the consumer within representations of a severely limited set of bodies—raced, sexed, and classed in a particular way, viz. bourgeois, skinny white women. Krimes's mural torques these symbolically carceral technologies, critically rendering them visible.

The panels in the middle level represent earth. The transferred images here form a sort of terra on which stalk monstrous female figures, half-transfers, half-original drawings. The landscape in this level is composed of a greater variety of images than in hell: The horizon is made up of photographs from the travel section and images of man-made and natural disasters. Krimes marks the profound ambivalence in media representations of the precarious locales simultaneously fetishized as dangerous and desirable. There are also photographs of a rehearsal of the passion play at Angola Prison, the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square, the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shooting, and a submerged rollercoaster in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. These juxtapositions suggest that the images of earthly human life as they are presented by the news media are sensationalized, functioning like the commercial advertisements.

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<sup>296</sup> Ghenov, Rubens and Jesse Krimes, "Interview: Jesse Krimes," *Title Magazine*, April 3 2014, <<http://www.title-magazine.com/2014/04/interview-jesse-krimes/>>. Accessed May 21 2014

These images work to foment and manipulate the viewers' desires and fears, though they operate under the guise of providing important information. Krimes made the giant figures that stand on this scorched earth by transferring the images of models from full-page J Crew advertisements, and then extending their bodies with colored pencil. These white women are usually framed in such a way as to be disembodied. Krimes says that he wanted to "make them whole again," using colored pencil to extrapolate and complete their bodies.<sup>297</sup> For instance, in the remarkable center figure, Krimes transferred the top half of her body and then drew the bottom half that the ad had occluded. She is looking at her feet as she gingerly makes her way across the terrain. Perhaps she is merely trying to avoid stumbling in her high-heeled shoes, but Krimes's composition invites us to imagine her as stepping carefully through the graveyard of disasters, trying to avoid falling into hell itself.

The topmost tier represents heavenly purity and transcendence. There are light blue, penciled clouds and nude female arabesques, but no transferred images. The nude dancers are spread throughout the three levels, representing angels of darkness and of light. Krimes traced their bodies from the *New York Times* dance section. In hell, these dancers are faceless demons, and blank geometries replace their faces. In the earth and heaven panels, the nudes are angels and archangels, having the faces of male and female politicians, celebrities, and "offenders," transferred from the crime section of the newspaper. The politicians and celebrities are generally white and the "offenders" generally people of color, dramatically staging the white supremacist logics of American society that, for instance, results in a young black male's higher chance of going to jail or prison than to college.

In the eyes of the prison authorities, Krimes destroys the prison bed sheets. They are made by incarcerated people as a part of UNICOR, a government program

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<sup>297</sup> Krimes, personal communication.

which strives to not only make prisons self-sustainable, reducing the cost to warehouse human beings by extorting the labor of those human beings, but also strives to make prison profitable and pays pennies to its incarcerated laborers. The practice and its aims are tantamount to slavery. Upending the exploitative logic of this system is one of Krimes's goals: "My project reverses the intended use by the prison and opens up the ability to have a conversation about the prison sheet as a material that serves to 'uncover and reveal' the prison system through my manipulation of this material and its latent associations [of being produced by prisoners, for prisoners in the UNICOR program]."298

Because using the sheets in this way is against prison regulations, not to mention the practical issues raised by creating a mural on this scale in a prison cell, Krimes had to develop a way to smuggle each sheet out, assembling the entire piece only after his release. He describes the process as a solo "Exquisite Corpse" because it was impossible to see the entire work at once; he moved forward in making the piece intuitively, using his imagination and whatever element he had just completed as reference.<sup>299</sup> Before he was able to mail the individual pieces out of the prison, he had to obtain a guard's signature affirming that the work was created using lawfully obtained materials. To circumvent this, Krimes used and re-used labels peeled from a legally purchased Dick Blick canvas, which prisoners can order via catalogue. After convincing the guard that the bed sheet was canvas, Krimes removed the dissembling labels so that he might use them for the next inspection, and mailed the panel to his girlfriend in a UNICOR box.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Ghenov and Krimes (2014).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

Stamped on these boxes is the following message from UNICOR, ironic in this case because of the symbolically charged and illegally appropriated contents of the package:

ESCAPE PROOF GUARANTEED

We take great pride in teaching inmates good work ethics and marketable job skills in order to produce high quality goods and services for our customers. We are committed to your complete and continual satisfaction. If, at any time, an item we have provided does not entirely meet your expectations, we will cheerfully and promptly repair or replace it, entirely at our expense.

The UNICOR box performatively announces itself in the above-quoted stamp as a highly commercial and market-driven didactic tool, promising to render operative the labor powers of “inmates” as it instructs them in the value of satisfying the consumer. Krimes, rendered inoperative by the law in prison, renders himself and the appropriated materials into a state of further inoperativity by making art, an act of labor that, in this case, defies marketable capitalist incentives by expropriating consumer goods into a mural too large for ordinary display and too aesthetically complex for mass consumer sale. He performatively challenges UNICOR’s “cheerful” promise with a profane scene of glory, the divine comedy of heaven, earth, and hell.

To return to Agamben, the prison produces the division in the political subject between *bios*, the political life of the citizenry, and *zoē*, the “bare life” reducible to animal metabolic processes, able to be killed but not sacrificed: the Ancient Roman figure of the *homo sacer*.<sup>301</sup> Moreover, this division is first and foremost a

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<sup>301</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 1.

performative, enacted in and by its own utterance.<sup>302</sup> Agamben emphasizes that *homo sacer* is not simply excluded and may be killed by any citizen, but that he is *necessarily* so and therefore paradoxically *included* in the body politic and his death is necessary to sovereign Glory and the foundation of the polis. It is the creation of these excluded—what Hannah Arendt identified as those without “the right to have rights”—that constitutes the very foundation of the contemporary Western state because without them the state’s central emptiness would be revealed.<sup>303</sup> It is no difficult task to locate these “included excluded” in our current political landscape: Arendt herself identifies them as refugees and criminals.<sup>304</sup> The millions currently confined in prisons and ghettos around the world, most dramatically in the U.S., quite literally engender the conditions for state sovereignty.

In *Apokaluptein: 16389067* Krimes moves himself out of the position of the *homo sacer*. Further, by appropriating prison materials, he profanes the Glory of the state. The mural, in a performance that resembles the performance of incarceration itself, attempts to undo the incapacitating logic of incarceration, which is the way the state both governs its citizens and establishes its own sovereignty. Reading *Apokaluptein: 16389067* uncovers in Agamben’s philosophy its value for performance scholarship today. I believe that Krimes rehearses what William Watkin describes as the “overall aim” of *The Kingdom and the Glory* and of Agamben’s philosophy more

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<sup>302</sup> See Austin, J.L., *How to do Things with Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>303</sup> Arendt, Hannah, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the Ends of the Rights of Man,” *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1951, 267-302.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

generally: “the rendering inoperative of a political system based on founding sovereign violence and distributive and regulative acts of governance.”<sup>305</sup> Krimes’s work presents a strong argument for locating the “founding sovereign violence” in the law—what Colin Dayan has examined as its capacity to disable and kill—and the governmental “distributive and regulative acts” on the very site of the penitentiary.<sup>306</sup> This profanation of the state’s objects of power—e.g. the prison, the bed sheets—is messianic in that its goal is to “make room” for new social organizations and political structures. It is here, where the mural and the performance of its making are revealed to be messianic practice, that Agamben’s quasi-mystical theory further reveals itself to be in line with abolition, as Angela Davis has articulated it, practicing resistance against neoliberalism broadly conceived.<sup>307</sup>

This mural mixes performance and collage and uses the *penitentiary itself as an aesthetic technology*, a kind of cagecraft that explodes time for the viewer by foregrounding the labor of its own production. Standing before the mural, the viewer doesn’t only take in the graphics of the collage—the mix of images evoking heaven, earth, and hell and the various denizens, tortured and exalted. The viewer also stands before the specter of the American prison and the narrative of labor that surrounds the mural, crystallizing in the tacks holding the sheets together, in the frayed edges of the prison sheets overlapping, in the fading image transfers, blended together with the

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<sup>305</sup> Watkin, William. “*The Kingdom and the Glory: The Articulated Inoperativity of Power.*” *Res Publica: Revista de Filosofía Política*, 28 (2012), 243.

<sup>306</sup> See Dayan, Colin, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>307</sup> Davis, Angela, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

scratchy markings of colored pencil, and in the artist himself. The time-consuming method of the mural's making cannot fail to leave the viewer's mind as they study the mural closely, and the performance of carceral art-making mixes with the more conventional performance of gallery art-viewing to produce in the viewer a strange sense of expanding time. The mural seems to confront the viewer, asking: How would you spend five years behind bars? How do you spend your time now? By foregrounding the performance of its own temporality, the mural inquires how we all "do" time, though we personally may not have literally done time. Hearing these questions may inspire the civilian public in two ways: First, the mural invites us to *respond*, with our own—perhaps abolitionist—performances, to the brutality of the prison. Second, the mural intervenes on notions of inspiration, art, and performance, positing that these things often have unexpected origins and equally unexpected goals. This might lead us to pursue these questions in other works that we encounter, asking after their narratives of development and completion. We might find that sometimes the most beautiful art works can be found in the dullest of places: for instance in the strange smear of hair gel on a white sheet.

The performance of making art allows those dedicated to the moral and political project of abolition to conceive of it as an ongoing commitment, as granular action embodied and practiced daily by ordinary people in ordinary spaces. Imprisoned intellectuals, authors, and artists have long understood this, and have produced an extraordinary body of work, speaking back to their situation of confinement in powerful ways. By attending to these voices and visions, audiences can begin the labor of dismantling the roots of the US carceral regime inside their own

imaginations. Paradoxically perhaps, it's by examining the prison directly, attaching freedom dreams to its dystopic desires, that scholars and activists can strip it of its power and purported durability. John Edgar Wideman once made a cultural diagnosis that employed carcerality to argue against those who reify it: "Walls separating Americans by race, gender, class, and region are being justified and celebrated, but not in a spirit that welcomes diversity or seeks ultimate unity through mutual respect and reconciliation. Prison walls are being proposed as a final solution. They symbolize our shortsightedness, our fear of the real problems caging us all. The pity is how blindly, enthusiastically, we applaud those who are constructing the walls dooming us."<sup>308</sup>

Mumia Abu-Jamal echoes Wideman's sentiment in a prescient story from *Live From Death Row*. A former journalist and a radical black activist writer, Abu-Jamal was convicted under suspect circumstances of the murder of a police officer in 1982 and was sentenced to death. He spent the next 20 years on death row in Pennsylvania, at which time his sentence was reduced to life in prison. During his incarceration he's published widely, including eight full-length books. His works, like the writings and art works of many of the other current and former incarcerated, offer non-incarcerated readers a glimpse into the world of the American penitentiary and those interested a way to see beyond it. He describes an incident in which the prisoners discovered inky-black pollution in the water. The smell was dangerously pungent, and the prison reeked of it for months. They soon learned that the water was toxic not only for the prisoners, but for the majority-white civilian community surrounding the prison.

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<sup>308</sup> Wideman, John Edgar, quoted in Mumia Abu-Jamal. *Live from Death Row*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 1995. xxix.

There's an obvious eco-critique to be made here. But for Abu-Jamal, the poisonous miasma became an occasion for reflection: "[B]ars and steel can't stop the power of love. The dark side of that also is true: bars, steel, and court orders can't stop the seepage of pollution that afflicts both the caged and the 'free.' Despite the legal illusions erected by the system to divide and separate life, we the caged share air, water, and hope with you, the not-yet-caged. We share your same breath. [...] The earth is but one great ball. The borders, the barriers, the cages, the cells, the prisons of our lives all originate in the false imaginations of the minds of men."<sup>309</sup> This study has examined how the creatures of the imagination, artists, seek to undo these false and illusory walls. By making change in the realm of the imagination, these subjects take the first step in making change elsewhere.

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<sup>309</sup> Abu-Jamal, 51-52.

APPENDIX  
REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF CARCERAL DRAMA

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Aeschylus, <i>Prometheus Bound</i> (c. 430 BC)                                       | John Galsworthy, <i>Justice</i> (1910)                            |
| Euripides, <i>Medea</i> (c. 431 BC)  | Elmer Rice, <i>The Adding Machine</i> (1923)                      |
| Christopher Marlowe, <i>Tamburlaine the Great</i> (1587)                             | Maurine Dallas Watkins, <i>Chicago</i> (1926)                     |
| William Shakespeare, <i>Measure for Measure</i> (1604)                               | Sophie Treadwell, <i>Machinal</i> (1928)                          |
| Lope de Vega, <i>Fuenteovejuna</i> (1619)  | Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, <i>The Threepenny Opera</i> (1928) |
| Pedro Calderón de la Barca, <i>Life is a Dream</i> (1635)                            | Tennessee Williams, <i>Not About Nightingales</i> (1938)          |
| Jean Racine, <i>Andromaque</i> (1667)  | Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>No Exit</i> (1944)                           |
| John Milton, <i>Samson Agonistes</i> (1671)  | Jean Genet, <i>Deathwatch</i> (1947)                              |
| Chikamatsu Monzaemon, <i>The Love Suicides at Amijima</i> (1721)                     | Samuel Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> (1953)                   |
| John Gay, <i>Beggar's Opera</i> (1728)   | Brendan Behan, <i>The Quare Fellow</i> (1954)                     |
| Percy Bysshe Shelley, <i>The Cenci</i> (1819)  | Peter Weiss, <i>Marat/Sade</i> (1963)                             |
| Edward Fitzball, <i>Jonathan Bradford; or, the Murder at the Roadside Inn</i> (1833) | Kenneth H. Brown, <i>The Brig</i> (1963)                          |
| William Wells Brown, <i>The Escape</i> (1858)  | Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, <i>The Black Hermit</i> (1963)                 |
| Tom Taylor, <i>The Ticket of Leave Man</i> (1863)                                    | Arthur Miller, <i>Incident at Vichy</i> (1964)                    |
| Oscar Wilde, <i>Salomé</i> (1891)  | Edward Bond, <i>Saved</i> (1965)                                  |
| August Strindberg, <i>The Ghost Sonata</i> (1907)                                    | Rick Cluchey, <i>The Cage</i> (1965)                              |
|  | Václav Havel, <i>The Memorandum</i> (1965)                        |

Harold Pinter, <i>The Homecoming</i> (1965)	Michael Keck, <i>Voices in the Rain</i> (1995)
John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Masteroff, <i>Cabaret</i> (1966)	Jane Taylor, <i>Ubu and the Truth Commission</i> (1997)
John Herbert, <i>Fortune and Men's Eyes</i> (1967)	Sarah Kane, <i>Cleansed</i> (1998)
Dario Fo, <i>An Accidental Death of an Anarchist</i> (1970)	Stephen Adly Guirgis, <i>Jesus Hopped the A Train</i> (2000)
Wole Soyinka, <i>Madmen and Specialists</i> (1970)	Paula Meehan, <i>Cell: a play in two parts for four actors and a voice</i> (2000)
Miguel Piñero, <i>Short Eyes</i> (1972)	Suzan-Lori Parks, <i>Red Letter Plays</i> (2001)
Athol Fugard, <i>The Island</i> (1973)	Simon Stephens, <i>Country Music</i> (2004)
Marsha Norman, <i>Getting Out</i> (1978)	Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, <i>The Exonerated</i> (2005)
Jerome McDonough, <i>Juvie</i> (1982)	Tanika Gupta, <i>Gladiator Games</i> (2006)
Manuel Puig, <i>Kiss of the Spider Woman</i> (1983)	Lee Blessing, <i>Lonesome Hollow</i> (2006)
Caryl Churchill, <i>Softcops</i> (1984)	Rebecca Lenkiewicz, <i>Her Naked Skin</i> (2008)
María Irene Fornés, <i>The Conduct of Life</i> (1985)	Luis Alfaro, <i>Oedipus El Rey</i> (2010)
August Wilson, <i>The Piano Lesson</i> (1987)	Naomi Wallace, <i>And I and Silence</i> (2011)
Griselda Gambaro, <i>Antigona Furiosa</i> (1986)	Branden Jacob-Jenkins, <i>An Octoroon</i> (2014)
Timberlake Wertenbaker, <i>Our Country's Good</i> (1988)	Sara Fonseca and Julia Steele Allen, <i>Mariposa &amp; the Saint</i> (2014)
Reza Abdoh, <i>The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice</i> (1990)	Bashar Murkus, <i>Parallel Time</i> (2014)
Migdalia Cruz, <i>Fur</i> (1995)	

Dick Scanlan and Sherie Rene Scott,  
*Whorl Inside a Loop* (2015)

Paula Vogel, *Indecent* (2015)

Anna Deveare Smith, *Notes from the  
Field* (2016)

Dominique Morisseau, *Pipeline* (2017)

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