

**“Freedom is a Practice”: The Praxis of Postcarceral Performance in the United Kingdom
and the United States**

by

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University of Pittsburgh, 2022

This dissertation theorizes postcarceral performance as a response to the violence of incarceration in the United Kingdom and the United States. Postcarceral performance consists of three core components: time, space, and praxis. Through its analysis of postcarceral performance, this project considers the role of community-building, the dialectical tension between hope and disappointment, alternative epistemologies of time, and carceral recovery spaces in enacting abolitionist ideologies. Diverging from cohesive applied theatre and prison theatre practices, this project broadly examines how organizations across theatre, art, and educational worlds rewrite carceral narratives by centering those harmed by the carceral state.

Within the past decade, theatre organizations and similar performance non-profits have cultivated new employment-based art programs to attend to this marginalized population of people formerly incarcerated (in addition to incarcerated individuals). These programs not only support a reconceptualizing of the self post-incarceration but also assists in developing methodologies for eventual abolition. Following a critical examination of institutionality and the work of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, this project investigates the postcarceral performance organizations of Clean Break, Let’s Get Free, and the Unit Literacy Group. This project hopes to invigorate the dialogue around prison theatre by displaying abolitionist possibilities of performance and expanding the structure and praxis of reform-centered arts organizations. Ultimately, I argue that building performance structures led by or alongside incarcerated/formerly incarcerated peoples offers new

pathways to a world without prisons. Organizations and individuals having the courage to question the sheer existence and practice of incarceration provides an empathetic visual network to process the trauma of prisons, respond to contemporary acts of state-sponsored violence, and imagine collectivist futures.

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Preface

In July 2019, I began archival research on this project, then in its early stages and still solely focused on the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy. My friend Beejay flew up from Cairo to join me in London for a few days, and we went to see a show at the Old Vic. When getting in line to pick up our tickets, I stopped dead in my tracks. “Courtney, what?” my friend asked, annoyed at the holdup. “Beejay, do you know who that is?” “Who?” “In front of us!” “A lady with a tote bag?” “That’s DAME Harriet Walter!” I’ve never been much for playing it cool. “Court, say hi to her! Say you’re writing about her!” Yeah – like I’d ever do that. I was just happy that it felt like this could be a good sign that I was on at least *somewhat* of the right track (and still reeling from being starstruck). Beejay and I went upstairs to get to our seats before the show began. Someone else also had upstairs seating. “HEY! MY FRIEND IS WRITING HER THESIS ON YOU!” Clearly, I associate with those who *also* don’t play it cool. After Beejay quite literally yelled at – again *Dame* Harriet Walter – I was looking for the nearest exit or window. But instead, Ms. Walter turned, smiled, laughed, and said, “Wonderful! Ask me anything!”

This project has been remade over and over again. As with all dissertations, it became a love-hate (sometimes hate-hate) relationship, and the world following the outbreak of COVID-19 did not make it any easier. What has made it easier has been the incredible love, support, and humor from family and friends, who have seriously sustained me throughout this endeavor. A fair warning to the dear reader, this is about to become uncomfortably sappy.

To the love of my life, Ryan, who supported me through it all, giving me the sweetest pep talks, necessary bluntness, and ordering GrubHub more than we probably should have. To Toby

and Millie, who unfortunately cannot read because they are dogs, but sat with me daily throughout this process and reminded me to take a break (on their schedule, of course) and snuggle often. To my brother, Chris, my very best friend, and greatest ally who I am so proud to look up to, for sending me the best memes and starting every FaceTime with “Oh my god, so...”. None of this – the project or even graduate school – would have been possible without the one who made me fall in love with words and the stage, my mom. I am who I am today because of you. To my guide, Amanda, with the “girl, I’ve been there” advice and cheer throughout all of this. To Victoria, for seeing me ugly cry more times than...not? And still believing in me when I couldn’t. To Liz, for a sense of humor and wit that kept me sane and Alison for being the best gardening buddy and helping me to quite literally stop and smell the roses. To Micaela – from being first-years in college to...now long out of college, you’ve never stopped being my number one cheerleader. To Shelby and Oggie, whose friendship (and dog-sitting) and general joy for life kept a smile on my face. To Emily and Jack, who supported all of my questions surrounding the UK and engaged in political banter, you two are absolute gems.

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Irizarry for the GSWS Works-in-Progress, which provided generative feedback to this project. Special thanks to Bill Daw of Archives and Special Collections, who has become a friend and mentor throughout my time at Pitt and never failed to locate any book or article I asked for. You are incredible. Furthermore, thank you to the entire Archives and Special Collections staff for supporting my work and life outside of the dissertation.

Additionally, I want to note my deepest thanks to Kathleen George for always encouraging my ideas and suggesting what to watch on television (and it inevitably being a great help for the dissertation). You have truly made my graduate career so very special. To Patrick McKelvey, for having a book or article suggestion for any topic at any time and sharing in mutual adoration for mozzarella sticks and chicken fingers. Lezlie Cross, who first supported my work as a young Ph.D. student at the Mid-Atlantic Theatre Conference, thank you for your kindness and incredible generosity throughout this project.

The statement “none of this would have been possible without my advisor” feels far too shallow for the endless support, encouragement, direction, and guidance that Michelle Granshaw gave these past two years. I am so thankful for having such a caring and brilliant professor who continuously believed in this work when I felt like nothing I had to say mattered. Talking through ideas with you and seeing your pen fly across the room from excitement never failed to be the biggest sign that I was going in the right direction. Your intellectual curiosity, intelligence, and compassion always encouraged me to “forward my voice” and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Most importantly, to Kabasha. You always say how blessed you are to have Ryan and me in your life, but we are the lucky ones. You are the most selfless, loving, and supportive person I’ve ever met, and I hope to make you proud. This is for you.

1.0 Introduction: “Justice is What Love Looks Like in Public”¹

Today I was told by my older sister that my nephew has been arrested. My initial reaction was hopelessness. Hopelessness because my nephew was the one out of the men in the family who was free. The one who I hoped who would help me break the cycle. But months before his arrest, I did attempt to empower him by imparting my knowledge, wisdom, and life experiences. Part of what was imparted to me from those before me in the hope that I would ignite self-discovery that would propel him to make a choice.

Was I as straightforward as I should have been? Could I have shown more compassion for why he behaves the way he does? Could I have been more forgiving when I believe my loving rebuke fell on deaf ears?²

Paul paused and I could hear him sigh as he folded his paper. “Uh, I just kinda stopped there. And like...I appreciate what Kabasha is doing with this. It definitely helps, and I’m definitely gonna put everything I can into it.”³ This was Paul’s third phone call of the day, taken during free time, under Kabasha’s encouragement. Paul McKenzie is a new member of the Unit Literacy Group (ULG) at SCI Somerset in Pennsylvania.⁴ The ULG began in 2017 under K. Kabasha Griffin-El to address educational gaps in incarcerated communities. Kabasha built the organization partly to combat the silence he experienced in prison when asking about addressing these gaps. He began participating in small, already-established groups in prison and volunteered

¹ etta cetera, *Justice Is What Love Looks Like in Public*, 2021. Let’s Get Free: Collective Resistance, Pittsburgh.

² Paul McKenzie, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, February 18, 2022.

³ Ibid.

⁴ At the time of our discussion, Paul had been a member for about 3 months. Ibid.

to be their secretary to learn how they functioned: “I quickly realized that so many of these meetings were just bitching sessions. I’d say [something along the lines of] ‘ok, yes, we know this – so what are y’all gonna do about it?’ And they’d just stare at me.”⁵ Determined to make an impact, Kabasha offered literacy courses, creative writing workshops, and tutoring sessions via his own organization when incarcerated at SCI Greene and later at SCI Somerset. Paul’s appreciation for ULG, “for what Kabasha is doing,” and his enthusiasm for educational opportunity gestures towards actual change post-incarceration, which stems from peer support rather than a top-down organizational model. Kabasha’s work, our friendship, and endless discussions inform so much of this project’s work. This dissertation centers the identities and experiences of incarcerated and released individuals. It follows their work alongside artists and activists to humanize and render the effects of the carceral state visible. In examining the structure and labor of organizations working to abolish prisons, I show how these groups use performance-based practices to build foundations to create change, both post-incarceration and in response to imprisonment.

An earlier version of this project centered on a theatre trilogy that took place in a fictionalized prison where the imprisoned women performed Shakespeare. The making of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy and its partnerships with Clean Break, a women-identifying theatre company made up of those impacted by the criminal justice system, and the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project caught my eye as activating something that worked between the space of applied theatre and commercial theatre. I asked, “how does theatre traverse between social justice groups, educational outreach, and the commercial stage? What role do community partnerships play in the continued impact of a singular production?”⁶ These questions opened up

⁵ K. Kabasha Griffin-El, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, January 2022.

⁶ Courtney E. Colligan, “‘Be Not Deceived’: Cross-Gender Performance, Societal Norms, and Innovative Theatre in the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy.” Prospectus, (The University of Pittsburgh: 2020): 4.

larger, more timely questions on the direct relationship between prison abolition and performance(s). At the heart of the Trilogy, the portrayal and employment of women impacted by the criminal justice system pointed toward the constellations between prison reform, diversity, audience engagement, and the efficacy of performance. My current project developed into another, broader project that explored these constellations.

The summer of 2020 elicited heightened awareness of the structural inequities of American society. Aside from the violence of law enforcement captured on camera and the effects of police brutality, the legal system came into focus for those who tracked the protests, think pieces, and high profiles of activists which followed. These discussions highlighted how many of these systematic injustices lead to incarceration and support the overall carceral state. Furthermore, maintaining a heteropatriarchy society encourages prison survival by using the law to disenfranchise those who do not (or cannot) follow the demands of a capitalist country. Two years later, the protests have subsided, and think pieces have dwindled. For the privileged some, the protests of summer 2020 were just that – a summer. But for many, they were an explosion of a pressure cooker that had been boiling for 400 years.⁷ While this dissertation does not focus on the continued practice of police brutality, it does address the systemic racism in both the United States and the United Kingdom and discusses the intersections between freedom and the arts. The key throughline of my dissertation articulates the emergence of what I call “postcarceral performance.” Postcarceral performance involves the organizational practice of engaging with both current and formerly incarcerated individuals who participate in artistic events as a means of employment, therapy, or similar forms of self-determination.⁸ Performance, or the study of theories of human

⁷ Stemming from the arrival of the first ship of enslaved Africans in the U.S.

⁸ By therapy, I do not mean a structured psychological medical practice but instead a meditative experience between an individual and artmaking or community-building through performance as an act of healing.

behavior as well as social practices and advocacies, best focalizes this project's case studies due to my broad undertaking of types of performance practices (theatre, visual art, literacy).⁹ My examination of the individual impacted by the carceral state necessitates the use of performance in exploring how they activate hope and futurity past prison walls.

Paul McKenzie's writing which opens this introduction, reveals the use of performative writing, highlighting the emotional processing and recovery-based reflections at play in the Unit Literacy Group. As the Unit Literacy Group's Executive Director, I acknowledge my optimism and excitement for this group.¹⁰ This positionality affords me the opportunity to understand the inner processes of the history and practice of the ULG as well as speak to future directions for similar groups in the march towards abolition. My analysis of the groups all includes individual interviews with key members of the organizations discussed yet as a member of ULG, I maintain a deeply personal connection to the work of the group and allow this connection to fuel the excitement for future ULG projects.

The organizational practice of incarcerated-led recovery groups at a peer-to-peer level encourages participation, connection, and community-building. With this in mind, I argue that postcarceral performance works as an abolitionist practice in the continual recruiting and inclusion of broad demographics. For example, while ULG's main work occurs in prison, its members use the knowledge gained to help empower others, particularly family members. In reflecting on his past and how it has informed his present, Paul explained how he "never really had a background in education. I actually got my GED while incarcerated, and that's the highest education I've had."¹¹ Paul's educational experience is not unusual for those imprisoned. He continues:

⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 1.

¹⁰ I discuss this role in Chapter 4 in more detail. This role and its work take place outside of SCI Somerset.

¹¹ Paul McKenzie, interview.

Since I've been in prison, I've done a lot of reading on a lot of different subjects. I don't even remember how Kabasha, and I started talking, but I'm glad [we did]. I've learned a lot from being around him. I'm kind of nervous and stuff, but, yeah, I've learned a lot, and I think the Unit Literacy Group is a great idea. It's helped me tremendously, and I'm actually about to get my daughter involved by sending her some of our lessons and going through them with her. I definitely want to become a better speaker and a better reader and be able to express myself better in conversations.

I want to start a nonprofit organization once I'm outta here that helps prisoners and their families to just understand the whole prison process and what we go through from beginning to end.¹²

Paul's excitement and determination for future plans centered around helping others highlight the role of self-determination and community engagement in postcarceral performance. By combining his experiences with the criminal justice system, experiences that he revealed cost his own family "a lot of money," with education and introspection, Paul speaks to one of the goals of the ULG: "to promote wellness and recovery through literacy."¹³ This recovery begins with the individual before extending outward to those additionally affected by incarceration. The process of recovery and defiance drives this project by focusing on those who use art to rethink gender, identity, individuality, and particularly, freedom.

In terms of incarcerated individuals, the use of community-building (as seen in the ULG) and partnerships with outside organizations (like Let's Get Free) actualize similar practices of thought. The concept of postcarceral performance considers the artistic and structural work of organizations, including those on the inside, who use performance practices to defy the carceral state. Notably, the case studies center on organizations focusing on the collective and the individual. Community-building and collective organizing traverse across postcarceral

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. K. Kabasha Griffin-El, "Unit Literacy Group," Unit Literacy Group, December 20, 2020, <https://www.unitliteracygroup.com/>.

performance organizations, threaded together by courage. In speaking on the role of youth, particularly Black youth, in building collectivist futures, Angela Davis contends:

I think that precisely because young people have a stake in the future, they are much more likely to forge the courage necessary to guarantee that the future is a better one. Courage comes from collective organizing. I think that individual courage is a myth that many people assume – that courage is purely internal, but I believe that it comes from connections with other people and building community. I’ve said many, many times that when I was facing the death penalty three times [how] it was a frightening experience. [But] I did not consider myself courageous. I knew that there was a good possibility that that despite the fact that I was innocent, that I would be found guilty and that I would be sent to my death. What made that fear begin to wane was the fact that so many people were standing with me and the fact that I eventually recognized was no matter what the outcome, I would not be alone.¹⁴

In her discussion with the president of the Black Action Society, Destiny Mann, at the University of Pittsburgh, Davis praised the collective action of BAS and the importance of uniting across differences. This union against “capitalism-driven individualism,” Davis claimed, “is one of the key dilemmas of our time.”¹⁵ This project supports the fight against individualism by forwarding community and rendering visible largely invisible populations.

This project analyzes key organizations involved with incarcerated and released populations in the U.K. and the U.S. I begin with the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy as it gestures towards the concept and framework of postcarceral performance through its attentiveness towards depicting incarceration, establishing community engagement through dramaturgy and education, and mapping out the relationships between prisons, universities, and commercial stages. In doing so, I position performance as redefining and portraying the realities of the carceral state. Forwarding the nexus of performance studies and prison studies as an area that “offers incisive

¹⁴ Angela Davis and Destiny Mann, “A Night with Angela Davis,” *Black Action Society at University of Pittsburgh*. Webinar, April 11, 2022.

¹⁵ Alexandra Ross, “‘A Symbol of Activism’: Black Action Society Hosts Conversation with Angela Davis,” *The Pitt News*, April 13, 2022, <https://pittnews.com/article/173021/news/a-symbol-of-activism-black-action-society-hosts-conversation-with-angela-davis/>.

critiques of the racialized, classed, sexualized, and gender dynamics of the prison” with attention to “arts practices in and around prisons and social institutions,” I develop postcarceral performance as an abolitionist logic that works to defy some forms of prison theatre’s reifying of prison power.¹⁶

Postcarceral performance offers a way through the carceral complex by solidifying the arts as redemptive without emphasizing prisons themselves as rehabilitative. The term “rehabilitation” in prisons and other forms of confinement such as asylums, Residential Schools, and other institutions “share characteristics, philosophies, and goals that relate to rehabilitation through top-down evaluation and constrained freedom, routine, and physical space.”¹⁷ The junction of rehabilitation and imprisonment has historically ebbed and flowed in dialogue with political leadership, particularly in the late twentieth century. Davis describes how “what was once regarded as progressive and even revolutionary represents today the marriage of technological superiority and political backwardness. No one – not even the most ardent defenders of the supermax – would try to argue today that absolute segregation, including sensory deprivation, is restorative and healing.”¹⁸ Based on discussions with those working across the arts and incarceration, the notion of prisons today as rehabilitative has continued to dissipate. Davis claims “the prison’s presumed goal of rehabilitation has been thoroughly displaced by incapacitation as the major objective of imprisonment.”¹⁹ If the objective of prisons (which has always been present, if not blatantly

¹⁶ Nina Billone Prieur, “In the System: Art, Prison, and the Performance of Social Welfare,” PhD Diss., (University of California, Berkley: 2010): 1.

¹⁷ Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds., *Disability Incarcerated Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): ix. Chapman cites how in “1895, the superintendent of the ‘prototype [U.S.] Indian Industrial School at Carlisle Pennsylvania’ Captain Richard Henry Pratt described the goal of Indian Residential Schools as to ‘kill the Indian, save the man’ (Churchill 2004, 13-14): 36.

¹⁸ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York City: Seven Stories Press, 2011): 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

named) is to incapacitate, then why does prison theatre scholarship continue to discuss the role of rehabilitation?

I ask this question to expose some of the language and justification for groups like Shakespeare Behind Bars and the Medea Project, and even Clean Break for their work in rehabilitation through the arts.²⁰ The actual act of rehabilitation beneath the structure of the prison system will always be at odds with one another. James Thompson discusses this tension in detail in “From the Stocks to the Stage: Prison Theatre and the Theatre of Prison.” He asks, “do theatre projects turn the objective of rehabilitation into a performance of justice being done or do they ‘contribute’ to the process of rehabilitation?”²¹ For an organization like Shakespeare in the Courts, a program from Shakespeare and Company, the answer is that of a performance of justice under the guise of rehabilitation. This program partners with the Berkshire Juvenile Court System as “an alternative to more punitive consequences.”²² The partnering with the criminal justice system supports said system’s power and equates the role of theatre as a more favorable alternative to detention. Under the guise of “choice,” programs like this one positions prison theatre as a spectacle with the court system. Similar to performed apologies of past crimes, the relationship across some prison theatre programs extends the criminal justice system’s reach rather than attending to the needs of those within it. What postcarceral performance offers, then, is a

²⁰ “Rehabilitation” is not the only term used. In their mission and vision statements, Shakespeare Behind Bars discusses “successful integration into society” and Clean Break mentions “the power of theatre to change lives.” The Medea Project’s website discusses “Train the Trainer Workshops” where teaching arts can register for workshops that are “rehabilitative in nature.” <https://themedeproject.weebly.com> “Mission & Vision,” Shakespeare Behind Bars, October 14, 2021, <https://shakespearebehindbars.org/about/mission/>; “About Us,” Clean Break, 2021, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/about/>; “About the Medea Project,” The Medea Project, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://themedeproject.weebly.com/>.

²¹ James Thompson, “From the Stocks to the Stage: Prison Theatre and the Theatre of Prison,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Portland: Intellect, 2004): 67.

²² “Shakespeare in the Courts - Education: Shakespeare & Company: Lenox, MA,” Shakespeare & Company, 2021, <https://www.shakespeare.org/education/shakespeare-in-the-courts>.

framework to acknowledge and work within this tension by first and foremost centering those with experience in the carceral system and using performance in defiance of prison control.

I frequently rely on interviews and direct quotes to allow those involved in postcarceral performance organizations to speak for themselves. In privileging the experiences of those impacted by the criminal justice system and their process with artmaking and performance, I work against carceral technologies which either erase or stigmatize these individuals. However, with my focus on returning citizens and formerly incarcerated individuals, I look beyond the temporal space of imprisonment as well as highlight prison's continual violence post-release. With postcarceral performance, I explicitly depart from a unified narrative of either the imprisoned or the released experience and instead offer varied assemblages of performance praxes which work across these demographics. This dissertation moves between imprisoned populations, formerly incarcerated individuals, and artists in solidarity to deconstruct the confines of these areas of study.

Postcarceral performance is not prison theatre, not applied theatre, not solely performance studies, and not either set in prison or outside of it. Actors (those who take action), cultural and social institutions, visual art, and transformative social reform contribute to the main mechanisms of postcarceral performance. Further, I examine how postcarceral performance functions in different spaces by examining a theatre company, an art show, and a prison literacy group. Informed primarily by the scholarship of Angela Davis, Nicole Fleetwood, and José Esteban Muñoz, this project maps out the performances of cultural norms and values and the role of radical optimism in the work to abolish the carceral state.

The three components of postcarceral performance (praxis, time, space) are explored in-depth in their own chapters. I cite the longevity and continued relationship-building work of Clean Break as emblematic of praxis. Praxis focuses on using the arts, particularly theatre, related to the

process of reintegration. However, I specifically move beyond the criminal justice system's definition of reintegration as re-entering into society. Instead, I view the process as a continued building of the self outside prison's confines. Let's Get Free visual art and art show investigated in Chapter 3 forwards time's role in experiencing and portraying incarceration as well as enacting alternative epistemologies to prisons. The time component of postcarceral performance specifically examines the deconstructing and reorganizing of time found in the prison system to the prison industrial complex. Performances by companies discussed in my project use time to expose the ramifications of this prison industrial complex and to offer new epistemologies of post-incarceration life. The Unit Literacy Group's work as incarcerated individuals center space by not only speaking to physical space but using education to cultivate a mental and emotional space to *try*. The act of trying supports this organization's focus on self-determination with the acknowledgment that healing and learning are not linear processes. As such, attempts, setbacks, and continued growth occur in an open and supportive space led by and for incarcerated men.

My work, grounded in theatre and performance studies, offers how this organizational practice can help actualize the goals of abolition rooted in carceral studies, women and gender studies, sociology, and human geography by centering the experiences and recovery of those in the criminal justice system. In conversation with Nicole Fleetwood's recent work on visual art in prisons, this study remains the only one to speak to the postcarceral (and carceral) demographic working in the arts across these two countries and examining art as community-building and identity-forming. Looking at these two countries reveals how multiple organizations engage in postcarceral performance with different (yet comparable) prison and theatre practices.

1.1 Literature Review

Much of my work originated with the intersections between applied theatre/prison theatre and the commercial stage. Within prison theatre specifically lies prison Shakespeare, an unofficial subfield of applied theatre but a powerhouse in terms of art programs in prison. Because their concepts inform much of my thinking, I briefly cover the intersections of these areas. The complexities of comprehending Applied Theatre as a field stem from the term itself. One might argue that all theatre is applied theatre in that the existence of the art is to make contact and connection with other individuals. In “Introduction to Intervention,” Tim Prentki states that “applied theatre is the agency of intervention forcing its way into close worlds (schools, prisoners, African villages, old people’s homes, aboriginal communities) in order to provoke changes.”²³ The critical goal of applied theatre is to enact a form of social and/or individual change by using dramatic practices.

However, not all methods of applied theatre nor their goals fall under such broad generalizations. In a 2009 issue of *Research in Drama Education*, Peter O’Connor and Briar O’Connor define applied theatre “as an umbrella term that defines theatre which operates beyond the traditional and limiting scope of conventional Western theatre forms.”²⁴ They then categorize the work as “engaging in spaces or with groups of people where mainstream theatre still fears to tread,” resulting in the “purposeful blurring” of boundaries between actors and spectators, leading to all involved as active theatre-makers.²⁵ Within applied theatre, the methods of reaching an

²³ Tim Prentki, “Introduction to Intervention” in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, eds. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (London: Routledge, 2009): 181.

²⁴ Peter O’Connor and Briar O’Connor, “Editorial,” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 14, no. 4 (November 2009): 471.

²⁵ Ibid.

atypical audience who actively becomes a theatre-maker of their own vary widely. Yet, most of these methods remain in close conversation with the work of Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal's methods speak to the goal of community problem solving through "anti-cathartic Brechtian approach," according to Hannah Fox and Abigail Leader.²⁶ Leader and Fox speak to the opposite methods of connecting with audiences through Playback Theatre and Autobiographical Theatre, two other forms that thrive on empathy and human connection. The motivations found in applied theatre (using empathy and methods of theatrical practice to rehabilitate) alter or revolutionize societal structures. This praxis directly speaks to Clean Break's work and implicitly supports the work of LGF and ULG. Postcarceral performance builds on the conversations of empathy in applied theatre but with a specific anti-institutionalist turn.

The complexities surrounding the application of applied theatre in terms of ethical representation and participation inform this turn away from institutionality. Tensions within applied theatre practices as upholding a prison system or a neoliberal education system can influence a discrediting of the practice altogether.²⁷ According to Jonothan Neelands, it additionally can attempt to apply western ideals of democracy to non-democratic nations and cultures. Neelands describes this tension as "between the political imaginary of democracy and the politics of places which are not democratic."²⁸ This "un-democratic space" contributes to postcarceral performance through the overt recognition that prisons *are* undemocratic spaces.²⁹ As

²⁶ Hannah Fox and Abigail Leeder, "Combining Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback Theatre, and Autobiographical Theatre for Social Action in Higher Education," *Theatre Topics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 101.

²⁷ Due to the wide umbrella of applied theatre, these tensions also extend beyond the upholding of some institutions to the questioning of if the practice as "theatre" at all. See "Introduction" and "Introduction to Ethics of Representation in *The Applied Theatre Reader* (2009): 10-14, 65-68.

²⁸ "In places where different forms of inequity have become institutionalised, it is even more necessary for socially committed AT work to create democratic spaces which allow participants to experience and model the processes and circumstances of egalitarian democracy." Jonothan Neelands, "Taming the Political: The Struggle Over Recognition in the Politics of Applied Theatre," *Research in Drama Education* 12, no. 3 (2007): 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

made apparent via performance, the questioning and concentrating on the rights of those in Anglo-American justice systems separates postcarceral performance from other applied theatre practices.³⁰

Within and adjacent to applied theatre is prison theatre. One of the most notable successes of prison theatre, The Medea Project, illustrates the possibilities of using theatre to reach disenfranchised populations through programs like the “Train the Trainer Workshop.”³¹ The intertwined theories between prison theatre and prison-as-theatre acknowledge the role of performativity in punishment and detention. Often, scholars cite the theatrical components of prisons to highlight the emergence and continuation of performance arts groups in prison settings. Across prison-as-theatre and prison theatre, some prisons’ “‘rehabilitation’ programmes use exercises and approaches that will be familiar to theatre practitioners such as rehearsal, public presentations and role-play.”³² Thompson describes how the media landscape, including politicians, artists, and journalists, “sit between the performance of justice and the public audience as mediators and arbiters of meaning. They/we seek to control the reading of these moments.”³³ The narrative of a crime, then, stems from those in charge of the justice system but also outsiders (journalists and pundits) who are secondary to the crime itself. Essentially, crime as the public understands it is a political and social construct, adapted to fit larger narratives of what society supports and denies in a given moment. Prison theatre and prison arts labor in a space of upholding

³⁰ Referring to “rights” as in the actual practice of the everyday while in the criminal justice system, not what is documented or claimed.

³¹ The website notes, “Interactive Zoom workshops provide training in Arts Facilitators’ Best Practices for Coordinating Organizations working in corrections. Starting February 2021, Teaching Artists (Arts Providers) can register for the Train-The-Trainer workshops that are rehabilitative in nature. The curriculum will draw from Rhodessa Jones’ groundbreaking Performative Methodology that instructs on working with disenfranchised populations.” “About the Medea Project,” The Medea Project, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://themedeaoproject.weebly.com/>.

³² Thompson, “From the Stocks to the Stage,” 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62.

the prison structure by willingly entering into it. They can defy it by empowering incarcerated individuals who are trapped in a system built to dehumanize and devalue. These practices typically occur separately from the general public without strong outside involvement. Postcarceral performance strongly diverges from prison theatre in its expansiveness beyond conventional theatre practices but also through its concrete focus on broader community-building and encouraged outside involvement.

Relatively few works center prison theatre (functioning under the confines of applied theatre), outside social justice organizations, and performance studies. Caoimhe McAvinchey, Alwyn Walsh, and Sarah Woodland actively study prison theatre via women's incarceration, while Michael Balfour, Rob Pensalfini, and James Thompson broadly examine applied theatre and prison theatre companies. Ashley E. Lucas's *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration* advocates for theatrical productions in prisons. Her foundational argument is that this practice enacts community building and individual transformation.³⁴ Within performance studies, Dwight Conquergood, Richard Schechner, and Diana Taylor use performance as a way to bear witness to rituals, gestures, and enacting power and control. Prison theatre robustly includes prison Shakespeare of which dozens of companies use Shakespeare's texts to forward a vision of rehabilitation. I discuss the complexities of Prison Shakespeare and cultural institutions in Chapter 1. The research on social justice collectives, particularly regarding abolition and incarcerated organizations, crosses many interdisciplinary texts from Lee Bernstein to Victoria Law. My work hopes to fill the void between these research areas by articulating a practice that spans inside and outside of prisons, embraces multiplicities of art and performance, and examines the work of collective resistance.

³⁴ Ashley Lucas, *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

To date, dissertations contain some of the most robust scholarship available on the intersections of prisons and performance. Nicholas Fessette calls for the term “cagecraft” as “a critical term for understanding how the process of making artworks as a practice of freedom that can open oppressive structures up for public engagement.”³⁵ Art-making and public visibility do connect wider audiences to the realities of incarceration, an argument I too make, yet rather than situating this process as open for public consumption, I am interested in how these performances can inform abolition. Furthermore, I refrain from reifying the violent images and technologies of incarceration by avoiding the image of the “cage.” Bridget Keehan also attentively examines the power of terminology in prison settings. Keehan’s work on prisoner identity in “Limitations on the Arts in Prison: Restrictive Narrative Identity and the Performance of Reform” argues against the appropriation of rehabilitation by arts groups in prison. In doing so, she activates the aesthetic performance potentialities of the incarcerated individual and encourages a broader identity construction beyond the role of prisoner in state-sanctioned rehabilitation.³⁶ With my dissertation, I aim to show the successful methods of incorporating incarcerated and released individuals in the arts. I begin by theoretically framing how this process actively wrestles with the capitalist-driven commercial stage, the continually shifting social force of Shakespeare, and how these practices deconstruct and offer new ways of watching and absorbing theatre. The case studies that follow build outward from the label of “prisoner” and instead reconceptualize performance practices defining identity outside of attachment to the carceral state.

³⁵ Nicholas Fessette, “Cagecraft: Prison, Performance, and the Making of Carceral Subjects,” PhD Diss., (Cornell University, 2018): 1.

³⁶ Bridget Keehan “Limitations on the Arts in Prison: Restrictive Narrative Identity and the Performance of Reform,” PhD Diss., (University of South Wales/Prifysgol De Cymru, 2013).

Nina Billone Prieur's work between critical prison studies and theatre and performance studies develops "the concept of penal-welfare performance."³⁷ This lens examines the carceral and welfare state's connections within community-based performance practices to "highlight how power saturates every aspect of the social world."³⁸ I build off Prieur's robust research between prison studies and theatre and performance studies by furthering connections between artistic practice and community engagement in defiance of carceral control, particularly when considering the role of space and time. As a whole, applied theatre and prison theatre offer select models and practices which engage in incarcerated and released populations. However, these areas have yet to reach the radical potential for those impacted by the carceral state.³⁹

1.2 Methodology: Developing Postcarceral Performance

Postcarceral performance forwards the embodied experience to center the individuals behind and engaged in this work; this repositions how the public views former prisoners to see them as multi-faceted individuals who have experienced detention. In other words, I forefront the individuals engaged in the performance practice to reconceptualize the person behind the societal label of "prisoner." Current rhetoric still upholds carceral logics, and my work aims to solidify the human behind the title. The ethics behind the centering of the individual experiencing incarceration drives my project's work.

³⁷ Prieur, "In the System," 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ These fields' institutionalization into higher education programs and robust, friendly partnerships with prisons contribute to this gap in possibility.

Throughout this project, I use the term and practice of “abolition” rather than “reform.” Liat Ben-Moshe’s claim concerning “how reform and abolition are embedded in each other” even though “one is often seen as legitimate, and the other is discredited as belonging to a radical fringe” functions as the undercurrent of this dissertation’s discussion on abolishing the carceral state.⁴⁰ For some organizations, like Clean Break, and even the messaging of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, educating the public about imprisonment and strengthening social support programs falls under the label of “reform” – a term used in my interviews by members of both groups.⁴¹ The U.S. programs in this project, Let’s Get Free and the Unit Literacy Group, use “abolition” (which is made possible through “reform”). When interviewing LGF’s founder, etta cetera, I asked about her work with those who are more reform-minded versus those who are abolish-minded. etta swiftly dismantled that binary:

The system will not be abolished overnight. Like, I don’t know anyone who is part of an armed insurrection right now [to tear down prisons]. There’s nothing to do fast. Really there’s a spectrum of abolition. No one has it figured out – there’s no perfect abolitionist group out there, and you have to make compromises because people actually have diversity of thought. [...] How are we creating alternatives to what keeps us safe? I want to make a banner that says, ‘perpetual punishment doesn’t keep us safe.’ It’s this whole façade, you know? You know when something happens the cops have to “get” someone to make the public feel safe. They’ll go, “all right! We got him!” and it’s all...just like a performance.⁴²

Put another way, reform can be a pathway to abolition and abolition requires reformation. Just as freedom is a practice, abolition is a process. I specifically break apart this epistemology to situate the political landscape of the groups interviewed in this dissertation.

⁴⁰ Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 6.

⁴¹ While not the focus of this project, British conceptualizations of abolition differ from American – particularly due to differing (yet similar) carceral models and history. However, with rising prison populations in the UK and a decrease in prison spending, some have argued that British prisons are growing closer to US ones. Duncan Campbell, “Britain’s Prisons Are Becoming Ever More like the Failed US System,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, November 1, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/01/britain-prisons-us-system>.

⁴² etta cetera, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, December 17, 2021.

Each group has a different approach to worldbuilding. The evocation of performance and the relationship between prison arts and the communities they serve inform much of this project. Furthermore, this project examines the assumed safety of the criminal justice system and the overall process(es) of abolition. I conducted interviews with the leaders of each organization discussed in Chapters 2 through 4 and with a key actor of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, Leah Harvey, for Chapter 1. Through these interviews and dramaturgical analysis of both archives and performance, I articulate the existence (and growth) of a performance practice and concept that bridge the gap between prison theatre, performance studies, and social justice organizations.

Angela Davis's and Ruth Wilson Gilmore's scholarship on carceral logics informs my conceptualization of the prison as a capitalized captivity space that silences individuality. Within this space, I offer analyses on how performance becomes a way through the silence. Artmaking and gaining literacy provide processes that contribute to the reclamation of self and individual growth separate from the prison's façade of rehabilitation—penal space and time function remarkably different than the outside world. Gilmore describes how prisons financially thrive because of forced patterns of circulation in order to access basic necessities. She writes, “what’s extracted from the extracted is the resource of life – time.”⁴³ Within this stolen time lies the rearranging of bodies in space and bodies as space, “if we think about this dynamic through the politics of scale, understanding bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold- extracting again time from the territories of selves. This process opens a hole in a life, furthering, perhaps to our surprise, the annihilation

⁴³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso Books, 2017): 227.

of space by time.”⁴⁴ Gilmore’s conceptualization of abolitionist geography examines the time-space of the past to imagine and develop futures outside of carceral practices.

This fluidity of temporality and ownership of space, activated through hope and imagination, contributes to the role of artmaking in and about prisons (Chapter 3) as an abolitionist practice. Furthermore, in *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as a “mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic reference whose forms of temporal experience seem natural to those whom they privilege.”⁴⁵ From her definition of chrononormativity, my project notes how the institutional force of the prison privileges labor-productive time. This process shifts the incarcerated body throughout mandatory events (from skilled occupational training, state-run therapy, and group activities) in order to alter and produce a reformed individual to become a contributing member of society. Although the mechanism of the state-run apparatus of the prison attempts to exert extreme chrononormativity through the specific organization of time (i.e., cell checks, mandatory cell-time, outdoor recreation, etc.) I argue that the bodies within the confines of the prison can subvert, albeit temporarily, chrononormative time as part of postcarceral performance. These subversions and resistance of carceral technologies illustrate the horizons of what art and activism can imagine.

This dissertation does not separate itself between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as I believe there is a productive tension between these methods, resulting in the rise of these postcarceral types of programming. My quantitative work categorizes programs that fall between the spectrum of prison theatre and commercial organizations using carceral narratives. My qualitative work includes conducting interviews, viewing performances, and reviewing

⁴⁴ Ibid. 227.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 3.

organization's archives. I examine both the performances and organization of the postcarceral groups. The analysis of these programs relies on the active-body production of mediatized performance.

My work traverses between the U.S. and the U.K. due to the critical carceral structures in both countries as well as their symbiotic relationship with the arts. While the United States has the highest prison population in the world, the United Kingdom also incarcerates at a high level. Prisons in England and Wales are currently at 102.6% capacity, while the U.S.'s federal and state prisons operate at 130% and 103.4%, respectively.⁴⁶ I particularly draw on London-based programs while in the U.K. due to the robust nature of Clean Break in British applied theatre. My work in Pittsburgh derives from my personal work with the ULG out of Somerset and the national role Pittsburgh plays in one of the most unequal cities in America, despite being labeled America's "most livable city."⁴⁷ Postcarceral performance is a way through the carceral complex of the U.S. and U.K. by solidifying the arts as redemptive.

The impact of institutions, whether explicit or implicit, reverberate across my study of postcarceral performance. In my analysis of the inspiration for postcarceral performance, the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, I draw on William R. Scott's theory of institutionality to map out the relationships between the institutions upholding the Trilogy: the prison, the university, and Shakespeare. The dramaturgy of the Trilogy highlights the issues with older approaches and points toward new directions. In doing so, I lay the foundation for understanding the impact of cultural

⁴⁶ Statistics available as of May 31, 2022. According to the World Prison Brief, the reporting on U.K. prisons separates Northern Ireland and Scotland from England and Wales. The average capacity of U.S. prisons is 95.6% when including local jails (operating at 80.9%).

⁴⁷ The Pittsburgh Equity Indicator provides a measurement for equity in the city using a scale from 1 (high inequality) to 100 (high equality). In 2017, Pittsburgh scored 28 on domestic violence, 1 on homicide, 27 on multiple incarcerations, and 20 on incarcerated populations. Linnea Warren May et al., eds., "Pittsburgh Equity Indicator Report," Pittsburgh Equity Indicator Report § (2017): pp. 1-107, https://pittsburghpa.gov/equityindicators/documents/PGH_Equity_Indicators_2017.pdf.

and social institutions on individuals and how they influence social norms and values, particularly via mimesis. Exposing the network between institutions, social norms, and behavior generates my critique of Shakespeare's prominent role in prison theatre. From this Trilogy, I expand the confines of performance outside the commercial stage. I pull from Miranda Joseph's theory of community to conceptualize the broad relationships interrogated in artistic nonprofits catering to formerly incarcerated women.

Across two nonprofits, Clean Break and Let's Get Free, I build off of Muñoz's work in worldbuilding and collectives. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz centers hope as his primary method of examining the present and the future. In his reading of Ernst Bloch, Muñoz cites the concept of utopia "as a critical and collective longing that is relational to historically situated struggles" and that time can produce new social relations.⁴⁸ This decentering of place and inclusion of non-linear time frame utopia as a vision forward. In my interviews with the leaders of both Clean Break and Let's Get Free, I rely on their own words to best describe their organization's past work and goals for the future. In doing so, both leaders use their own terms and categorizations, which may diverge from how other scholars define them. For example, scholarship on Clean Break typically defines the organization under prison theatre, but co-Artistic Director Anna Herrmann pointedly avoids that label because of the variety of spaces where the work takes place. Hope additionally upholds this project in its role for members of the Unit Literacy Group.

Postcarceral performance offers a reclaiming of the voice and a grounding of identity and experience that extends beyond prison walls and offers new epistemologies of a world without

⁴⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 22.

prisons. The role of post in postcarceral may additionally be thought of as (post)carceral – the parenetical separating an “after” from the ever prominent “carceral.” However, the post depicts not only those who have been released from prison but also a movement of abolition – of living in a world after prisons have been abolished at the highest level or at least a world in which the peak of incarceration has subsided.

1.3 Chapter Breakdowns

My first chapter explores Phyllida Lloyd’s Shakespeare Trilogy, a three-play production of *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV*, and *The Tempest* at the Donmar Warehouse, and later filmed for the BBC between 2012-2016. This production speaks to the theatrical use of a prison structure to highlight the plight of incarcerated women. The Trilogy offers a window into how the arts can portray the complexities of the carceral system. It also shows the use of female prisoners’ actual voices in the building of the production through active communication between these women and the cast. I rely on cultural materialism to expose how the audience can read both the rehearsal process of the production and the production itself. With the filming of the Trilogy, Phyllida Lloyd enhanced the prison/prisoner framework, creating clearer characters that resemble real-life prisoners rather than the general construction of prison, which occurred in the original productions. Fundamentally, I do not define the Trilogy as postcarceral performance. This production relied on famous British actors to lead the production, and most of the cast were professional actors. The work with women who experienced the prison system supported the show rather than a staple. Nevertheless, the production uncovered and made visible the processes and methods of incarceration. Thus, I argue that the Trilogy serves as a gateway into postcarceral performance

through its limited but essential work with incarcerated women and the portrayal of mental health, queerness, and self-determination.

My second chapter maps out the history and reorganization of Clean Break, a U.K. women's theatre company that works exclusively with formerly incarcerated women and uses the integration of professional artistic practice with educational drama to create new work highlighting the criminal justice system. I open with a play written to celebrate Clean Break's 40th anniversary. Alice Birch's *[Blank]* "reaches across society to explore the impact of the criminal justice system on women and their families."⁴⁹ Similar to the Trilogy, *[Blank]* features a few members of Clean Break's Member Programme, building from the direct experience of the criminal justice system.⁵⁰ I assert how Clean Break's longevity and flexibility reflect the shifting needs of women post-incarceration and how they converse with José Esteban Muñoz's utopic visions of society through their productions and community-centered praxis. Clean Break's malleable authority structure, interweaving professional playwrights with recently released female artists, constructs a space for new ways of being and performing. They work within the "historically situated struggles" of the industrial prison complex to write, produce, and perform concepts of freedom, unity, and hope and speak from a space of unfathomable loss and grief in the prison system.⁵¹

My third chapter takes a local approach and expands the reach of performance by identifying the community outreach and impact of Pittsburgh's organization, Let's Get Free: The Women and Trans Prisoners Defense Committee. After leading a tour of the annual LGF art show, I interviewed LGF founder etta cetera about the group's work and use of artistic practice

⁴⁹ "Production: *[Blank]*" (The Donmar Warehouse, 2020). Accessed March 28, 2020. <https://www.donmarwarehouse.com/production/7193/blank>

⁵⁰ Shona Babayemi and Lucy Edkins are the featured members.

⁵¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.

contributing to transformative justice. This abolitionist community-based program positions art by incarcerated artists and artists in solidarity in the same space to merge the gap between those on the inside and outside. Elucidated in Black time studies, the role of waiting and patience support my analysis on incarcerated renditions of the passing of time and the continuation of carceral stigma post-release. I further build from examinations of time and carcerality to investigate queer identity and relationships in prison and assemble alternative epistemologies about and in prisons. Furthermore, I draw from Nicole Fleetwood's work in *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. With two well-known incarcerated artists appearing in Fleetwood's book and MoMA exhibit of the same name and in the Pittsburgh show, I question the relationship between professionalism, prestige, and prisons via prison art. This chapter studies the role of time in postcarceral performance and how artmaking and community engagement defy the role of chrononormative time behind bars.

My final chapter attends to the role of space in postcarceral performance. Spanning between close friendships with the founder of the Unit Literacy Group, Kabasha and the ULG's work in promoting healing while imprisoned, this chapter forwards the experiences of currently incarcerated men. I identify the absence of education as a space that the ULG seeks to fill and, in doing so, prepares individuals for futures beyond prison. The role of trying – continuously attempting change (usually in a non-linear fashion) – upholds the basic practices of the group as they resist the dehumanizing and degrading technologies of prison. I propose how the use of performance, whether written or physically enacted, instills beneficial skills in the process of becoming returning citizens. Furthermore, these practices help members learn their own self-worth and possibility by participating in a collective led by their peers. I argue that rehabilitation can and does happen *despite* prisons rather than because of them. The hierarchy of the ULG revolving

around those who share similar experiences encourages a communal space built on respect and trust.

2.0 “With Those That I Saw Suffer”: Institutionalality and Incarceration in the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy

*As you from crimes would pardon 'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.*⁵²

A tall, White, middle-aged woman hugs a young Black woman goodbye. The tenderness and tightness of the hug imply that this goodbye may be for a long time, if not permanent. The older woman looks on and smiles sadly. Reaching into her backpack, the young woman hands her friend a book, *Hag-Seed* by Margaret Atwood, before walking away into the darkness. Voices of women saying goodbye are heard overhead. After a while, the older woman sits down on a bed and opens the book to begin to read. The room is bright and silent. In the distance, another woman is quietly vacuuming the floor. The lights go out.⁵³

The Donmar Warehouse's *The Tempest* marks the final play of the all-female Shakespeare Trilogy cycle, set in a prison, and directed by Phyllida Lloyd from 2012 to 2016. The gift of Atwood's book from the prisoner playing Miranda to Prospero signals the ending of this play and the Trilogy's production but also insinuates the continuous cycle of imprisonment. As *Hag-Seed* offers a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in a prison setting, the use of this prop in performance connects isolation and confinement. The last characters on stage in the Trilogy are

⁵² William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2011): V.i.377-378

⁵³ The stage directions read: MIRANDA runs on and says farewell to PROSPERO. She is followed by OFFICER JOSEPH and finally ARIEL. The sounds of all the Prisoner's farewells play as they appear around the space in their leaving clothes. [Prospero and Caliban remain]. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. Edited by Phyllida Lloyd. London: Donmar Warehouse, 2016.

Caliban and Prospero, as everyone else experiences release from imprisonment. Reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, the linking of Prospero and Caliban in carceral solitude informs the reading of life in prison. Prospero and Caliban remain on the island (prison), where they will inevitably meet the next set of prisoners, and the cycle repeats. There are those who are released and those who remain.

Before fully embracing the politics of incarceration as central to a prison-set all-female Shakespeare, the first production of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, *Julius Caesar*, was initially conceived “to redress the imbalance in Shakespeare.”⁵⁴ Phyllida Lloyd explained to Barbara Bogaev on *Shakespeare Unlimited* how the project developed during the planning of the ceremonies of the 2012 Olympics in London in which “there were a number of projects that seemed to be heavily freighted in favor of men.”⁵⁵ Around the same time, Lloyd noted a report published revealing that for every job for a woman in theatre, there were two jobs for men.⁵⁶ Thus, Lloyd and her friend actor Harriet Walter decided to partner with the two newly appointed members of the Donmar, Artistic Director Josie Rourke and Executive Producer Kate Pakenham, to produce an all-female Shakespeare play.⁵⁷ Through the all-female cast, the parameters of gender identity and character shifted. Harriet Walter stated how she “had much more in common with Brutus than [she] ever had with Cleopatra.”⁵⁸ Lloyd remarked how “Shakespeare’s plays burn brightly when performed by a single gender [...] the plays still have so much to show us about what society does

⁵⁴ Barbara Bogaev, “Phyllida Lloyd and All-Female Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Unlimited*, 2017, <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/phyllida-lloyd-all-female-shakespeare>.

⁵⁵ Bogaev, “Phyllida Lloyd.”

⁵⁶ Lloyd’s referencing a report published by *The Guardian* in collaboration with Elizabeth Freestone of Pentabus Theatre. “Women in Theatre: How the ‘2:1 Problem’ Breaks Down.” *The Guardian*, 2012.

⁵⁷ Additionally, Harriet Walter is a patron of the all-female theatre and incarceration company, Clean Break.

⁵⁸ Barbara Bogaev, “‘Say to All the World ‘This Was a Man,’” *Shakespeare Unlimited*, 2019, <https://collections.folger.edu/detail/shakespeare-unlimited-harriet-walter/046bb460-16f8-4315-a1a8-745ccf9995aa>.

to corral men and women into certain patterns of behavior.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the setting stems from a contemporary issue with the inequity of the commercial stage, the inequalities of roles in still-popular classic texts, and the continued relevance of the discussion of gender expectations within these texts.

The Trilogy uses the prison structure to highlight the plight of incarcerated women by using the actual ideas of female prisoners in the building of the production. The show’s rehearsal process involved local prisons and university-prison partnerships in developing how these women read Shakespeare and how they read themselves through Shakespeare and imprisonment. This chapter examines how the Trilogy serves as a gateway into postcarceral performance through its limited but essential work with incarcerated women and the portrayal of societal norms, using Shakespeare as a subversive tool for gathering audiences. Much of the Trilogy represents cornerstone pieces of conventional prison theatre (same-gender casting, use of Shakespeare, and inclusion of some amateur actors). At the same time, other aspects distinctly separate it from the prison theatre genre (fictionalized prison setting, paid actors, for paying audiences). These distinctions start to shift the form away from prison theatre and into a new type of prison-influenced performance.

Three key institutions make up the Trilogy: the prison, the university, and Shakespeare. The institution of Shakespeare makes apparent the complexities and critical issues of the prison structure, and its institutionality is essential in understanding the relationships between the arts, educational and legal structures. Both the U.S. and U.K. wield Shakespeare in varying ways in prison theatre, as both countries maintain high incarcerated populations. Within the play itself, the

⁵⁹ From both an interview with Barbara Bogaev and published on the Shakespeare Trilogy website. Barbara Bogaev, “Phyllida Lloyd.” Phyllida Lloyd and Harriet Walter, “Three Plays, Four Years,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy (Donmar Warehouse, 2018), <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/206-Three-plays-Four-Years-In-Conversation-with-Phyllida-Lloyd-and-Harriet-Walter.pdf>.

wedding masque of *The Tempest* offers a space to map out the relationships between the cultural and physical institutions at play both within the world of the play and in the real world. The intricacies of the wedding masque also illustrate how queerness functions as an abolitionist tactic. The Trilogy's success and its surrounding cultural discussion inform the increased awareness and support for smaller organizations involved in the productions, like the theatre company Clean Break. The site's unusual space between prison theatre and commercial stage offers a clear case study between the key institutions and relevant actors that inform the UK/US's relationships between carceral and performance spaces. Ultimately the Trilogy exists in a liminal space between commercial Shakespeare performance, prison theatre, and social activism. It simultaneously conforms to the institutions of the stage and the prison through paid performance and adherence to prison guidelines but pushes past traditional professional and prison theatre through its long-lasting focus on rendering female incarcerated populations visible.⁶⁰

2.1 Selection Shakespeare: The Institutions That Made the Trilogy

Shakespeare's cultural value and breadth informed Phyllida Lloyd's decision to employ an all-female cast for *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV*, and *The Tempest*. How and why Lloyd made this decision and what this decision means for future iterations of artistic work in carceral spaces and with formerly incarcerated people relies on the ability of Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon to traverse these vastly different spaces. I am interested in how the ideas of cultural institutions,

⁶⁰ Due to the filming of the Trilogy by the BBC, these films are now widely available. The Donmar Warehouse website has a specific site solely for the Trilogy that provides script excerpts, lesson plans, and information about the arts and incarceration. This site is open to all secondary school students and teachers. "Welcome," Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2018, <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/#/>.

specifically Shakespeare, influence the physical institution, such as prisons, universities, and commercial stages, and how these ideas are performed and later broadcasted in the Shakespeare Trilogy. The complex web of institutionality informs why Phyllida Lloyd selected Shakespeare to address “the gender imbalance” and how this choice shapes the production’s design, the interaction between actors and incarcerated peoples working on the production, and the Trilogy’s reception and impact.

Understanding how Shakespeare functions as an institution requires dissecting the roles and maneuverings of institutions as a whole and how the ideas within Shakespeare’s text manifest in the public sphere. The language surrounding institution and institutionality broadens, shifts, and transforms with each decade. Similar to “performance,” the definitions of “institutions” change depending on the framework, area of study, and/or method of analysis (e.g., in the field of museum studies, “cultural institutions” appear synonymously with the structure of a museum or archive itself).⁶¹ The redefining of common terms, like institution, requires a macro and micro view of the societies in which these terms function. For example, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* reconceptualize how one might utilize “study” or “debt.”⁶² I follow Harney and Moten’s reconceptualizing tactics to break apart how to view the relationship between cultural institutions and physical institutions. For this project’s purposes, highlighting the role of mimesis informs the cultural and structural institution of the stage and how this institution then performs and works with the other institutions of prisons and

⁶¹ Kiersten Fourshé Latham and John E. Simmons, *Foundations of Museum Studies: Evolving Systems of Knowledge* (Santa Barbara, California: Libraries Unlimited, 2014).

⁶² Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013): 62.

universities.⁶³ Such a move has roots in cultural materialist methods, moving away from isolated views of spheres of power and instead examining how cultural ideas feed into institutions' existence and functionality. Our engagement with Shakespeare's texts and our collective understanding of how they should properly be understood and performed is the essence of it as an institution. In general terms, the UK primarily institutionalizes Shakespeare through brick-and-mortar institutions rooted in high culture/arts specific organizations (British Library, RSC, Birthplace Trust, Globe) which bring in visitors; the US primarily institutionalizes Shakespeare through the traversing of the works through social institutions like schools, prisons, and stages.

The work of Shakespeare (texts, productions, histories, adaptations, materiality, commercial use) functions as a cultural institution. Notably, when I say "Shakespeare," I distinctly refer to the works, the dissemination of the works both in print and performance, and the pop culture use of the works and the figure himself.⁶⁴ Shakespeare's centuries-long global reverberations derive from the continued engagement with his texts, characters, and themes. How

⁶³ I discuss mimesis later in the chapter and its complicated definitions. Briefly, I refer to mimesis as the representation of societal norms.

⁶⁴ There is a deep history of the relationship between institutions and theatre in the Early Modern period. Stephen Greenblatt's "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture" and later *Self-Fashioning* sparked the rise of the New Historicist movement, a method intricately linked with Johann Gottfried von Herder's principle of diversification and the notion that a people invent their art in accordance with its own culture. Much of New Historicism examines material culture as informing and how it informs the literary works of the Early Modern era by specifically reading culture-as-text. New Historicism's methodology refrains from discussing a singular political ideology of a time and instead expands its focus to include competing ideas and frameworks, or "the poetics of culture." New Historicism inevitably touched the last thirty years of Shakespeare studies. Missing in this foundational work is the actual theorizing of what an institution is (during the Renaissance.) As Erica Sheen notes in *Shakespeare and the Institution of Theatre*, the institution's role in New Historicism has largely been contradictory and more informed by the time in which scholars were producing this work (the 1980s/1990s) and less about the institutionality of their subject's timeframe. The specific use of the term "institution," in other words, follows a late 20th-century usage rather than a 16th-century application. Specifically, New Historicism's reliance on Foucault dismantles institutions' boundaries in favor of citing power and violence as the specific focus across social structures. While I am not focused on the historicity of using "institution" in past New Historicist scholarship, I am interested in the ways in which an interdisciplinary focus on institutionality allows for the categorization of Shakespeare as an institution. Thus, as scholarship on the Early Modern era moves to utilize institutionality during Shakespeare's time, I move towards the present to mark how Shakespeare's work in the present day has evolved into its own institution. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Erica Sheen, *Shakespeare and the Institution of Theatre*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009).

people repeat, build upon, thwart, or otherwise maintain Shakespeare in the cultural lexicon indicates how Shakespeare has become an institution. William R. Scott argues that human behavior and societal structures create institutions. He defines institutions as “social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience. They are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.”⁶⁵ The acknowledgment of resilience and continuation of the institution as well as repetitive human behavior implies the impact of history.⁶⁶ Thus, by examining an institution, the histories that informed the institution’s current state are also examined. The deconstruction of Scott’s use of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements opens up the separation between physical and non-physical institutions. Such a separation allows for tracking how the repetition of human behavior and influence informs these institutions and how these institutions respond to such behaviors.

⁶⁵ William R. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas, Interests and Identities*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014): 57-59.

⁶⁶ Scott, *Institutions*, 7. Institutional theory concerning politics and social structure traces back to the work of Alexis de Tocqueville. As sociologist William R. Scott notes in his genealogy of institutional theory, de Tocqueville’s writings “may be seen as an important early instance of the analysis of organizations operating under diverse institutional contexts [...] and he distinguished between institutions, primarily laws but including associate routines and habits, and moeurs (mores) referring to norms, attitudes, and opinions.” In Part I of *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville describes the relationship between imported norms and ideals and their impact on the social structure of Early America, particularly New England: “In most of the states situated to the southwest of the Hudson, great English property owners had come to settle. Aristocratic principles, and with them English estate laws [...] The great proprietries formed a superior class, having ideas and tastes of its own and generally concentrating political action within itself.” Alexis de Tocqueville, “Chapter 3: Social Conditions Of The Anglo-Americans,” in *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, vol. I, 2006, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/815/815-h/815-h.htm>.

From these social structures informing class dynamics and placement of power and the rise of the Industrial Revolution, Karl Marx identified the structural relationship between work’s nature and meaning. Following Scott’s reading of Marx, “these structures - including the accompanying beliefs, norms, and power relations, are the product of human ideas and activities, but appear to be external and objective to their participants.” In other words, social ideology and structure developed from the transformation of human nature in relation to material objects. Across de Tocqueville and Marx to 20th-century critical theorists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the institution houses societal norms, rules, and expectations, which in turn inform social behavior. Scott, *Institutions*, 48.

Table 3.1 Three Pillars of Institutions

	<i>Regulative</i>	<i>Normative</i>	<i>Cultural-Cognitive</i>
<i>Basis of compliance</i>	Expedience	Social obligation	Taken-for-grantedness Shared understanding
<i>Basis of order</i>	Regulative rules	Binding expectations	Constitutive schema
<i>Mechanisms</i>	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
<i>Logic</i>	Instrumentality	Appropriateness	Orthodoxy
<i>Indicators</i>	Rules Laws Sanctions	Certification Accreditation	Common beliefs Shared logics of action Isomorphism
<i>Affect</i>	Fear Guilt/ Innocence	Shame/Honor	Certainty/Confusion
<i>Basis of legitimacy</i>	Legally sanctioned	Morally governed	Comprehensible Recognizable Culturally supported

Figure 1 Scott's Three Pillars of Institutions

In contrast to museums and theaters, prisons and universities work between the regulative and the normative institution. They function as organizations to structurally organize education and employment (universities) and imprisonment, forced employment, and quasi-rehabilitation (prisons). The human behavior within these institutions is broadly codified and repeatable, reinforcing the supposed normativity of their existence.

Mimesis speaks to the essence of societal norms and ideas performed for the public. Shakespeare's works and their impact on global culture relate to the works reflecting broad cultural ideologies as well as informing them. The role of mimesis shows the divergence from structural institutions to the ideas that inform the organization of these sites. Mimesis, a loaded term with dozens of definitions ranging from "imitation" to "representation" to "mimicry" to "copy," appears

in the works of Plato and Aristotle, the latter of which forms Western foundations of theatre.⁶⁷ Anne Fleche in *Mimetic Disillusion* describes how Plato “suggests that representation (mimesis) is the law that replicates itself throughout the human endeavor - in fact, it is the law that specifically links art and the state. What is most important in art is accuracy [...] similarly the state is ‘a representation of the finest and noblest life.’”⁶⁸ For Plato, the relationship between theatre and the state can be seen through the reenactment of human behavior with drastically different consequences. The performance of law informs just and sound rule. But the performance of law on stage, mimesis on stage, implies a falsehood or duplicitous nature in which the performance of reality distorts actual reality. On the other hand, Aristotle found therapeutic value, catharsis, in mimesis or the performance of real-life on stage. Erving Goffman continued exploring real-life and theatre in the *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* by viewing daily existence through the lens of theater. Although Goffman does not explicitly reference mimesis, his positioning of individuals as actors working towards objectives informs a representational view that mirrors mimesis.⁶⁹ Thus, from Scott’s pillars of institution to Plato’s Laws, the performance of norms and cultural values influences the continuation and resilience of institutions. Culture originates from the collective experience and is produced and reproduced through actions and distribution.⁷⁰ The mimetic mechanism of the cultural-cognitive posits that humans repeat or imitate models of behavior from the world around them, which then informs cultural production, further repeating said behavior or distinctly thwarting it.⁷¹ This relates to the normative mechanism of institutions

⁶⁷ Anne Fleche, *Mimetic Disillusion* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1997).

⁶⁸ Ibid. Fleche is citing Plato’s *Laws*, Book 2, 668A.

⁶⁹ Particularly referring to his development of a dramaturgical approach. Erving Goffman, “Preface” in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York City: Anchor, 1959).

⁷⁰ Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press): 74.

⁷¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self*.

in that this repeated behavior, or essentially repeated actions, becomes normalized, socially observed, and then facilitates the upholding of the normative institutions (such as making Shakespeare a cornerstone of US/UK English courses).

The relationship across institutions further reveals their mutual continuation and points to how Shakespeare's role as an ever-present idea of culture and identity moves across varied spaces. In "The Undercommons and the University," Fred Moten and Stefano Harney explore the intricately linked state and university in which the professionalization of the university feeds directly into state power. The "study" of the university's "desperate business is nothing less than to convert the social individual...to turn the insurgents into state agents."⁷² The university serves the state by creating a labor force for the state in which the state then supplies funding back to the university for a continued labor force. Furthermore, the knowledge taught in universities by the "critical academics" may question the relationship between school and state, yet housed within such an institution, the critical academic becomes a pacifist (thereby upholding both institutions).⁷³ The relationship between the general state, in and of itself an institution, and the university fold in on one another, rendering the distinct lines between institutions obsolete.

Similarly, Shakespeare's continued space in the theatre and the classroom reinforce his significance and necessity. Considering the training of Shakespeare available at university, the familiarity with the texts to become a professional actor, and the financial draw of Shakespeare at theatres, both professional and academic, the space between university and theatre simply becomes a space of Shakespeare. In other words, while Scott's three pillars of institutions allow for overlap, the model's structure visually and conceptually seems to separate different types of institutions.

⁷² Harney and Moten, 38.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

Yet if the model becomes horizontal, a spectrum from which the brick-and-mortar institution may slide across the three categories, the fluidity and the blurriness of institutional separation emerges.

Highlighting the fluidity of ideas and norms enacted by humans across multiple institutions brings to light how Shakespeare has become its own legitimate and identifiable institutional powerhouse, able to move through brick-and-mortar institutions and reflect societal attitudes across centuries. Beneath the Cultural-Cognitive pillar, William R. Scott situates the institution's legitimacy through comprehensible, recognizable, and culturally supported means. However, such a broad basis inarguably functions in regulative and normative institutions as well. The cultural support of an institution is what gives institutions their power. Scott would argue that the cultural-cognitive institution is subject to the regulative and normative pillars, in which he cites the power of the Supreme Court as regulating "the rights and powers of individual and collective actors."⁷⁴ I diverge from Scott's assumptions by noting how social norms and cultural ideas directly feed into the cases that appear in the Supreme Court. It is the human interaction, mimetic performance within the normative institutions of primary schools, churches, and cultural centers that inform and contribute to changing beliefs and values.

Considering Shakespeare from this perspective, Shakespeare's continued performance and cementing of Western, White values inform his status as institution, but very rarely with that specific label. Instead, the language used around Shakespeare frequently appears in binaries rather than the broad and resilient categorization of institution. For example, in academia, trends of Shakespeare scholarship ebb and flow, yet one of the key questions that continue is "what is Shakespeare?"⁷⁵ These questions appear through casting practices, updated published editions, and

⁷⁴ Scott, *Institutions*, 79.

⁷⁵ See Diana E. Henderson and Stephen O'Neill, eds. *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Adaptation* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2022).

blockbuster films. Richard Burt argues that academia is no longer concerned with the authentic/inauthentic question of Shakespeare because “we all know there is no authentic Shakespeare.”⁷⁶ Aside from my disagreement with this claim based on several publications published in the past decade, the authentic/inauthentic divide highlights the institutionality of Shakespeare. That is, that Shakespeare remains so prominent and so ingrained within academia and the arts, that there continues to be an endless search for “Shakespeare.” Similarly, the debate over inauthentic/authentic Shakespeare and, more broadly, Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare results in a continued and ongoing discussion of the works themselves, resulting in popular styles of Shakespearean performance, adaptations of the work, and continued use of the pieces in both academic and popular culture. Performance practices, teaching methods, usage in popular media, citations in political speeches, and other cultural materials regulate Shakespeare and make Shakespeare an institution — the works enter nearly every facet of daily existence and pop up in unconventional spaces (such as *William Shakespeare’s Star Wars: Verily, A New Hope*).⁷⁷ The constant barrage of Shakespeare, essentially naturalized as universal, becomes an institution through the continued labor of repeating and reiterating the works by varied demographics, particularly in the US and UK.

Shakespeare functions as a cultural institution in the United States, spanning from the arts to the legal system. According to several scholars, the US has made Shakespeare “American” by relating the American Dream with many of Shakespeare’s characters (i.e., Romeo, Portia,

⁷⁶ Richard Burt, “Shakespeare, ‘Glo-cali-zation,’ Race, and the Small Screens of Post-Popular Culture.” In *Shakespeare, the Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*. Eds. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (London: Routledge, 2003): 17.

⁷⁷ In the entrance to Shakespeare’s Birthplace in Stratford-Upon-Avon, an exhibit in 2019 showcased a plethora of “pop culture Shakespeare” items throughout the space in an attempt to highlight Shakespeare’s universality and timelessness.

Prospero, Lear) regarding the rights to self-determination, following dreams, and crafting one's legacy.⁷⁸ Furthermore, the "proper" pronunciation discussions of Shakespeare in Early America, as well as the frequent citing of the texts in American political speeches, trace a history of Shakespeare as 'quintessentially' part of the fabric of America.⁷⁹ While de Tocqueville wrote of early America and the adaptations of Anglo norms, he additionally captured America's early hold on the British export: "there is hardly a pioneer hut, in which the odd volume of Shakespeare cannot be found."⁸⁰ Shakespeare has quite literally entered the court system and rooted itself as an act of repentance and rehabilitation in contemporary America. Since 2001, Shakespeare & Company's program, Shakespeare in the Courts, has partnered with the Berkshire Juvenile Court system, where "adolescent offenders study, rehearse, and perform Shakespeare as an alternative to more punitive consequences."⁸¹ This program showcases the lengthy relationship between Shakespeare and incarceration and positions Shakespeare as a way out of prison. I discuss the complex relationship between prison theatre and the US later in this chapter. The UK similarly uses Shakespeare as an institution, but its space in the carceral system is less common.

The UK's stronghold on Shakespeare differs in its physical institutionalizing of the works; they use the playwright within the bounds of national identity, tourism, and theatrical greatness. Questions of access and intent inform the funding of Shakespeare in England, which in turn relates

⁷⁸ See Stephen Greenblatt, James Shapiro, Virginia and Alden Vaughan.

⁷⁹ Stephen Greenblatt claims, "First, there is the history of American public eloquence that culminates in Abraham Lincoln not only quoting from the plays in his first inaugural address, but also using the cadences of Shakespeare to connect with his audience. Second, Shakespeare shares with the English language itself – his language – a remarkable openness to linguistic innovation by immigrant cultures. In that sense, Shakespeare is the quintessentially American author." Robert McCrum, "William Shakespeare: A Quintessentially American Author," *The Guardian* (April 9, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/09/william-shakespeare-a-quintessentially-american-author>.

⁸⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, "Chapter 13: Literary Characteristics Of Democratic Ages," in *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, vol. II, 2006, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm>.

⁸¹ "Shakespeare in the Courts."

to Shakespeare's role in the public sphere. In Kate McCluskie and Kate Rumbold's study *Cultural Value in Twenty-First Century England: The Case for Shakespeare*, the two expose the difficulties of acquiring evidence-based successes of using arts in prisons when attempting to obtain more funding in the United Kingdom. A study completed by sociologists from the University of Manchester Centre for Socio-Economic Change attempted to discover using "evidence-based policy" what works in the British justice system in order to receive more funding from Arts Council England.⁸² McCluskie and Rumbold point out how the restrictions on gathering such information were so overwhelming due to the difficulty of access to prisons, the high demands of evidence, and the prison population's turnover, that they prevented the report from truly tracking the impact of the arts in prisons. However, they point out that the qualitative findings, narratives by those incarcerated speaking to what the arts in prison allowed them to accomplish (a rehabilitative focus), were not enough to "provide the evidence necessary to support new prison management strategies, however emotionally persuasive the individual narratives of transformation might appear."⁸³ The selection of funded programs by Arts Council England illustrates the institutions they primarily believe in to enact some sort of "public good." In other words, the funding mechanisms at play in the UK are "encouraged to create a sense of value for the taxpayers who fund them."⁸⁴ The qualitative narrative that Shakespeare allowed for rehabilitation does not sufficiently meet the funding mark by organizations like Arts Council England. Yet similarly, the Royal Shakespeare Company, through its commitment to "inspire and captivate audiences and transform lives through amazing experiences of Shakespeare's plays and of great theatre," implies

⁸² Kate McCluskie and Kate Rumbold, *Cultural Value in Twenty-First-Century England: The Case of Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017): 24.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁴ Kate Rumbold, "From 'Access' to 'Creativity': Shakespeare Institutions, New Media, and the Language of Cultural Value," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2010): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2010.0009>.

a notion of change - but change for the wider public.⁸⁵ Thus, I am left with the question as to not whether British society finds the institution of Shakespeare as benefitting society, but rather who benefits. The cultural impact of this institutionalization in theatre and governmental spaces can produce a monetizing and classist view of Shakespeare.

If building on the concept of institutions working on a spectrum and through the mechanism of mimesis, Shakespeare can be viewed as an institution, then the question of how prisons or theaters use Shakespeare shifts. Instead, the question turns into how Shakespeare enters and functions in prisons or theaters. Kate Rumbold's thorough analysis of cultural value and Shakespeare exposes how Shakespeare's institution interacts with other cultural institutions. She argues how "the institutional relationship to the value of Shakespeare is particularly slippery. Because "Shakespeare" spans and now seemingly transcends categories of text, performance, and material heritage, in addition to symbolizing abstract qualities of beauty, morality, and knowledge, Shakespeare institutions have a necessarily incomplete grasp of his value."⁸⁶ Like the Royal Shakespeare Company or the British Library, organizations that use Shakespeare position this use as "for the public good."⁸⁷ Therefore, the wielding of Shakespeare speaks to the bettering of society. How cultures wield Shakespeare "for the public good" differs through the institutions that house it and access it. Shakespeare as an institution works to build a form of shared cultural heritage or sense of community. The relationship between Shakespeare and its place in and across the US and UK carry similar interests in that the texts remain foundational to literature education,

⁸⁵ "RSC," Royal Shakespeare Company, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/>.

⁸⁶ Rumbold, "From Access," 315.

⁸⁷ According to Rumbold, these companies are categorized as Public Cultural Institutions according to the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport in the United Kingdom. Government subsidies don't fund the Globe and Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

performance practices, and pop culture; but the differences in which institutions use Shakespeare and how point to a remarkable fracturing of practice: Shakespeare and prison theatre.

Implied within the funding decision by subsidized arts organizations of where Shakespeare travels and who has access lies the question of who is worthy to receive access. Imprisoned populations notably receive less access to the arts (particularly in the United States), although Shakespeare proves capable of moving between both worlds. There exists the Shakespeare that receives substantial funding, opens to the broader public, particularly the paying public, and then there exists the Shakespeare that is royalty-free, a cheap but culturally valuable currency that moves past prison bars. By institutionalizing Shakespeare, the dichotomies and varied use of the works can exist simultaneously. The rise of popular entertainment's portrayals of prison and "prison theatre" point to the critical intersection of prisons, Shakespeare, and the continued question of access.

The Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy allows us to move beyond the lawyer or the cop, who society typically depicts within the justice system, and into the psyche of women experiencing incarceration. The process in which the Shakespeare Trilogy directly worked with women experiencing incarceration provides a case study in how theatre amplifies marginalized and forgotten voices. The audience's relationship with these women offers a method that allows for sustainable shifts on both the commercial stage and wider reception of prison reform and social justice. Such a relationship and visibility of the carceral state to the public marks the transition between prison theatre and postcarceral performance.

2.2 Performing Incarceration: Prison Theatre and the Trilogy's Foundations

The Shakespeare Trilogy is not the first production to link together incarceration and Shakespearean text. There lies a deep history between Shakespeare and prison arts that the Trilogy is directly informed by and responds to. A genealogy of prison theatre and prison Shakespeare offers a way to understand the Trilogy's liminal work between the confines of prison theatre and the new branch of applied theatre, postcarceral performance. From film and television portrayals of imprisonment to direct theatre work in prisons, the relationship between the arts and prison reverberates in both political and entertainment spheres. At the heart of these portrayals lie the social understanding of the judicial power structures, which in turn are then remade in artistic performance.

Before analyzing the Trilogy, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms of incarceration and how the language around these mechanisms creates and repeats support for imprisonment. How a society incarcerates individuals who defy the legal system reveals society's essential power structures and values. It also reflects the criminal justice system's goals, which on one end stands for punishment and on the other end for rehabilitation. By witnessing how incarcerated peoples are treated, their access to healthcare (quite obviously including mental healthcare), legal advice, education, voting, recreation, nature, and the arts they receive, society develops views on those in prison and the carceral state. For example, the use of solitary confinement in the United States illustrates the belief not necessarily that this practice works in rehabilitation but that it effectively punishes unruly prisoners. The discussions of solitary confinement produced by authorities signal that said method protects those working in prisons and is typically used in extreme situations, which studies show not to be true. In 2015, the Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report revealing that more than 30% of prison inmates in solitary confinement reported severe

psychological distress.⁸⁸ Although data remains limited on specific prison practices and torture (because of the legal loopholes that protect prisons from releasing this information), the available information illustrates how solitary confinement is state-sponsored violence. In the United Kingdom, the use of segregation (solitary confinement) requires more checkpoints and oversight possibilities than in the US. The use of showers, visits, mental health checks, and time-limit use of the practice results in a drastically different wielding of carceral power.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the UK, like the US, maintains one of the largest imprisoned populations in the world. Both countries use private for-profit prisons to expand on the profitability boom of incarceration. The UK's private prisons, which are commercial, prevent the "government from revealing financial or operational details, making it more difficult for Parliament and the electorate to hold these companies publicly accountable."⁹⁰ As such, the continued use of torture and the growth of mass incarceration signal societies built on punishment rather than rehabilitation.

Angela Davis traces society's willful ignorance of the prison industry in the beginning of *Are Prisons Obsolete?* She notes how people want to believe "that prisons would not only reduce crime, they would also provide jobs and stimulate economic development in out-of-the-way places."⁹¹ This desire to choose to embrace a view of prisons as a space for the most horrendous individuals, a space that protects "us" from "them" forms from the narratives spun by the legal system and further validated by popular entertainment. Shows like *Law and Order: SVU* or *Criminal Minds* produce a cleansing type image of prisons in which murderers and sex offenders,

⁸⁸ Allen J Beck, "Bureau of Justice Statistics," Bureau of Justice Statistics § (2015), <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/urhuspj1112.pdf>.

⁸⁹ "Segregation," Prison Reform Trust, 2019, <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ForPrisonersFamilies/PrisonerInformationPages/Segregation>.

⁹⁰ Caoimhe McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison* (London: Red Globe Press, 2019): 13.

⁹¹ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 15.

overtly characterized by their crime and only their crime, are removed from society, and therefore society is better because of it. These portrayals show a form of popular entertainment so enmeshed in the public that even Netflix labels these shows “Crime Dramas.” These shows, mixed with broader political ads during campaign season and politicians’ public display of “tough on crime,” warp the realities of the injustices and inhumanities of the prison industrial complex and instead craft a fantasy that cleanly separates the good from the bad, the free from the detained for the good of the country.⁹²

Popular entertainment’s obsession with prison-as-setting or crime as a genre curate an image of criminality, punishment, and justice that further separates the inside world of incarceration from the outside world. As Caoimhe McAvinchey notes, “for those of us who have never been sentenced, or do not work in or visit prisons, our access to the prison world is mediated by others’ representation of it.”⁹³ In other words, what we think and perceive of prison life and prisoners, rarely comes through individual experiences but through a carefully crafted narrative by someone else. Yet occasionally, performances of imprisonment give rise to greater social awareness and spark changing cultural mindsets. *Orange is the New Black*, a Netflix series running from 2013 to 2019, shifted the perception of women inmates’ experiences and the complexities of incarcerated life. Throughout the show’s run, major and popular news outlets reported on the show’s diversity, depth, representation of class, race, and LGBTQ+ issues.⁹⁴ The writer of the

⁹² The phrase, use, and adaptations of ‘tough on crime’ began in the early 1980s and commonly speaks to the era from the 1980s and 90s when mass incarceration grew.

⁹³ McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison*, 4.

⁹⁴ Hank Stuever, “Netflix’s ‘Orange Is the New Black’: Brilliance behind Bars,” *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/netflixs-orange-is-the-new-black-brilliance-behind-bars/2013/07/11/d52f911e-e9aa-11e2-8f22-de4bd2a2bd39_story.html?tid=usw_passupdatepg.

Seth Abramson, “How ‘Orange Is the New Black’ Humanizes Inmates,” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-orange-is-the-new-black-humanizes-inmates/2013/07/26/d1559bac-f3e5-11e2-9434-60440856fadf_story.html.

book on which the series was based, Piper Kerman, reflects on the real-life impacts that fuel the show: “All of these women were struggling to survive in a system built by and for men, in prisons operated in a way that was at best neglectful and at worst viciously punitive. What I had witnessed during my time inside was not justice.”⁹⁵ Kerman’s reflection on justice centers on how prisons function and what role women play in a male-dominated system. Hollywood seized this reading to create an ensemble show of diverse characters that enticed audiences into the “real-world” creation of the show. The show provided a greater insight into female imprisonment than, say, the musical *Chicago*, but *OINTB* inarguably did not change the current prison system, nor did its creation alter the lives of incarcerated women. It did, however, embark on a humanizing process of the incarcerated. Yet, the space between the representation of real-life and the actualities of reality widens when examining the excruciating circumstances of prison. The mimetic portrayal offers a lesser-viewed experience of incarceration (or at least the idea of it) but does not actually impact the world it represents.

The literature on prison theatre and the theatre of prison frequently notes the performativity of prison life. Prisons construct new ways of being, redefine individuality, partake in ritual and performance, and work across multiple audiences. From the labeling of a person to an inmate with a number to the performance of rehabilitation to a parole board, prisons themselves are performance. The use of performance in and about prisons build atop this performativity, marking and remarking on the prison structure and system and continuously reshaping it through

Judy Berman, “Orange Is the New Black Is the Decade’s Most Important Show,” *Time*, July 22, 2019, <https://time.com/5631804/orange-is-the-new-black-season-7-legacy/>.

James Poniewozik, “‘Orange Is the New Black’ Taught Us What Netflix Was For,” *The New York Times* July 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/arts/television/orange-is-the-new-black-final-season.html>.

⁹⁵ Piper Kerman, “Opinion | What’s Happening in ‘Orange Is the New Black’ Is Happening to Real Women behind Bars,” *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/whats-happening-in-orange-is-the-new-black-is-happening-to-to-real-women-behind-bars/2019/07/25/9fa0f94c-ae3-11e9-8e77-03b30bc29f64_story.html.

conversation, dramatic narrative, and physical performance. Michael Balfour in *Theatre in Prison* highlights the complexities of the art of performance mixing with the performance of prison, “pointing to the danger of aligning art too closely with ‘the system.’”⁹⁶ To enter into prisons to create theatre is to function under the rules of the prison. If theatre allows for reimagined worlds and alternative lives, prison forces the execution of those worlds to only exist for brief moments and to assert dominance. Balfour notes this paradox in that prison theatre “is a term in eternal contradiction with itself.”⁹⁷ Applied theatre scholar James Thompson builds on this contradiction by asking if the work becomes complicit in the state apparatus by bringing theatre into prisons.⁹⁸ How did prison theatre come to this paradox? What do the histories of prison theatre offer present programs?

Contemporary prison theatre as we know it began in the early 1980s during the Reagan/Thatcher era.⁹⁹ As President Reagan implemented his “tough on crime” policies, resulting in the exponential growth of incarcerated populations, Prime Minister Thatcher and the Tories supported extended custody and heavy community sentences. The Right in both the US and UK became the party of “law and order,” increasing mandatory minimums and embracing authoritarian views.¹⁰⁰ During this time, the emergence of groups and organizations dedicated to using

⁹⁶ Michael Balfour, “Introduction,” in *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, ed. Michael Balfour (Portland: Intellect, 2004): 3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁸ Thompson, 59. Furthermore, Thompson argues that ‘Criminal justice’ is an interconnected performance process with an ‘extended range of meanings’ creeping beyond each single moment.

⁹⁹ The Actor’s Workshop of San Francisco’s performance of *Waiting for Godot* in San Quentin in 1957 remains a vital part of prison theatre history. However, between this production and the 1980s, very few seismic displays or cultural growth of these types of companies occurred.

¹⁰⁰ “Margaret Thatcher was to use TV programmes to speak out on individual sentences, reinforcing the ‘authoritarian populist’ tones and consolidating the party’s lead in the polls on the issue.10 In her final election broadcast on the eve of the 1979 election, Thatcher referred to ‘feeling safe in the streets,’ and before that, she had claimed that the country wanted ‘less tax and more law and order.’ Clearly, the Tories ‘owned’ ‘law and order’ as a party political issue—ownership they were to retain until the mid-1990s.” Stephen Farrall and Will Jennings, “Policy Feedback and the Criminal Justice Agenda: An Analysis of the Economy, Crime Rates, Politics and Public Opinion

performing arts in prison began to appear. Stirabout Theatre Company, formed in 1974, regards itself as the first professional theatre troupe dedicated to performing and leading drama workshops in prisons for the incarcerated.¹⁰¹ Clean Break, a women’s theatre company formed by Jenny Hicks and Jacqueline Holborough in HMP Durham in 1977, used performance as a way to openly discuss the criminal justice system and how it affects women.¹⁰² I will discuss the work and restructuring of Clean Break at length in Chapter 2. That same year in California, Eloise Smith began the Prisons Art Project at the California Medical Facility at Vacaville.¹⁰³ Prison theatre grew exponentially following the emergence of these groups and working with other facets of applied theatre (such as drama in education). Geese Theatre became the largest prison theatre project in 1980 in Iowa, branching out with a UK site in Birmingham in 1987.¹⁰⁴

Notably, theatrical work for and with prisoners by professionals and dramatic work by prisoners for prisoners are both housed under the term prison theatre or labeled beneath the even broader umbrella term “applied theatre.” I note the expansiveness of these labels to highlight the difference between organizations that create theatre continuously in prisons led by either professional theatre practitioners and/or incarcerated individuals and organizations that visit prisons to provide workshops or productions and are led by professional actors and teaching artists. If applied theatre creates a space in which “new modes of being can be encountered and new possibilities for humankind can be imagined,” prison theatre manipulates how one encounters

in Post-War Britain,” *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 4 (2012): pp. 467-488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2012.678052>.

¹⁰¹ “Stirabout Theatre Company and Gallery,” *Unfinished Histories*, accessed June 26, 2020, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/stirabout-theatre-company-and-gallery/>.

¹⁰² Clean Break remains the oldest criminal justice theatre organization still in operation, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.

¹⁰³ “Prison Arts Project,” William James Association, September 28, 2020, https://williamjamesassociation.org/prison_arts/.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 10.

these new modes of being.¹⁰⁵ These encounters can be continuous if a prison has an in-house theatre group or sporadic if groups travel through detainment centers. At the heart of prison theatre lies the belief that art creates identity and feelings of belonging, builds, and maintains hope, develops practical communication skills, and incites social change. Frequently found in the work of prison theatre groups are the texts of William Shakespeare.

Rob Pensalfini's foundational text, *Prison Shakespeare*, traces the history of Shakespeare in prisons, beginning with the Royal Shakespeare Company's Cicely Berry starting prison workshops in the 1980s. Prison Shakespeare functions as a branch of prison theatre. Berry's foray into prisons in the 1980s broke "cultural boundaries," according to Pensalfini.¹⁰⁶ As a key practitioner and vocal coach of the Royal Shakespeare Company, her entrance into prisons crossed "the boundary between the high culture of the RSC and the pessimal status of the prison, and the line between professional performance and applied theatre."¹⁰⁷ Pensalfini implicitly points out Shakespeare's status as a marker of the elite, as he continues to note the generalized assumption of this cultural value today. Such a marker of elitism then positions Shakespeare as a gift or a tool to those incarcerated and enters into a rehabilitative-type narrative. Following Berry's work in UK prisons and workshops in the US arose Jean Trounstone's popular work, *Shakespeare Behind Bars* in Framingham, Massachusetts, in 1988. The 1990s witnessed a boom of Shakespeare-centered prison programs in the United States even as funding dwindled for other prison theatre programs.¹⁰⁸ The work of Shakespeare in prisons cemented prison theatre as nearly synonymous

¹⁰⁵ Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, "The Applied Theatre Reader," in *The Applied Theatre Reader* (New York City: Routledge, 2008) citing Philip Taylor, *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003): xxx.

¹⁰⁶ Pensalfini, 15.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ James Thompson, *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practices* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998).

with prison Shakespeare, and by 2019, there were over a dozen Prison Shakespeare programs across the United States, most of which are still functioning.¹⁰⁹

A 2019 article in *American Magazine* featured an extensive list of arts organizations working in prison settings. Couched beneath “Prison Theatre Programs” and tagged with the interactive label “PRISON THEATRE,” the piece cites the “transformative effect creative outlets can have on those in the criminal justice system.”¹¹⁰ Using the Prison Arts Resource Project database, the piece invites readers to skim through 30 U.S.-based organizations that fall under “prison theatre.” Out of the thirty-two organizations listed, seven feature Shakespeare in their title (though more use Shakespeare in practice). Nine are in California. Most of the programs are housed beneath a larger theatre collective such as a public theatre or performing arts project. Some of these organizations follow Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed’s footsteps, while others work within the conventional applied theatre models. The programs listed in the AMT magazine all cite their non-profit status, a mission statement that roughly draws on using the arts as a catalyst for societal change, and some form of community engagement. Despite being vitally relevant, partnerships between universities’ theatre departments and prisons are not included in this list. Perhaps one of the most centralized prison Shakespeare university groups, Notre Dame’s Shakespeare in Prisons, hosts the national Shakespeare in Prisons Conference and facilitates prison theatre work in Illinois state prisons. Although the relationship between universities, prisons, and

¹⁰⁹ Jean Trounstine’s Shakespeare Behind Bars, 1988 – 1998; Prison Performing Arts, 1995 – Present; Luther Luckett Correctional Facility Shakespeare Behind Bars, 1995 – Present; Brent Blair’s projects, 1995 – 2005 (Blair worked predominantly with youth but not housed under a central “group”); Rehabilitation Through the Arts, 1996 – Present; Shakespeare in the Courts, 2001 – Present; Shakespeare in Shackles, 2003 – Present; Shakespeare Prison Project (US), 2004 – 2008; 2014 – Present; Marin Shakespeare Company at San Quentin, 2004 – Present; Open Hearts Open Minds, 2007 – Present; Redeeming Time, 2017 – Present; Reflecting Shakespeare (Old Globe), 2016 – Present; Shakespeare in Prison (Detroit Public Theatre), 2012 – Present.

¹¹⁰ Sofia Barrell, “Prison Theatre Programs,” *American Theatre*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/01/22/prison-theatre-programs/>.

theatres forms my main discussion in Chapter 4, I point out this organization to bridge the discussions of the institutionality of Shakespeare, its hold on the wielding of Shakespeare for social change, and the elite gatekeeping of who leads this institution and how.

Within the United Kingdom, prison theatre companies vary in structure and size from prison to prison. Due to the history and scale of applied theatre programs in the United Kingdom, there are significant partnerships for practice-as-research in prison spaces.¹¹¹ Furthermore, according to practitioners working in prison theatre, the Ministry of Justice recognizes the importance and need for creative education within carceral spaces.¹¹² Writing a report for the Justice Secretary, the Director of Academies United Learning, Sally Coates, described the importance of education within prison and advocated for the continued growth of educational access through the standardized system of education assessments: “In every prison that receives remand or newly-sentenced prisoners, all prisoners should receive a mandatory maths and English assessment on reception. This should be undertaken with the assessment tool mandated from the centre to ensure consistency across the estate (public, private and reform prisons).”¹¹³ Within the proposed assessment is the data collection of an incarcerated person’s experiences in education. Based on known statistics of access to education prior to incarceration, this data effectively forces the acknowledgment for continued education while incarcerated in order to fulfill the government-stated goals of prisons as rehabilitative.¹¹⁴ The push for education in prisons includes creative

¹¹¹ See the Royal School of Speech and Drama, York St John University, and Manchester University (TiPP).

¹¹² Special thank you to Rowan Mackenzie for discussing these points with me. Broader discussion found in the introduction of her dissertation.

¹¹³ Sally Coates, “Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison,” Ministry of Justice, May 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524013/education-review-report.pdf, 13.

¹¹⁴ “Fifty-nine per cent of prisoners stated that they had regularly played truant from school, 63% had been suspended or temporarily excluded, and 42% stated that they had been permanently excluded or expelled.” Kim Williams, Vea Papadopoulou, and Natalie Booth, “Prisoners’ Childhood and Family Backgrounds: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) Longitudinal Cohort Study of Prisoners, Ministry of Justice, March

endeavors, particularly drama, housed under the umbrella of “prison arts.” Because of the frequent funding changes, both governmental and within theatre companies, it is difficult to mark the number of Prison Shakespeare groups across the UK and the US. However, Notre Dame’s Prison Shakespeare Directory only identifies one UK Prison Shakespeare company, the London Shakespeare Workout Prison Project, which has been closed since 2009. Contrasted with the Directory’s list of US groups, 9 of which have Shakespeare in their name, the prominence of Prison Shakespeare reads as a more American endeavor.¹¹⁵ I am aware of the broadness of this claim based on the information available, but I identify the separation between US/UK Prison Shakespeare to better situate the environment in which the Donmar Trilogy originated and the wide-reaching cultural impact of Shakespeare.

At the heart of Shakespeare entering prisons lies the notion of the texts as universal. Viewed as an institution that enters many aspects of social and cultural life, Shakespeare’s history and practice traverse from comedy for groundlings in the seventeenth century, productions favored by Colonial American statesmen in the eighteenth century, to performances by convicts in Australia in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁶ These histories, geographic travels, and cultural shifts later transformed into the notion of Shakespeare as “universal” in the twentieth century. The issue lies in the Western use of Shakespeare’s texts as emblematic of the “best” of Western culture and belief that exposure to his works would result in a transformation of character. At the same time, Shakespeare as universal moves to “connect” cultures by finding mutual ground in the admiration

2012, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/278837/prisoners-childhood-family-backgrounds.pdf, ii.

¹¹⁵ Shakespeare at Notre Dame, “Prison Shakespeare: Directory – A State-by-State Directory Listing of Organizations Specializing in Arts Programming for and by Incarcerated and Nontraditional Populations,” April 2020.

¹¹⁶ See Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 7. Rob Pensalfini, *Prison Shakespeare*, 8. Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2003).

of the plays. Yet looked at another way, Shakespeare's universality erases cultural difference, positions a White Western work/culture above all others, and becomes a cultural currency to show intellect and worldliness.

The contemporary notion of universality functions in how prison Shakespeare can be rehabilitative. For example, Notre Dame's Shakespeare in Prisons website states that the organization "celebrates the transformative power of William Shakespeare's works in bridging the space between our shared humanity and isolation typical of incarcerated and marginalized individuals."¹¹⁷ "Transformative," "bridging," "shared humanity:" such phrasing positions Shakespeare as a type of cure for the challenges of prison and a way for outsiders to connect with those incarcerated. Shakespeare's spread to prisons functions as a type of quasi-missionary work in contemporary America.¹¹⁸ In the UK, arguably due to the embrace of practice-as-research, work with Shakespeare can be more pointed and specific in terms of using Shakespeare as a tool to identify and articulate past traumas while incarcerated.¹¹⁹ I do not mean to imply that Shakespeare's themes, characters, or plots have no connection with the trials of incarceration. The general focus is on Shakespeare and *then* on incarcerated peoples. Continued productions using Shakespeare this way reaffirms its status as a valuable, necessary, and key component of Anglo-American society.

The main work of prison Shakespeare (i.e., workshops and productions with/for the incarcerated) takes place outside of the public eye. Due to various open access and communication constraints with prisons and penitentiaries, people leading the workshops and productions retell

¹¹⁷ "Shakespeare in Prisons," Shakespeare at Notre Dame, 2020, <https://shakespeare.nd.edu/service/shakespeare-in-prisons/>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Rowan Mia Mackenzie, "Creating Space for Shakespeare with Marginalised Communities" PhD Diss., (The Shakespeare Institute, 2020).

the majority of work occurring. Through its direct work with incarcerated women in building the productions and through subsequent traveling of the productions into women's prisons across the UK, following the performances at the Donmar, the Trilogy's reach went beyond prison walls and made visible female incarceration. The Trilogy's shared space between performance in prison and on commercial stages highlights how Shakespeare and prisons are performed by and for the public in the public view. Furthermore, the restructuring of where Shakespeare lies in stage productions (using a frame within a frame type of performance) opens up a specific focus on incarcerated women in which the public receives the focus of the production as on incarceration of which Shakespeare is a tool.

2.3 Rehearsing Life: Building the Trilogy

Centering the focus of the Trilogy on female incarceration through the performing of Shakespeare necessitated in-depth dramaturgy. To produce the show, the Donmar Warehouse joined with the York St. John University Prison Partnership Project (PPP) at HMP Askham Grange, an open prison and young offender institute for women.¹²⁰ The original production of *Julius Caesar* relied on Phyllida Lloyd's own research at Holloway Prison and work with Clean Break.¹²¹ However, *Henry IV* and *The Tempest*, as well as the later reprised performances for

¹²⁰ HMP Askham Grange was repurposed in 1947 as the first all-female prison in England. The prison focuses explicitly on rehabilitation and provides spaces for new mothers to bond and care for their babies. The fictionalized prison in the Shakespeare Trilogy roughly mirrors Askham Grange through its use of pregnant characters and new mothers (shown through the holding of baby dolls in the production). However, the structure of Askham Grange resembles an English country estate (which it served as from 1886 until 1947); thus, the other design elements of the production resemble Holloway Prison.

¹²¹ A year after *Caesar* premiered, Rachel Conlon began the Prison Partnership Project in 2013 between HMP Askham Grange and the theatre department at York St. John University.

filming, were in discussion with the Project. The Prison Partnership Project as an organization reflected Phyllida Lloyd's desire to capture the livelihoods of incarcerated women. The project "was born out of the desire to provide a unique, creative partnership between the arts, education and the prison service" with the goals of the theatre department aiming "to provide a real-world experience of the impact of theatre within a criminal justice setting."¹²² This "impact of theatre" spoke beyond Lloyd's desire to recalibrate the employment of women in the theatre industry and instead cultivated relationships between these women (incarcerated, actors, and professors). As the rehearsals continued, the work produced was meant to give agency to the women for sharing their experiences and to the actors playing prisoners as they grasped the mentality of incarceration.¹²³ For The Donmar, they "wanted to provide an opportunity [to incarcerated women] to develop vital creative and life skills in line with their resettlement plans approaching release into the community."¹²⁴ From the initial production of *Julius Caesar* at the Donmar Warehouse in 2012 to the later productions of *Henry IV* and *The Tempest* and the filmed Trilogy, the structure of the productions largely remained the same (prison setting actors-playing-prisoners-playing-Shakespeare), but the depth of the prison spaces and the actor-prisoner voices grew substantially.

The framework became the cornerstone of the show during the early stages of rehearsal in *Henry IV* as Lloyd wanted to remain as respectful and truthful as possible in accurately portraying life in a women's prison. The rehearsal process with incarcerated women is at the center of this shift and perhaps its most important act in speaking to the Trilogy's legacy. Through the professional actors' depictions of how these incarcerated women read Shakespeare, audiences

¹²² Rachel Conlon, "Drama in Prison: 'I Feel Like I Have a Voice'" (The Donmar Warehouse, 2016), accessed February 14, 2020

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

witness a mapping of the struggles for power and freedom onto historicized verse. There is not a neat layering of immediate prison life and immediate world of the play — the Trilogy ebbs and flows between the worlds made by Shakespeare’s words and prisons functioning with Shakespeare’s words. The rehearsal process created the complexity between the world the actor-prisoners are creating, the constant acknowledgment that an audience watches women in prison perform Shakespeare, and the further detached notice of watching actors perform prisoners perform Shakespeare.¹²⁵ The layers of this process derive from the partnerships between a university, a prison, and a stage, all of which required the experience of incarcerated women to actualize the Trilogy’s goals. This process between the inside spaces of a prison and the outside place of the public stage marks a transition between prison theatre and postcarceral performance.

The in-depth collaboration of three institutions, HMP Askham Grange, York St John University, and the Donmar Warehouse, fall under the key purpose of applied theatre: to use theatre practices in “real-life” scenarios to benefit an immediate and broader community. Professor Rachel Conlon, a Senior Theatre Lecturer in Applied Theatre at York St. John, oversees the Prison Partnership Project and facilitated the partnerships between these three institutions. The Prison Partnership Project is an advocacy group that partners university students with women at the local prison. She additionally brought in Clean Break to further actualize the goals of “merging these two worlds [prison and education/theatre] and gain a deeper understanding of self, community, and justice, and ultimately see beyond the myth and stigma, to new perspectives.”¹²⁶ The majority

¹²⁵ A brief note on the language used when discussing the form of the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy: the terms surrounding imprisonment (‘prisoner,’ ‘inmate,’ ‘convict,’ ‘offender’) erase the individual behind the label. As such, I attempt to refrain from using this type of language where possible. However, because of the Trilogy framework in which professional actors portray women experiencing incarceration who in turn play characters in Shakespearean plays, I will use the term “prisoner” when discussing the Trilogy’s actor’s characters.

¹²⁶ Conlon, “Drama in Prison.”

of individuals involved in this program leading to the Shakespeare Trilogy were women, and women continued to work on the second and third productions, *Henry IV* and *The Tempest*. This employment of women actualizes Lloyd's goals of facilitating artistic production and community engagement for and by women. Lloyd's final decision for a women-led production culminated in an all-female cast for the Trilogy.

Beyond the atypical casting choice of all women, the specific centering and focus of the prison setting informed the interpretation and intent of the production. Centering the prison structure in theatre and performance allows us to see, according to Caoimhe McAviney, "how recent developments in the funding and methodologies of theatre practice in prison are embroiled in neoliberal narratives that fuel the corrections industry and how audiences are invited to affectively respond to or critically engage with theatre in or about prison."¹²⁷ The Trilogy requires audiences to wrestle with the performed realities of incarceration outside of detention centers' actual bounds. As such, performance becomes a space to bear witness to the functionalities of how prison theatre functions. Whereas Caoimhe McAviney specifically studies the history of prison and performance, dramatic texts exploring prison life, and theatre in prison, I shift the boundaries to focus on the structural use of the prison and the wielding of Shakespeare to unveil the complex identities of incarcerated women performed by both formerly incarcerated and non-incarcerated actors.

The performance of female prisoners in the Trilogy is derived from the lived experiences and interpretations of Shakespeare's text as identified by the women at various prisons across Britain. The rehearsal work on the Trilogy began with takings copies of *Julius Caesar* to HMP Royal Holloway London. Phyllida Lloyd hosted workshops with women in Royal Holloway to

¹²⁷ McAviney, *Theatre in Prison*, 3.

discuss their analyses and interpretations of the text, where they found the work to be “highly suitable for their preoccupations.”¹²⁸ This connection between some of Shakespeare’s texts to the experiences of those incarcerated frequently occurs in Prison Shakespeare scholarship. A majority of Prison Shakespeare companies relate currently detained citizens’ identification with Shakespeare as a key factor of why Shakespeare works as means of therapy or rehabilitation in these settings. However, the positioning of relating incarcerated people’s experiences to Shakespearean characters and plots becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. These companies rely on various funding to continue, thus tangibly showing how Shakespeare “makes a difference” becomes a vital part of the message. Yet Lloyd’s approach to bringing Shakespeare into prisons resulted in a different ending. Instead of returning to the cast of the Trilogy and proclaiming, “the women at Holloway see similarities with *Julius Caesar* and their experiences!” she actively continued the dialogue with these and other incarcerated women throughout the rehearsal of *Caesar* and then into the other two productions with the assistance of the PPP.

The cast met with incarcerated women through the York St. John University’s Prison Partnership Project and then developed their prisoner characters with the women at the local prison. The rehearsal process consisted of weekly check-ins between the prisoners and actors to better understand the prison world’s complexities while also serving as a space for the incarcerated women to learn Shakespeare. After a workshop, one incarcerated woman told Phyllida Lloyd: “I think there are people who are going to get out of prison sooner because of this. Getting out of prison is hard. You have to have an ability to speak, an ability to have a voice to talk to the parole board,” implying that working on this production gave these women such a voice.¹²⁹ The women’s

¹²⁸ “Prison Context,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2018. <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/welcome/prison-context/>.

¹²⁹ “Prison Context,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy.

ability to rehearse and actively discuss a cultural institution largely shadowed by its association with elite power (Shakespeare) opened up new pathways to develop the dialogue between art and individual expression in carceral spaces.

The continued interaction with these women creates long-term spaces (the Trilogy's work took more than five years) that attempt to deconstruct the power dynamic between outsiders (cast/crew of the Trilogy) and those subjected to incarceration. Rehearsing in London with an audio-line into a women's prison quite literally linked two separate institutions into a communal space working on highlighting the incarcerated woman's experience. The rehearsal room's physical place and the sonic space of the prison work to create a new space that traverses' physical boundaries to unite and strive towards a common goal of a female-led production. Lloyd remarked how women in HMS Royal Holloway would give their own readings on Shakespeare's text and include their own stories or connections to the plays, which Lloyd and the cast then used in the production itself. Also included were the women's use of humor in responding to the incarcerated living and the class-based assumptions of Shakespeare as "for the elite;" Lloyd acknowledges that these jokes and references became critical components in the show.¹³⁰ Using these jokes and these interpretations, the thoughts and opinions of incarcerated women left HMS Royal Holloway and became a crucial factor in the Donmar stage performances. The actors who performed these thoughts and opinions embodied the incarcerated women while also performing other iterations of visibility through diverse racial, gender, and sexual portrayals.

Shakespeare's value in the theatre, the university, and prisons fluctuates depending on a multitude of factors (location, current events, objectives, and outcomes of each institution), but

¹³⁰ "Somehow, we began to learn a great deal from them, as they were learning that they were not voiceless. So, we would say to them, 'You know that joke you suggested to us? It went down really well in Brooklyn.' And they felt buried alive in jail." Bogaev, "Phyllida Lloyd."

these three sites used Shakespeare for cross-institutional connection. Donmar's use of Shakespeare and its partnerships became monetarily and critically successful because of the labor of these incarcerated women. In other words, the insight and experience of these incarcerated women's readings of Shakespeare and their individual stories informed the unique draw of the Trilogy. Blurred are the ethics of the relationships between the actors and the prisoners regarding who gained more from the partnerships as the actors modeled their characters off of these real-life women. At the base level, the three physical institutions involved in the Trilogy can highlight their practice with female prisoners. With these experiences, the Donmar can say they produced work developed with the input of incarcerated women, York St. John University can say their PPP was invaluable to the building of the Trilogy, HMP Askham Grange can show that they offered incarcerated women access to the formation of a Donmar Warehouse show, and the wielding of Shakespeare can continue to support the goals of prison theatre and applied theatre. At the root of all of these claims lie the detained women. As previously noted, incarcerated women told Phyllida Lloyd that this experience would help women get out of prison. In an interview with Leah Harvey, Harvey remarked on the organizing and activist work of the Trilogy's actors who, while performing in New York City, campaigned for Judith Clark to be pardoned by the Governor of New York. According to Harvey, Harriet Walter visited Clark in prison.¹³¹ Clark was released in 2019. This experience illuminates the focus of uplifting the voices of incarcerated women. Still, notably only one woman, Judith Clark, received overt discussion and recognition of her connection and work with the Trilogy itself.

Yet, at the same time, the construction of female-led and female-centered groups provided fruitful contact spaces in which wider audiences would hear the reimagining of the incarcerated

¹³¹ Leah Harvey, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, June 16, 2021.

lives. The Trilogy destabilizes the stark separation between stage and prison yet upholds the neoliberal hierarchy of art access, valued labor, and public recognition. This complex relationship demonstrates how the Trilogy is a transitional production pointing towards postcarceral performance. The in-depth work by Trilogy members with those within and released from incarceration nevertheless seeks to vocalize the indignities of the criminal justice system through art.

The Trilogy makes apparent issues of incarceration through the rehearsal process with incarcerated women, the performance of the structure of prison and subsequent relationships with queerness, and the development of prison characters enmeshed with Shakespeare's characters to expose the literal material impact of incarceration as viewed through three physical institutions (prisons, stages, and universities). It also provides a structure in which abolitionist goals may be actualized through the reframing of the former prisoner. The productions ultimately show the transitional prospect of prison theatre and inform the possibility and futurity of postcarceral performance in evoking meaningful and actual change to incarceration systems.

2.4 Constructing Identity: Queerness, Visibility, and Black Joy

Portions of The Donmar's *The Tempest* exude queer Black joy working within and in defiance of institutions embedded in White supremacy. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* explores the stranding of a Duke, Prospero, and his daughter, Miranda, on an island as the Duke's brother, Antonio, usurped the dukedom. The arrival of a shipwreck sees Antonio and his son Ferdinand on Prospero's island. Prospero rules the island through the enslavement of both the spirit Ariel and the supposed-monster, Caliban. The play presents questions of magic and truth, love and loss, and

the quest for freedom at the heart of it. Postcolonial studies, particularly with Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, reconfigured receptions of *The Tempest*, focusing on the slaveholder and enslaved person narrative between Prospero and Caliban to critique the embedded social hierarchies and power dynamics inherent in the text. Later twentieth-century productions of *The Tempest*, like RSC South African set *The Tempest* specifically centered racial injustice and White supremacy with the casting of Antony Sher as Prospero and John Kani as Caliban. Yet even as that production worked to illuminate South Africa's deep history of racist power structures, the focus nevertheless remained on the Prospero-Caliban narrative or a narrative of pain and isolation. In stark contrast, the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy's production of *The Tempest* reconfigures portions of the show to highlight queer Black joy instead of Black suffering. The Black female casting of both Ferdinand and Miranda subverts a system that works to erase any semblance of humanity by reveling in the embrace of love and pleasure. Furthermore, the enactment of queer Black joy stands in defiance of the heteronormativity primarily performed in Ferdinand and Miranda's. This section directly and specifically engages with the performance of the Trilogy, particularly through the wedding scene in *The Tempest*. The visibility of incarcerated women varied gendered performances of prisoner identity, and the mimetic performances of long-term incarceration create the space for queer Black joy to conclude the ending of the Trilogy. The performed wedding of Ferdinand and Miranda within the world of *The Tempest* and simultaneously within the world of the prison reconceptualizes Shakespeare's works as primarily reading White and heteronormative. Furthermore, the development and execution of this scene creates a new space to witness the radical spaces of joy in prison and to develop a dialogue between the arts and incarceration.

The system of incarceration works because of its masterful and visceral separation of individuals from the outside world. Michel Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopias as

institutional spaces that work to make the utopic space possible enforces the divide between those within prison walls and those on the other side. Heterotopias are distinctly “not accessible like a public place [...] the entry is compulsory.”¹³² These “worlds within worlds” highlight humankind’s classification systems and the desire to establish a society that spaces-off undesirable beings. Prison scholar and practitioner Rowan Mackenzie views the intersections of the institution of Shakespeare and prisons as “the physical spaces in which [incarcerated] individuals are situated often inflict emotional and social trauma and this, combined with Shakespeare acting as a mirror creates an internal heterotopia.”¹³³ Her use of internal heterotopia focuses on the individual process of experiencing the space of prison against the identifying process of the self through Shakespearean performance. Yet within the creation of the Trilogy, actual incarcerated women did not so much perform Shakespeare as review it, connect the work to their individual experience, and relay that information to then be performed by another body – a distinctly outside body. The result is two-fold: such practice prohibits the incarcerated woman’s body from physically performing alternative identities through Shakespeare and moves her ideas of Shakespeare and prison outside of the prison’s walls; these ideas are activated in a professional actor’s body, and then these ideas are made public on stage. The internal heterotopia through Shakespeare exists by being enacted by the professional actor’s body through the knowledge and ideas from the incarcerated woman. Across both spaces, those inside and those outside, Shakespeare as cultural institution makes incarcerated populations visible.

This visibility of incarceration requires a public audience to bear witness in a space that quite literally forces the audience to be in the world of imprisonment. Knowledge as power fuels

¹³² Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias (1967),” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October 1984, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>, 7.

¹³³ Mackenzie, “Creating Space,” 229.

Discipline and Punish, and I note a physicalization of this theme in Donmar's panopticon: the theatre in the round. With four aisles descending into a circular pit, the play starts on a prison's gym floor. The audience, from all sides, physically looks down on the prisoners turned into actors turned into magical entities, obedient daughters, and lost fathers. If, as Foucault claims, punishment gains power through supervision and organization of bodies in space, the prisoners on the island are about to receive sentence through isolation. The audience watches on. Lloyd remarked on the success of creating a realistic prison in that she "felt that when we had, in particular, a 'corporate audience,' that they felt 'my god you prisoners are *there*, we're *here* – don't come any closer to us.'"¹³⁴ With this reading of the audience, Lloyd suggests an overt fear of incarceration, despite the incarceration being performed. Although the corporate audience knew they were attending a play and watching actors, the inclusion and performance of prisoners nevertheless discomforted these audience members – even the portrayal of prison incites enough fear or disgust. Essentially, the fear or disgust of even performed incarceration elicits the segregation and othering of those on the outside world and those behind bars. The dramatic use of prison characters in an intimate in-the-round stage forces a confrontation between societal reception to imprisonment rooted in fear. It reveals the fine line between the imagined and the real.

Identifying the stark divide between audience member and prisoner/actor as one that's free (audience) and detained (the actors) sets the tone for the opening of the play. Tracing the line of women entering the gym floor to begin their time of play, the visual picture of the stage reads as blank, muted, without much reliance on a costume to enhance gender performance. All those involved wear shapeless tracksuits, some with gray polo shirts beneath, others with fully zipped-up sweatshirts to obscure the body. Following in line, one behind the other, the women move from

¹³⁴ Bogaev, "Phyllida Lloyd."

an outside space into the theatre in the round. In the film version of the production, we witness a hand slam the prison cage shut. A security system buzzer followed by a body-less voice yelling “PLACES, LADIES” forces a gender identity upon all on stage.

In real-life, the design, structure, costuming, and organizing of incarcerated peoples in both male and female prisons read as visually similar. At the root of both types of prisons is the aesthetic of base masculinity: muted color, simple design, roughhousing, and anger as fixed on the body. Due to the gender performativity of masculinity and the history of the Western conceptualization of masculinity in the latter part of the twentieth century, these aesthetics read as masculine. In the Trilogy, the women enter the space wearing loose-fitting gray jumpsuits. Their hair is either cropped short or pulled back, resulting in an appearance that erases conventional forms of femininity.¹³⁵ Essentially, the prison structure appears to have visually masculinized the women on stage. Centering the prison structure in theatre and performance allows us to see, according to Caoimhe McAvinchey, “how representations of criminal bodies are marked by race, class, sexuality, and gender.”¹³⁶ Thus, the Trilogy’s diverse casting reconceptualizes or perhaps even introduces the paying public to the reality of who is incarcerated and why.¹³⁷ The prisoners themselves signal specific gendered identities through gestures. In brief moments, particularly through the prison’s interruptions during the play, complicate a fixed comprehension of a prisoner/character’s identity between the Shakespearean male figure and the incarcerated individual on stage.

¹³⁵ With this, the question of “what does femininity look like?” arises in my mind and I believe the notions of what masculinity/femininity looks like should be challenged but for the sake of this project and the discussions of the gender binary imposed by the carceral state, I am using conventional understandings of masculine/feminine.

¹³⁶ McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison*, 3.

¹³⁷ The “why” is answered through the actor-as-prisoner interviews on the Trilogy’s website, where the women talk about their past and, in some cases, what brought them to prison.

The relationship between carcerality and gender build from the state's enforcement of normative identities. The Trilogy's inclusion of an overheard voice labeling all of the incarcerated people on stage as "ladies" reflects the gendering technology. Incarceration run in the United States and the United Kingdom only offer separate male and female detention. The prison itself functions as gendering technology as it responds to and asserts a compulsory binary gender system. As a result of this enforcement comes the well-reported issues of prison staff and correctional officers being "uncomfortable" by those who defy the binary and harass or even assault those they feel don't belong.¹³⁸ Gender and carcerality are intricately linked through the forced application of the gender binary. Being in prison is not a choice; being forced into an identity or the categorization of an identity of which there are only two options and then being mocked, ridiculed, and abused by those carrying out the systems of confinement speak to how the system has always been designed to function: to carry out the norms of the White heteronormative state. While prisons insert a binary between outsider/insider, the other binary of male or female and the question of "belonging" to a category further inserts alterity into the prison system.¹³⁹

Within this system, the notions of societal norms are at play. Angela Davis cites prisons' existence as "so 'natural' that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it."¹⁴⁰ White cisgender heterosexual identities and relationships are the basis for Western understandings of "societal norms." Furthermore, the embodiment and performance of Shakespeare rooted in Anglo-America facilitate the existence and continuation of these norms through the continued repetition of "universality" (which inevitably works to erase difference and mold one historically marginalized

¹³⁸ Discussion by abolitionist Krys Shelley. Eric Stanley and Krys Shelley, "Prison and Gendering Technology," *Critical Gender Studies at University of California San Diego*. Lecture, January 21, 2021.

¹³⁹ See Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 10.

group to fit into the predominant mode of being). The women's labor in these productions disrupts the text's social norms and the performed prison structure. This disruption is powerfully seen in the skewing of a truly linear production as the prison life frequently interrupts the world of the play, with the audience constantly reminded that they are in prison. By changing and adapting the preconceived notions of what the body looks like within the prison system, audiences are thrust into a new imaginative space to interpret incarceration through the vehicle of Shakespeare.

At the beginning of *The Tempest*, Harriet Walter moves meekly and speaks softly while she introduces herself as Hannah. Hannah, a sixty-six-year-old woman who, when she was thirty-one and a new mother, became involved in a robbery as the getaway driver in which three policemen were killed: "At my trial, I pleaded political status, and I refused to accept the authority of the court, and for that, I was given a life sentence with no the possibility of parole, and I've been in prison ever since."¹⁴¹ Walter's crime directly parallels Judith Clark's story, who, with former members of the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army, drove the getaway car in an armed robbery of a Brink's Truck in New York state.¹⁴² The "refusal to accept the authority of the court" colors Hannah's development as Prospero, where we witness a figure simultaneously asserting authority and being hounded by past actions of those who usurp power.¹⁴³ The rest of the cast read as a diverse group of gender identities and racially and ethnically varied. Two critically

¹⁴¹ *The Tempest* (BBC/Opus Arte, 2019).

¹⁴² On the morning of October 20th, 1981, six members of the Black Liberation Army and four members of the former Weather Underground, then the May 19th Communist Organization, began their armed robbery of a guarded Brink's truck, parked outside a local mall in Rockland County, New York. After stealing over \$1 million from two security guards at the Nanuet Mall, the six men of the planned operation jumped into a U-Haul before breaking off into separate getaway cars. By the end of the afternoon, the men had killed two police officers and a security guard in a gun battle. The getaway driver, Judith Alice Clark, drove two of the members of the gunfight in a car chase before being captured by the police. Clark was sentenced to 75 years to life in 1983. She was finally released on May 10, 2019, after earning multiple academic degrees, founding AIDS activist groups, bringing college education programs to local prisons, teaching pre-and post-natal courses, and maintaining a longtime membership of Puppies Behind Bars, a group that trains service dogs, and fighting the injustices of incarceration. Walter befriended Clark while creating her character of Hannah, and the two remain friends.

¹⁴³ *The Tempest* (BBC/Opus Arte, 2019).

acclaimed Black actors played Miranda and Ferdinand. Leah Harvey, who gained critical success as Hortense in National Theatre's *Small Island*, portrayed Prospero's daughter, while Sheila Atim, Olivier Award-winning actor in the original production of *Girl from the North Country*, played Alonso's son. Their excitable and passionate relationship culminates in a joyful, colorful wedding ceremony staged to highlight the methods of celebration and defiance in prison life. With the Trilogy, we witness the breaking apart of the stability and the normality of marriage conventionally understood as a White cisgender heterosexual couple.

In Act IV Scene I, following Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement, Prospero summons spirits to perform a masque for the soon-to-be betrothed. Juno, goddess of marriage, Iris, Juno's messenger, and Ceres, goddess of agriculture, appear to "celebrate the contract of true love."¹⁴⁴ In stark contrast to the earlier conversation between Ferdinand and Prospero, surrounding virginity, sexuality, and loss, this masque centers on the harvest, birth, and future of Ferdinand and Miranda. Juno blesses the union with Ceres, "Go with me / To bless this twain that they may prosperous be, / And honored in the issue."¹⁴⁵ Juno then sings:

Honor, riches, marriage, blessing,
Long continuance, and increasing,
Hourly joys be still upon you.
Spring come to you at the farthest
In the very end of harvest.
Scarcity and want shall shun you.
Ceres' blessing so is on you.¹⁴⁶

Elizabethan scholar E.K. Chambers describes this scene as an "appropriate hymenal mask," speaking to the play's historic original performance at the wedding of King James I's daughter

¹⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.84.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. IV.i.104.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., IV.i.110.

Princess Elizabeth and Frederick, Elector of Palatine.¹⁴⁷ Early Modern scholars have questioned the authorship of the masque itself for much of the twentieth century -- with Chambers arguing for the masque authorship to be Shakespeare's. While the issue of authorship does not directly concern my argument, I believe the inclusion of the masque for the royal wedding speaks to the intentionality of its reception: that the masque reflects the wedding ritual both in the actual act of the marriage ceremony and in the expectations of marriage to follow. Quite notably, Ferdinand and Miranda are never married throughout the play. Instead, the masque steps in as a performance of the rituals and expectations of marriage. Therefore, the restructuring of the Trilogy to include the wedding ritual adheres to some cultural norms (a wedding) while also defying them (a reimagined wedding ceremony).

The entirety of *The Tempest's* performance works as a disidentifying process in which prisoners take the playwright of the elite and the majority male-centered script to recode Shakespeare's possibility mapped onto female bodies.¹⁴⁸ José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification constructs a queer possibility in which the rebellious queer aesthetic exists as a strategy for survival and illustrates the utopian mode of being. The disidentifying process works through "the reconstruction of a cultural text in a fashion that exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations."¹⁴⁹ Unlike a traditional Shakespeare Behind Bars, where outside academics or theatre practitioners enter to structure and run the prisoners' performance, the women inmates are on their own, without a clear outsider (as witnessed by the

¹⁴⁷ E. K. Chambers, "The Integrity of *The Tempest*," *The Review of English Studies* 1, no. 2 (1925): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/os-i.2.129>.

¹⁴⁸ I use this term because, to my knowledge of the Trilogy actors, they all identify as female.

¹⁴⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 31.

audience) guiding their performance. Through this autonomy, the women recreate social ceremonies to fit into their environment and embrace queer identities.

The Tempest's contemporary productions do fold the performance of a wedding ceremony and the masque itself into a single unit. For example, in the 2015 production of the play by Great Lakes Theatre, the masque featured Miranda in a wedding gown as Prospero holds her hand to eventually “give” her away to Ferdinand, a key component of the wedding ritual.¹⁵⁰ Other productions cut the masque entirely, given its unique inclusion in a Shakespearean play.¹⁵¹ In the Trilogy, however, Lloyd fused the masque and the wedding into a single event to highlight relationships, dreams, and the isolation of prison. As Prospero orders, “No tongues! all eyes! be silent!” the lights dim to a warm purple glow.¹⁵² Ferdinand and Miranda each descend the aisles of the stage-in-the-round, meeting in the center of the circular stage. Both wear groomsman-like top hats with veils (made of toilet paper) fluttering behind them. Miranda, holding a bouquet of flowers made out of toilet paper and tampons, wears a white skirt beneath her gray prison polo. Ferdinand, carrying the same bouquet, dons a black skirt. The embrace of using menstrual products like flowers and wearing key parts of both masculine and feminine matrimonial dress speaks to the disidentificatory ritual, both celebrating and diverging. Fellow prisoners encompass the lovers, with one softly singing Juno’s hymn cited above. Prospero walks toward Miranda smiling as he, like a magician, pulls a wedding ring from Miranda’s ear. Miranda beams as Prospero turns to do the same act with Ferdinand. Both put on their individual rings. Then, Ariel brings center a folded paper crane as she flies it around the betrothed before landing it in Miranda’s hand.

¹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich and Drew Barr. Review, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (2016): 332–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26355187>.

¹⁵¹ As well as questions of authorship.

¹⁵² Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.51.

The music speeds up as more prisoners begin to sing the chorus, “Spring come to you at the farthest / In the very end of the harvest.”¹⁵³ The women bring Starbucks cappuccinos, a bucket of KFC, and stacks of ramen to the couple – a humorous laying down the KFC on the last line of “harvest.” Prisoners take the food away as Prospero comes to the middle of the stage and bellows “NOW DANCE!” as the music and the scenery changes into a club-like scene. Ferdinand and Miranda share their first dance in a fast-paced swing as others dance around them.

Prison transforms the ritual of the marriage ceremony. From the wedding scene’s opening to Prospero’s culmination of “we are such stuff,” the structure and materiality of the prison overtake the performance of the play. The audience sits in a dual space in which it is possible to wonder if this ceremony of Ferdinand and Miranda is genuinely a ceremony of their prison characters or even the potential of such an act. Leah Harvey’s (Miranda) prison character is Ayesha – a 22-year-old with bipolar disorder who cites drama group and her ability to read Shakespeare as transformative. Sheila Atim’s (Ferdinand) prison character appears to be, based on the prison introduction videos on the Trilogy’s website, nameless – with only “ID 100” appearing on her video. ID 100 softly explains that “I’m in here for a bad crime – I was trying to protect someone I love very much, but that’s all I want to say about it, really.”¹⁵⁴ The two move through *The Tempest* with a rich depth to their relationship, appearing in love and enjoying each other’s company. This queer relationship, whether performed through Shakespeare or real in the world of the fictional prison, nevertheless stands in as a bold celebration of queer love. Furthermore, Miranda and Ferdinand’s gendering occurs through the play’s language, but the prisoners’ gender identity remains fluid. The dismantling of a gender binary and the embodiment of queer love functions

¹⁵³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.103.

¹⁵⁴ “Prison Character Introduction: Leah Harvey as Ayesha,” “Prison Character Introduction: Sheila Atim,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2019, <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/welcome/prison-context/#/>.

simultaneously through the lack of specificity (i.e., specific pronouns/labeling of sexual orientation/question of identifying as LGBTQ+ or not). I label this wedding as distinctly queer because of the multiple layers of reading of the marriage – through Shakespeare, through the contemporary production, and the body’s movements and exclamations of joy. Such a reading speaks to queer possibility in defiance of incarceration.

The Tempest’s innovative staging of the queer wedding stands in defiance of prison’s refusal to allow individuality and relationship building. The Trilogy reconceptualizes *The Tempest’s* aesthetic through the actual performing of the wedding ceremony, the prison structure, and queer relationships. In his monograph, *Performance Theory*, Schechner traces his beliefs on the processes of performance. He explains how the “‘theatrical frame’ allows spectators to enjoy deep feelings without feeling compelled either to intervene or avoid witnessing the actions that arouse those feelings.”¹⁵⁵ The theatrical frame of the aesthetic drama provides a space to witness transformation while social drama (of which ritual may be part) “provides a place for and a means of transformation. Rituals carry participants across limens, transforming them into different persons.”¹⁵⁶ Yet this separation of aesthetic performance, of which the Trilogy is part, from ritual, which the Trilogy performs but does not actualize, relinquishes the power of what the aesthetic drama is doing through ritual. The queer marriage ceremony thwarts traditional marriage rituals and norms associated with it through dress and action. Both partners dress similarly, wearing two components of clothing together that are usually separated from the bride and groom (the top hat *with* the veil). They then walk towards each other rather than the groom waiting at the altar for the bride. Lastly, the partners put on their wedding rings as given to them by Prospero before

¹⁵⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 190.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

celebrating their union. Essentially, this scene constructs a new ritual adapted from old ones while also making visible queerness and celebrating love within the prison industrial complex.

The intersectionality of the performances by Leah Harvey and Sheila Atim, traversing gender fluidity, and providing social commentary on female incarceration radicalizes aspects of the Trilogy as revolutionary. But more specifically, the performance of queerness in a prison structure, through texts that have been wielded to uphold White heteronormativity, illustrates *how* the public understands the prison structure (in that queerness and queer love positions themselves in direct opposition to the prison's gendering technology by refusing to perform the conventional marriage scene yet still act for the institution of marriage). Muñoz describes how the disidentificatory subject "tactically and simultaneously works one, with, and against, a cultural form" as a method of rebellious survival.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the Trilogy participates and challenges cultural norms by inserting a queer marriage into a Shakespearean work performed by prisoners.

The second part of Act IV diverges from the wedding ceremony and moves inward by crafting a silent space for reflection. Following their dance, Ferdinand then picks up Miranda, embraces her lovingly, and turns to see Prospero bringing out balloons as the music fades into an airy background:

Ferdinand: This is a most majestic vision, and
Harmonious charmingly. May I be bold
To think these spirits? (*pointing to the balloons*)
Prospero: Spirits, (*gestures to balloons*) which by mine art
I have from their confines called to enact
My present fancies.
Ferdinand: Let me live here ever.
Such a rare wondered father and a wife
Makes this place paradise.
Miranda: Sweet now, silence (*hushes him to have him look up at the sky*).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. Edited by Phyllida Lloyd.

Massive balloons float above the women prisoners. The lights dim down as projections appear on the balloons. Images of the ocean, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and the English countryside overtake the floating orbs as others watch on. Swiftly the images transform into jet skis, large boats, sports cars, and motorcycles. The women murmur in excitement at these images. From the vehicles come images of H&M, Nikes, and other mainstream and coveted brands. Finally, the projections end with the golden arches of McDonald's, to which there is great fanfare as the arches transform into the shape of an expensive Rolex – the women are frenzied with excitement. From the middle of the crowd, we hear from Hannah/Prospero, “Oh, stop this crap! Come on!” The lights flicker on – overhead lighting, exposing the playing space and the audience in the same cold fluorescent lighting. Hannah/Prospero begins to pop the massive balloons, one by one, as they whither down to the ground while she weeps. For a brief moment, she turns to Ferdinand's character – it is unclear if this is the life of the prison or the world of the play – and looks around painfully before saying as Prospero, “You do look, my son, in a moved sort as if you were dismayed.”¹⁵⁹ As Prospero finishes popping the balloons, he stands still, hands to his heart, as he weeps, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on ... our little life.”¹⁶⁰ The stark contrast between the vivid joy of marriage, love, and dreams with the harsh, violent glare of prison captivity destabilizes the performance's linearity. Not only does the prison itself interrupt (through buzzers, the arrival of guards, or threats of drug testing), but the prisoners themselves facilitate such interruption when the realities of their world speak too strongly to the realities of *The Tempest* world.

¹⁵⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.136-37.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. IV.i.146-47.

The inclusion of the mimetic tools or even mimesis, in general, opens up the space for how to read Harriet Walter's performance in the liminal space between Hannah and Prospero. Harold Niels in *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance: Repentance Rituals and the Early Modern* cites Shakespeare's use of "mimetic tools," including internal/reflective verse, varieties of speech, and the "improvisational nature of Shakespeare's scenic constructions" to create complex characters connected to the real world.¹⁶¹ Following the wedding ceremony, the audience witnesses the crumbling of a woman at the sight of exclamations of joy by her fellow prisoners. Hannah/Prospero exhaustedly cries that what they have just seen – the images of nature, luxurious lifestyles, and simple pleasures are just that – images. Hannah/Prospero steps in to remind them that the harsh reality of prison has but momentarily vanished, and none of this, perhaps not even the wedding, was real. Of course, these are the lines, relatively in order of this scene in the actual *Tempest*. Hannah has not gone "off-script" except for the exclamation of "Oh, stop this crap! Come on!" as the balloons she set up excite the women. This exclamation offers a crack into *The Tempest*'s performance and, more importantly, a strong characterization of real-life prison trauma as Hannah realizes the futility of these dreams due to her life-long sentence. Harriet, as Hannah, repeats the frustration and trauma that she learned in the rehearsal process of the Trilogy from incarcerated women.

On Folger Library's *Shakespeare Unlimited*, Phyllida Lloyd discussed the rehearsal process in detail. She described how every part of the wedding scene and the balloon scene came from the women at HMS Askham Grange and Royal Holloway:

We looked at ritual in prison. How do you celebrate when you don't have anything? So, the wedding between Ferdinand and Miranda, which is accompanied by a masque, really did become a wedding prison. And we looked at what you could get in prison and what

¹⁶¹ Neils Herold, *Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance: Repentance Rituals and the Early Modern* (New York City: Palgrave Pivot, 2014): 50.

you would dream of having if you couldn't have anything. [...] And you could see the bride and groom in a state of ecstasy that they'd gotten cappuccinos because they couldn't really afford it more than once a year. So, everything became heightened in its detail.¹⁶²

Lloyd's open discussion of prison life and portraying it through the eyes of those who have experienced it or are experiencing it overtakes her discussion of Shakespeare in this portion of the interview. The clarity of the wedding being a prison wedding further highlights the significance of the disidentificatory ritual. The images of nature and cars came from conversations with women who openly spoke of what they dream of while incarcerated. Thus, the audience bears witness to prisoners' actual dreams, forcing the inside/outside divide to crumble in on itself. In other words, through this scene, the audience witnesses the dreams of the incarcerated, not the dreams of Shakespeare's characters, and by doing so, reasserts the key focus on making visible and accessible the costs of incarceration. The swift popping of the balloons broke such a connection with the audience, "looking absolutely horrified, like, 'What is she doing?'"¹⁶³

In the text of *The Tempest*, Prospero ends the masque through his recollection of Caliban's plans to kill him. Prospero's swift remembering interrupts the performance of the masque and startles Ferdinand and Miranda. Following the masque's ending, he then reflects on the swiftness from new life (marriage) to death. Yet, in the Trilogy, the interruptions about Caliban are not present. Instead, we textually move from Miranda saying (initially Prospero's line) "Sweet now, be silent" to the dreams on the balloons to Hannah yelling and starting to pop the balloons to Prospero lamenting Ferdinand's confusion.¹⁶⁴ Prospero's despair, therefore, changes from vain concern about Caliban to sorrow over the futility of dreams. This rewriting through omission

¹⁶² Bogaev, "Phyllida Lloyd."

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.59.

ultimately brings the prison structure to the forefront and reiterates the livelihood and struggle of incarceration.

The marriage scene in *The Tempest* illustrates how the Trilogy rethinks the norms embedded in the text and commercially produced Shakespeare to forefront incarceration. I contend that unsettling pre-established norms create multiple forms of watching. This opening of various layers of identity and connection occurs in the space of performance and appears within the real world. From this, the process of developing the production and educating the public about the Trilogy destabilizes the rigidity of the prison's separation from the outside world. Analyzing how contemporary gender-thwarting productions navigate gender norms, I observe how Shakespeare, as a cultural symbol of intellectualism, becomes a subversive tool to make the prison's apparent violence. The Trilogy uses the stage as a platform for reform from the rehearsal process to production to post-production.

Since its completion, the Trilogy has come to be known as Donmar's Shakespeare Trilogy. Not "Female Prisoner's Shakespeare Trilogy" or "Shakespeare, Women, and Incarceration Trilogy" or some other combination of these ideas. What remains is Shakespeare; what is made visible is Shakespeare. However, the focus, the fundamental methods, and interventions of the Trilogy are the performance of female incarceration. Soyini Madison's work on the intersection of theory and performance attempts to work through society's relationship with performance - as a word, an action, a product, and a theory. She elicits the question as to who owns performance, who uses performance, and how? Shakespeare appears to "own" the performance, as the performance builds from his work, and who "uses" it crosses between professional actors, a reputable British stage, and the incarcerated women who made the production by sharing their experiences. The

structure of female prisoners shifting between their own experiences and playing Shakespeare makes the Trilogy not Shakespeare's but the performed incarcerated women's.

How to forefront the importance of incarceration without neglecting Shakespeare or how to build on Shakespeare without using the prison context as a mere staging technique became the focus of the Trilogy's dramaturgs and educational outreach members. The performance of incarceration outside of prisons can result in a more robust engagement with incarceration, mainly through materials of the Trilogy that withstand the performances' ends. This work aids in reconceptualizing or deconstructing old forms of knowledge about prisons and builds new awareness in the outside population. Jo Robinson and Clare Cochrane in *Theatre History and Historiography* ask, "if, at the historical moment of performance, the product was deemed to be ineffective or unsuccessful, why did that happen" and how did the passing of time alter a new reception to that performance?¹⁶⁵ This question ignites the historiographical reading of the reach of the Donmar Trilogy and how in nearly a decade, this production seismically reconceptualized the prison theatre practice and navigated a liminal space between the commercial stage and the on-the-ground work with incarcerated women.

Dramaturgy and educational outreach developed alongside the Trilogy. Following the closing of *Julius Caesar*, Phyllida Lloyd began work on *Henry IV* and then *The Tempest*. Throughout the years of these productions and the BBC filming of them, the Donmar's Education Team meticulously built a wide-reaching website, the "Shakespeare Trilogy on Screen" website, dedicated to teaching the Trilogy in schools and colleges in the United Kingdom. The site is free and open to all students and instructors in the UK upon registration with an access code. When

¹⁶⁵ Jo Robinson and Clare Cochrane, *Theatre History and Historiography: Ethics, Evidence, and Truth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 8.

entering the site, the trailer for the Trilogy immediately plays. Beneath the video lies six interactive boxes: “Origins of the Trilogy,” “Prison Context,” “Director’s Process,” “*Julius Caesar*,” “*Henry IV*,” and “*The Tempest*.” Clicking on the “Origins of the Trilogy” box takes the reader to a new page filled with videos describing how the Trilogy came to be, how all-female casting works in the production, the four years of the production of the three plays, and a spotlight on Harriet Walter. By selecting these four components, origins, casting, timeline, and lead actor, the Trilogy website forefronts what it deems to be important in understanding the complexity and the wide reach of these productions. The documentation of the Trilogy offers a window into how the arts can portray the complexities of the carceral system. Pulling from cultural materialism, we can expose the ways in which the audience reads, through the dramaturgical website, the lasting impact of the Trilogy following its final performance.

The creation of the Trilogy stemmed from an unequally gendered English stage and ended with a collection of shows that brought female incarceration to the forefront of the arts scene. Raymond Williams’s reading of culture and society as expressed in “the habitual past tense” restructures our relationship to significant cultural constructions. To see culture as complete is seeing it “habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions, and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes.”¹⁶⁶ Therefore, Williams believes we comprehend culture, works of art as fully formed. To disrupt culture as fully formed and complete, Williams destabilizes worldviews by evoking feeling and centers the active reading of experience as continuously forming. He defines feeling as distinctly separate from an institutionalized, systemic ideology, a definition purposefully abstract, pervasive,

¹⁶⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 132.

and nuanced. Feeling necessitates the expansiveness of the continual formation of culture and art alongside individual experience: “we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal beliefs.”¹⁶⁷ By restructuring the epistemological process to include multiple and contradictory threads simultaneously, subversive theatre performances can lead toward new types of theatrical possibility by defying past historical staging and integrating multidimensional spaces on stage. The ideas within one institution (like the stage) can reimagine the function of another institution (like the prison). The power of the artistic practice can inform and present alternative understandings of social norms and present new epistemologies to break apart from old institutions.

For example, Artistic Director Anna Herrmann of Clean Break cites the Trilogy for expanding the reach of Clean Break and inciting much more interest in their work after being exposed to the Donmar productions due to the employment of two Clean Break actors in the Trilogy.¹⁶⁸ The Trilogy was a part of a moment in which it was just one of many cultural pieces that increased attention towards those impacted by the carceral state. As *Julius Caesar* toured both in London and at St. Ann’s Warehouse in New York, other theatre reviews and critical discussions about the arts and imprisonment grew. Many prison theatre companies added workshops or additional groups to address the need of the recently released population around the same time *Henry IV* and *The Tempest* were in rehearsals.¹⁶⁹ I am not implying that the Trilogy caused this growth or directly influenced these groups, but rather that across the US and UK, discussions of incarceration, abolition, and the arts moved to the forefront of cultural discussion across these fields. Looking at these processes, at how the Trilogy traveled multiple times from the UK to the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶⁸ Anna Herrmann, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, July 3, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Based off of organizational updates by the groups listed in footnote 52.

US as well as traveling to female prisons shows the time invested in growing the conversation and reaching large audiences.

2.5 Conclusion: Looking Back to Move Forward

Despite the Trilogy's many successes, the reliance on Shakespeare to bring cultural capital to incarcerated populations upholds the hierarchy of Shakespeare as a tool of the elite. Yet imprisoned people's reclamation of Shakespeare occurs through their self-identification with characters, physically performing and speaking the language, and escaping into a world outside of the prison. Shakespeare enters the prison space and becomes a moldable work by drawing on drama therapy and building confidence – but this entrance into prisons does not erase the centuries of Shakespeare as a tool of cultural erasure, upholding of White Western ideologies, and continued wielding of elitism in the outside world. The Trilogy made visible the issues of incarceration. It highlighted extenuating circumstances that led to the imprisonment of the women (domestic abuse, drug addiction, poverty, mental illness). Yet, due to the confines of its role as a professional production, it did not actively alter the lives of those incarcerated but showed what those lives are like.

In Todd Landon Barnes's monograph, *Shakespearean Charity and the Perils of Redemptive Performance*, the world of applied theatre supports the neoliberal agenda of temporarily helping the "less-fortunate" before moving on to the next endeavor. Barnes questions how scholars and instructors position Shakespeare as "a gift" and how this positioning upholds Shakespeare in culturally elite circles that become the White Christian Shakespeare Complex's

philanthropic tool.¹⁷⁰ This complex “interpolates marginalized youth into a particularly neoliberal, patriarchal, and puritanical view of capitalism.”¹⁷¹ When specifically examined in terms of Shakespeare for marginalized audiences, the works facilitate neoliberal ideals by positing Shakespeare’s works as rehabilitative and “a way out” for poor students. While Barnes explicitly examines how documentaries on Shakespeare (especially in schools) position these texts within the White Christian Shakespeare Complex and attempts to show how through Shakespeare these students have “bettered” themselves, the key concept of Shakespeare as “a way out” nevertheless resonates in the Trilogy as well.

The productions continue to perform Shakespeare as culturally significant through its place on a well-known British stage, the employment of an award-winning director to run the Trilogy, and the play’s reliance on its leading figure: Dame Harriet Walter. Thwarting the professional production of Shakespeare, however, are the ways in which Shakespeare was used as a vehicle for multiple forms of societal address. The Trilogy used Shakespeare as a vehicle and as a way through the trials and tribulations of prison. It readily made domestic violence, lengthy sentences, and drug addiction issues apparent, but it does not actively change their causes nor highlight how these women will re-enter society. The Trilogy makes apparent these issues through the rehearsal process with incarcerated women, the performance of the structure of prison and subsequent relationships with queerness, and the development of prison characters enmeshed with Shakespeare’s characters to expose the literal material impact of incarceration as viewed through three institutions (prisons, stages, and Shakespeare).

¹⁷⁰ Todd Landon Barnes, *Shakespearean Charity and the Perils of Redemptive Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 5.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

In an interview with Rowan Mackenzie, the role of using Shakespeare's text in prison theatre reflected the difficulty of finding "the right words" to communicate experience. Because of her work as a practitioner in prison Shakespeare in the U.K., I asked the elusive question, "but why Shakespeare?" Mackenzie responded by highlighting the belief that giving a text with enormous cultural capital and may also reflect incarcerated people's experiences helps these individuals connect with aspects of themselves.¹⁷² Essentially, these individuals can resituate their identity outside of the prisoner by using a text that is deemed "worthy" by society and by relating to it. The Trilogy emphasizes this connection through Phyllida Lloyd and Harriet Walter's multiple interviews, speeches, and podcasts on the building of the production and how the women of Holloway prison resonated with the three plays. Furthermore, following the run of each show at the Donmar, the production then traveled to local women's prisons, who, according to these interviews, additionally saw themselves in the production. Yet I wonder if the connection found by the incarcerated women when watching these productions in prison resonated more with the fact that their livelihoods and situations were being reflected to them by the framework of the Trilogy rather than specifically Shakespeare's text. How might the use of Suzan Lori-Parks or Jeremy O. Harris, or even the often-cited Tennessee Williams's prison play *Not About Nightingales* also make the connections of identity and similarity?

The dramaturgy work of the Trilogy essentially reads as though this production was completely built, rehearsed, and developed by theatre practitioners. The acknowledgment of the incarcerated women who informed some of the jokes or interpretations of the lines is completely absent from this material. Each of the three shows explores key themes found in the texts that are additionally applicable to imprisonment. With *Julius Caesar*, the key focuses are rhetoric, gender,

¹⁷² Rowan Mackenzie, interviewed by Courtney Colligan.

physicality, and power and politics.¹⁷³ The following two shows are even more specific in the direct connections from plot to prison. The *Henry IV* page shows healthy relationships, addiction, identity, and borders and nationhood.¹⁷⁴ *The Tempest* culminates with the island metaphor, forgiveness, magic, and dreams.¹⁷⁵ The education department at the Donmar crafted lesson plans to work through the connections between the plays and imprisonment. Considering the widespread access to these materials in UK schools, the teaching of Shakespeare could also go together with learning about the prison industrial complex by using the Trilogy’s materials. However, the neat fusing of the production’s structure with the play emphasizes the practical theatrical work that made the Trilogy happen. Only through interviews and extra material outside of the website and the films of the production itself do the women who gave their insight appear. The absence of discussion about the rehearsal process and direct engagement, which clearly informed much of the final productions of the three plays, raises questions about the agency of these women prisoners and the spotlight on the celebrity and an “all-female Shakespeare” label. The complexities of the successes and limitations of the Trilogy showcase how the productions are transitional between prison theatre and postcarceral performance. The lengthy work of the Trilogy, and the fact that the “pot is still bubbling” regarding the cast members making another show, speaks to a continued engagement with the female incarcerated population.¹⁷⁶ Understanding how artistic institutions worked with those involved in the criminal justice system and how this work can be transmitted to the public informs the foundation of postcarceral performance’s future possibilities.

¹⁷³ “Julius Caesar,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2018, <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/julius-caesar/#/>.

¹⁷⁴ “Henry IV,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2018, <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/henry-iv/#/>.

¹⁷⁵ “The Tempest,” Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, 2018, <https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/the-tempest/#/>.

¹⁷⁶ Leah Harvey, interviewed by Courtney Colligan.

Artistic practice centering the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated peoples can help actualize abolition goals. The Trilogy made visible imprisonment through an indirect method of employing professional actors to embody the experiences of incarcerated women who in turn perform Shakespeare. The Trilogy did not actively center women touched by the carceral state but illuminated the social norms that cross between prison, university, and stage. It gestured towards social activism through visibility and using a widespread platform to portray marginalized populations but featured celebrity and cultural capital over direct action due to its work on a commercial stage. What I call postcarceral performance involves the organizational practice of employing those impacted by the carceral state who participate in artistic events as a means of employment, therapy, or similar forms of self-determination. This practice consists of three core components: time, praxis, and public space. In the chapters that follow, I will explore this practice and how it navigates the limitations that the Trilogy, being a transition between prison theatre and postcarceral performance, could not.

3.0 Modeling Hope: Clean Break's Performance of the Carceral State and Beyond

*I didn't think it would happen. I thought. If I Applied then I'm doing my best by This baby. But that I wouldn't get in. And then nothing would be different for my other ones. The ones at. At. Home. So I'm just. I'm just Processing what that. What I can Do about. About that.*¹⁷⁷

Wrestling with guilt and incarceration, the above quote from an unnamed character in *[Blank]* reflects incarceration's breaking apart of families. Theatre company Clean Break's recent partnership with the Donmar Warehouse produced *[Blank]* by commissioned playwright Alice Birch. The script consists of one hundred scenes, all with unnamed characters and rapid dialogue. In this scene, a pregnant inmate reflects on being sent to another prison which would allow her to keep her baby with her for the first 18 months.¹⁷⁸ She worries about moving to a new prison located even further from her other children at home. She questions her role as a mother spanning two separate geographic locations: the immediate space between her and her unborn baby and the space between her incarcerated self and her older children outside of town. To move prisons would allow early connection and care with her unborn child yet it would disallow substantive visits with her children who've witnessed their mother's incarcerated state. The unnamed parole board representative remains unsympathetic: "This is something that was discussed when you Applied [...] So it's not an entirely new thought."¹⁷⁹ The mother questions how to gauge which months are

¹⁷⁷ Alice Birch, "Application" in *[Blank]*, (London: Oberon Books, 2019), Kindle.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

more vital: “they’re All vital though. Aren’t they? All the days, weeks, months. They’re all vital. There are no recommended ones to miss.”¹⁸⁰ Reverberating beneath the clear plot points of a difficult choice made by a mother are the questions of time. Time ordered by the state, time the body takes to create a new life, time for babies to become children, and time for children to comprehend their mother’s “choice.” The performance of these multiple questions illuminates the reverberations of incarceration beyond the incarcerated individual and offer a space for those involved in the performance to reflect and process their own experiences in prison.

“Strong but dispiriting” claims one headline’s review of the production, reflecting on how the production favors “form” over “content.”¹⁸¹ I cite the critic’s review to highlight the cultural expectations of what prisons look like, how prisons perform, and how society views and treats prisoners. To the critic, this piece of theatre should revel in the complexities of the choice, perhaps to further perform the suffering of the mother’s decision for the audience. However, such a review neglects the point of the piece and the work of *Clean Break*. These works are not to satiate an audience’s desire to witness suffering or trauma. They do not follow the heightened drama of a Tennessee Williams play on the plight of the incarcerated or a *Law and Order: SVU* episode’s rapid succession of events. Instead, the type of theatre that *Clean Break* creates directly centers the experience and development of women touched by the criminal justice system. The decision to artistically emulate their experiences was, arguably, through the form, a collaborative process with the playwright. It is this gap between the expectation of the commercial audience member and critic and the methods behind applied theatre work in and around prisons that *Clean Break* and similar companies attempt to fill.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Aleks Sierz, “[*Blank*], Donmar Warehouse Review - Strong but Dispiriting,” *The Arts Desk*, October 18, 2019, <https://theartsdesk.com/node/84078/view>.

The work of Clean Break centers women's experiences rather than the audience expectation of said experience. My second chapter maps out the history and reorganization of Clean Break, a UK company that works exclusively with formerly incarcerated women and women still in prison.¹⁸² I assert how Clean Break's longevity and flexibility reflects the shifting needs of women post-incarceration. Drawing on Miranda Joseph's theorization of community, I analyze and trace Clean Break's longevity through its relationship with the nonprofit label and work with/for/through the community.¹⁸³ My discussion of Clean Break's new model (2019-) relies heavily on an interview with Anna Herrmann as most scholarship on the company was published during their older model. The 2019 reorganization of Clean Break uses the integration of professional artistic practice, educational drama, and amateur performance to give formerly incarcerated women greater influence on the work devised and produced.¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, how Clean Break dealt with COVID-19 and their online presence shapes their new model in forwarding amateur performance. I argue that through amateur performance, the women in Clean Break build towards utopias by rendering visible the hidden nature of incarceration as well as highlighting the specific complexities that women face in the judicial system. This work exemplifies one tenant of postcarceral performance: praxis. Praxis is central to

¹⁸² Incarceration does not solely include the criminal justice system but also drug and alcohol programs and other forms of detainment that result in social stigma.

¹⁸³ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁸⁴ At the same time I was reflecting on the connections I saw between arts advocacy groups, social justice, and the formerly incarcerated population, similar discussions were happening (unbeknownst to me) by women criminal justice, sociologist, and performance scholars in the United Kingdom. *Women/Theatre/Justice* is a research-based and publicly available project that examines the longevity and impact of Clean Break that is a component of a larger academic project titled *Clean Break: Women, Theatre, Organisation, and the Criminal Justice System (2019-2021)*. According to the project's website, "this interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project is led by academics in theatre and performance studies and work and employment relations, in partnership with Clean Break theatre company." Their goals are to examine issues including "the criminalization of women; theatre practices with incarcerated women in different cultural contexts; gender organization and leadership; the role of higher education in partnerships within the criminal justice system. "Women Theatre Justice: Performing, Organizing, Working," *Women, Theatre, Justice* (Queen Mary University of London, 2021), <https://womentheatrejustice.org/>.

postcarceral performance because of its continual work of both exposing the effects of the prison system and creating awareness of how the prison system functions. Such exposure attempts to either alter the system or prevent the societal circumstances that lead to higher likelihoods of incarceration. Within this praxis, for Clean Break at least, is the use of theatrical practice to convey British women's experiences of the carceral state more concretely. Clean Break informs society about carceral natures through their productions and community-centered praxis. This performance practice additionally serves as a method of processing trauma and gaining confidence in one's voice as a complete person, rather than a number in a large, violent system.

The paradox of building a utopia by performing, essentially a dystopia, shows incarceration's effects and aftereffects. By processing the experiences of the state, performance centers historically marginalized communities at the forefront and creates space to imagine worlds beyond the carceral state. As such, Clean Break is a type of postcarceral performance partly through their direct engagement with both incarcerated and recently released community members and by creating and producing theatre through the lens of those who experienced detention. Furthermore, Clean Break spends substantive amounts of time with those on both sides of incarceration and through their workshops and productions build a foundation for women to not only re-enter society but also navigate the societal issues that led to their incarceration. Having an organization that dedicates its time in months rather than days cultivates a space for women to process and heal. After discussing the history of Clean Break against the prison policies of the 1980s and 90s, I critically investigate a program from a 1992 production. Initially stored in the limited Clean Break archive at the Victoria and Albert, I situate the 1992 program for *Head-Rot Holiday* as exemplary of Clean Break's work between professional theatre spaces and community-based nonprofits/charities. Then, I survey the case studies of two types of newer Clean Break

productions: a short film and an eBook/film. Using José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of educated hope and queer utopias, I assert that as a type of postcarceral performance rooted in the artistic practice of amateurism, Clean Break's new model utilizes theatrical praxis for self-actualization, informed by Alison Reed's concept of traumatic utopias.

3.1 A History of Clean Break: Re-Imagining "Prison Theatre"

In 1979, Jenny Hicks and Jacqueline Holborough founded Clean Break while incarcerated at HMP Askham Grange. The two had originally met two years earlier in a maximum-security unit at Durham. According to Holborough "we experienced prison in a very stark way - this was a small unit [at Durham] that had previously been closed down for men as inhumane."¹⁸⁵ They attempted to produce *The Trojan Women* at Durham, but it was quickly shut down. In contrast to Durham's isolated spaces, Askham Grange functions as an open prison and their reunion there in 1979 became the space where they were able to share their stories and build a theatre company to serve incarcerated women and educate the general public about female incarceration. When recounting her time at Askham Grange, Holborough noted the possibility of making an all-female theatre company because of the prison's governor: "Susan McCormick studied philosophy at Oxford before a postgrad in criminology. She had been the youngest prison governor when she began her career. She loved theatre [and was] willing to go out on a limb to help us achieve our goals."¹⁸⁶ At this time in the early 1980s, the incarcerated women of Clean Break began touring the country,

¹⁸⁵ Jacki Holborough and Ray Malone, "Clean Break," *Unfinished Histories*, November 2013, <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/clean-break/>.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with *Killers* by Holborough and *In or Out*, a devised piece.¹⁸⁷

Yet the publicity surrounding this tour by incarcerated women remains murky with the exception of the Home Office allowing the women to perform outside of prison as long as they did not “advertise themselves as serving prisons.”¹⁸⁸ Due to their support at Askham Grange and their first tours of *Killers* and *In or Out* in 1980-81, Hicks and Holborough set out to make Clean Break a proper theatre company outside of prison. Clean Break’s past and present goal of empowering women has its origins in helping women achieve agency over their stories and experiences, despite the prevalent prison practice of silencing voices. However, the early years of Clean Break versus the later decades reveal a chasm between the amount of focus and visibility on ex-offenders and the theatrical production.

Following Hicks and Holborough’s release, Clean Break continued as both a touring company and a workshop for women ex-offenders.¹⁸⁹ The group’s workshops also took place in prison where they led trainings for prison staff and began assisting young offenders for release. Located in Oval House, Clean Break worked “both as a support group and as a means of developing skills and discovering a voice for themselves through theatre.”¹⁹⁰ The productions reached wider audiences but also became a space for women to process their experiences and inform the public about the violence of incarceration. Oval House, an off-West End theatre, served historically marginalized groups for much of the latter part of the twentieth century. Producing works by LGBTQ, Black, and Asian artists, Oval House met Clean Break’s vision for a more just

¹⁸⁷ “Gallery: Clean Break Archive,” *Bishopsgate Institute*, (Bishopsgate Foundation, October 22, 2020), <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/stories/gallery-clean-break-archive>.

¹⁸⁸ Holborough and Malone, “Clean Break,” *Unfinished Histories*.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

and equitable society made possible through theatre.¹⁹¹ Due to Oval House's history, audiences attending Clean Break's productions were likely far more open-minded about incarceration and stigma than if Clean Break performed at the Old Vic.

From 1979 to 1987, formerly incarcerated women made and produced all work. These productions featured new work and open audience discussion about the criminal justice system and by doing so, engaged in what I see as the founding of postcarceral performance. The group shifted from self-financed while behind bars to relying on ticket sales and charity grants: "having been turned down twice by the Arts Council, because they were told they wouldn't last, they finally received in 1986, their first public tour grant."¹⁹² The early denial of funding led to a tenacity of the organization that relied on the strength of the founders and participants to craft an organization that helped those involved begin healing from past traumas. Part of postcarceral performance includes the use of performance practices to identify and heal from experiences that may have contributed to incarceration. Yet another component of this praxis exposes, critiques, and renders visible the injustices of the carceral system and subsequent institutions that contribute to carcerality. Clean Break developed a collective that created performances that additionally involved discussion with audiences about incarceration, Both Jenny Hicks and Jacki Holborough wrote and directed before Holborough left to become the writer-in-residence at the Bush Theatre. This era, spanning thirteen productions, saw the strongest focus on women who directly experienced incarceration before developing into a broader theatre company with more professional goals.¹⁹³ Although this era informs the building of postcarceral performance, how

¹⁹¹ Oval House was rebranded as Ovalhouse before it closed in 2020. The theatre then moved to Brixton and is now known as Brixton House.

¹⁹² Holborough and Malone, "Clean Break," *Unfinished Histories*.

¹⁹³ Clean Break established itself as a charity in the 1980s, receiving public subsidies.

Clean Break has since grown in reach and access informs my focus on contemporary postcarceral performance in the digital age. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the use of technological access contributing to the efficacy of postcarceral performance in actively working against incarceration.

From 1987 to 2018, Clean Break reorganized itself and the funding models dramatically shifted. The political shift in funding and support for incarcerated and post-incarcerated peoples in making their own art informs Clean Break's significant change as an organization from being one primarily led by and for incarcerated/post-incarcerated women to one run by theatre professionals. Clean Break Members are the women who have experienced detention while professional actors with the company typically do not use that title. The late 1980s and early 90s saw a rise in prison theatre projects. Yet notably, many arts groups lost significant amounts of funding in the latter part 1990s, while mass incarceration was on the rise. Prison theatre scholar James Thompson regarded the loss of funding as an example of the U.K.'s shift towards "a no-frills policy in corrections."¹⁹⁴ According to James Pensalfini, at the same time "there were over 30 theatre companies providing training and productions for inmates with a variety of artistic, therapeutic and vocational goals" operating in the UK. Pensalfini, pulling from Joe White in *Prison Theatre*, notes that while productions continued traveling to prisons, the opportunities for incarcerated people to partake in the building and performing of theatre became increasingly small.¹⁹⁵ The U.K. government subsidizes Clean Break, through grants which they have to apply for, but does not actively address the problems Clean Break attempts to work through such as the prison industrial complex for women. At the same time, Clean Break relies on, as do many applied theatre projects, quantitative data of showing "meaningful change" typically valued through

¹⁹⁴ Pensalfini, *Prison Theatre*, 18.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

decreasing recidivism rates when applying for funding. Yet the work Clean Break produced during this era relied on the use of professional artists and influence of patrons, particularly celebrities that bring both financial and cultural capital to the country, which therefore enhanced how Clean Break could financially function and expand.

The early years of Clean Break were entirely self-financed then following Holborough and Hicks's departure, the company received funding from the Greater London Council (GLC) and the Arts Council. Due to the dramatic change in funding, Clean Break adapted a model highlighting professional actors in order to produce shows that could compete with other big-name theatres.

Caoimhe McAvinchey notes how:

During the 1980s, the availability of government funding for the arts was increasingly conditional on organizations demonstrating hierarchical management structures that reflected more traditional business models, and the collective identity of Clean Break was necessarily expanded to include artists and arts professionals who shared a commitment to the mission of the company, rather than the shared lived experience.¹⁹⁶

The visible, public-facing work at this time was performed by professional actors using the histories and experiences of incarcerated women to educate audiences about the criminal justice system. Clean Break additionally moved to professional writers, usually selected by the company and who would receive the title writer-in-residence, which furthered the group's focus, at least to the public eye, on the aesthetic production rather than the rehabilitative components. The reorganization, as a partial result of changing funding, featured three main areas: outreach programs in prisons, theatre education and training for recently released women, and a professional writing/production company.

¹⁹⁶ Caoimhe McAvinchey, "Clean Break: A Practical Politics of Care," in *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*, ed. Amanda Stuart Fisher and James Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020): 124.

To date, all artistic directors of Clean Break since 1987 have been women who have not experienced incarceration and the artistic directors of the company usually stay in their role for many years. This is not to say that to lead a company for women touched by the criminal justice system, one must have experienced it directly. However, the hierarchy of leaders without carceral experience and the hiring of professional practitioners to perform incarceration illuminate the relationship between receiving funding and producing shows to draw in audiences. In other words, Clean Break adapted to continue competing for funding (once the group was no longer self-financed) and to produce larger-scale shows. Incarcerated women became less of the center of the company and instead served as inspiration and material to produce shows. At play in this shift are the complexities of ownership, visibility, funding, and continuation of companies working in the criminal justice system and how Clean Break has single-handedly remained the longest running program of its kind in the United Kingdom and the implications of this legacy.

Incarcerated women have largely remained the focus of Clean Break's artistic work since its founding, but the methods in which this population becomes the focal point have shifted.¹⁹⁷ From 1987 to 2018, professional aesthetic performance served as the primary method of Clean Break's productions, sometimes in direct contradiction to the company's values of producing "high quality, original theatre which provides a powerful and unique voice *for women ex-prisoners and ex-offenders.*"¹⁹⁸ Under Lucy Perman's leadership from 1997 to 2018, Clean Break broadened the use of commissioned professional playwrights "to explore women's experiences of crime and

¹⁹⁷ "Clean Break's women-only identity is crucial to our rationale. The treatment of women by the criminal justice system is one of the clearest demonstrations that our society is still unequal and that women are judged by different standards to men. Our vision is of a society where women are neither unjustly criminalised nor unnecessarily imprisoned, and we believe that theatre enables women to challenge their oppression by society in general and by the criminal justice system in particular." "About Us," Clean Break, 2021, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/about/>.

¹⁹⁸ The stated goals of Clean Break during the early 1990s. *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992), Blythe House Archive: Theatre & Performance Collection, GC/TMC General Collection: Theatre & Performance Corporate Files, Victoria & Albert Archives.

criminal justice, and [were] mostly developed following intensive residencies in prison, in which the playwright used creative writing to stimulate debate, discussion and artistic materials from the prisoners.”¹⁹⁹ The production of “good” theatre, one that relies on professionally trained actors, typically earn more ticket sales. This distancing effect, of having professional actors *play* carceral situations, I believe, made some of the pieces more emotionally manageable for audiences yet it came at the expense of centering the actual incarcerated women.

Separate from these commissioned plays was the education training program which exclusively worked with recently released women in developing educational and professional skills to renegotiate their place in society. Some of the trainings with ex-offenders included education classes to prepare these women for higher education while others focused on volunteer opportunities and employment. These trainings were specifically designed to “develop skills, confidence, and creative expression.”²⁰⁰

Though ambiguous in description and execution, the educational programs and the prison programs covered similar information and rehabilitation in different settings, yet according to Herrmann in “*Inside Bitch: Clean Break and the Ethics of Representation of Women in the Criminal Justice System*,” the prison programs also served as a space for the commissioned playwrights to work with incarcerated women. Due to the group’s work about prison and with prisoners, scholars have categorized Clean Break as “prison theatre.” Though most writings on the

¹⁹⁹ Aylwyn Walsh, “Staging Women in Prisons: Clean Break Theatre Company’s Dramaturgy of the Cage,” *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 12, no. 3 (December 21, 2016): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659015613675>.

²⁰⁰ Anna Herrmann, “*Inside Bitch: Clean Break and The Ethics of Representation of Women in the Criminal Justice System*,” in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, ed. Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2020): 17.

company acknowledge the group's work outside of prison walls, their association with the criminal justice system contributes to critics lumping the group in with prison theatre.

In her introduction to *Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System*, Caoimhe McAvinchey acknowledges the broad spectrum of what scholars and practitioners consider “prison theatre.” When discussing theatre practice with those at risk and those who have served time, McAvinchey concludes that “this spectrum of practice is often collapsed within the term ‘prison theatre.’”²⁰¹ She then states that when she uses the term, “it reflects an accommodation of practices both within and beyond institutional walls.”²⁰² Later in the introduction, McAvinchey then provides a brief history of Clean Break. When examining *Applied Theatre's* index, countries are listed under “prison theatre.” The first United Kingdom company categorized as this is Clean Break. McAvinchey, along with James Thompson and Michael Balfour (who also edited this collection), lead the fields of prison theatre/applied theatre. Thus, her continued use of “prison theatre” in her edited collections and monographs which include Clean Break (whom she has frequently written about) reinvigorates the label and its applicability to the organization. However, Anna Herrmann distinctly avoids labeling Clean Break as “Prison Theatre.” Instead, she states that “much of our current work takes place with the women in the community.”²⁰³ This distinction on outside community separates Clean Break from conventional prison theatre groups which usually only serve the currently incarcerated. By attending to those who have been released, Clean Break supports a largely invisible population.

²⁰¹ Caoimhe McAvinchey, “Introduction,” in *Applied Theatre: Women and the Criminal Justice System*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020): 9.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Anna Herrmann, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, July 3, 2020.

Clean Break's attention to the released community situates their work as postcarceral performance rather than prison theatre. The company's work with professional performance further complicates its relationship between the space of applied and professional theatre. Cultivating a specific aesthetic in a production can increase the likelihood of an audience to attend a show. Casting celebrities, employing professionals, and performing some sort of social trauma sows seeds for critical attention and success. The correlation between performing social trauma, or the dramatization of trauma typically inflicted on minoritarian bodies, and award-winning productions speaks to a desire for "trauma porn." If applied theatre works with those who have experienced the trauma, professional theatre can capitalize on it. Clean Break edges the line with their old model by using professional aesthetic performance to portray issues of female incarceration but does not cross it due to the organization's dialogue with community members and activist focus. By 'professional aesthetic performance' in this chapter, I specifically mean theatrical productions focused on the dramatic form enacted by professional artists. I contrast this with amateur performance, which while working with an aesthetic theatrical form, does not involve or does not specifically center the professional theatre practitioner.²⁰⁴ Instead, amateur performance relies on continued process of play and of social relationality. Nicholas Ridout's reading of Nicolas Bourriaud articulates the notion of "relational aesthetics" – in which artists produce social relations rather than material objects."²⁰⁵ Ridout critiques Bourriaud's idea as

²⁰⁴ This definition features an amalgamation of Nicholas Ridout's definition of amateurs "those that fall outside or undermine theatre's status as a professional activity," Julie Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut's historicization "in the long history of the amateur's other, the professional," and Helen Nicholson et al. reading of the term referring to "to companies of people who make theatre in, with and for their local communities for love rather than money."

Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2015): 15. Helen Nicholson, Nadine Holdsworth, and Jane Milling, *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 5. Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut, "Amateurism," *Third Text* 34, no. 1 (2019): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1682812>.

²⁰⁵ Ridout, 13.

lacking ‘concrete politics’ and that the practice itself becomes ingrained in the capitalist practice of art as social commodity. However, I believe relational aesthetics, when applied to amateur performance with those touched by the criminal justice system, participate in a rebellious politic where relationships and sites of processing contribute to aesthetic production. In a system where relationships are decimated by the logics of incarceration, the building of relational aesthetics enacts defiance. Though both professional aesthetic performance and amateur performance move towards the tangible material production, amateur performance forwards past experiences and political engagement towards social change by performing.

Clean Break has been and continues to be in practice with the work of applied theatre which in and of itself relies on aesthetics.²⁰⁶ Where the lines blur between professional theatre and applied theatre, however, is through applied theatre’s direct involvement with a specific demographic or institution in order to engage in social change or transformation. From the public view of the company as implied in a 1992 program, Clean Break created a community for ‘women ex-prisoners and ex-offenders’ alongside professional artists. They state how “women with direct experience of imprisonment or the justice system are involved with the production at all stages” and “building on this input, the company recruits highly respected theatre professionals for its production team. *The combination produces a vibrant creative atmosphere.*”²⁰⁷ The reality of this combination between professional practitioners and women involved in the criminal justice system is somewhat murkier.

²⁰⁶ While the discussion of the role of aesthetics in applied theatre remains contentious, I am in dialogue with Dani Snyder-Young’s claim that “applied theatre is an aesthetic medium, and as a field, our over-reliance on bullshit impact evaluation has prevented us from developing our own tools for capturing and analyzing what Michael Balfour calls ‘the affect of aesthetics.’ If one ignores the aesthetic aspects of applied theatre, one might as well be doing popular education, community organizing, activism, or conflict negotiation without an artistic component.” Dani Snyder-Young, “No Bullshit: Rigor and Evaluation in Applied Theatre Projects,” in *Applied Theatre: Understanding Change*, ed. Michael Anderson et al. (Springer International Publishing, 2018): 93.

²⁰⁷ *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

With Clean Break's rise of prolific partnerships with some of the best-known theatres in the U.K. came the shifting focus of professional aesthetic theatre over drama therapy and rehabilitation. The rise of the professional actor and playwright to render visible female incarceration emphasizes Clean Break's expansion in the theatre world as they began partnering with larger theatre companies for co-produced productions. To date, Clean Break has partnered with National Theatre, Royal Court Theatre, Donmar Warehouse, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Almeida Theatre.²⁰⁸ These partnerships led by professional actors performed select issues of female incarceration, altering the attention of the company towards public awareness of female incarceration rather than the rehabilitation and education of women impacted by detention.

Essentially, much of the work at these famous theatres during Clean Break's old model embraced a similar structure to the companies they partnered with rather than embracing the origins of why and how Clean Break was founded. In Aylwyn Walsh's theoretically rich article, "Staging Women in Prisons: Clean Break Theatre Company's dramaturgy of the cage," Walsh critically examines the practice of using professional playwrights to represent female incarceration. She notes that "what is important here is that the artist, rather than the prisoner/participant is the author of the representation of the criminal justice system; *it is for this reason that the plays merit critical attention*" (emphasis my own).²⁰⁹ The argument for critical attention of these productions because of the *artist* rather than the "prisoner/participant" further erases the very population that Clean Break means to uplift.

The majority of scholarship on Clean Break focuses on the company's work with professional artists and discussions of realistic and nonrealistic theatre. The conversation

²⁰⁸ "Past Productions," Clean Break, 2022, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/productions/>.

²⁰⁹ Walsh, 311.

surrounding realistic vs. non-realistic theatre misses the key issue of centering and actively engaging with the women who have experienced the criminal justice system. Instead, my work argues that the conversations within Clean Break over the role of formerly incarcerated women in performance are not as final as the scholarship suggests. I cover the full history of the organization to highlight how the company's latest model more robustly engages with Clean Break's origins as well as its ability to adapt to the needs of women connected to the criminal justice system, of which the portrayal of these women remains a crucial part. The theatrical drawing of an incarcerated woman as either a victim or a monster (found in many performances of incarceration) reinscribes notions of resistance or deviance in a judicial system. Aylwyn Walsh proposes "that what is needed is more resistance to the gritty and fearful sites of conflict that loom large in the prison imagination" and instead yearns for dramaturgies that follow influences of the absurd or other non-realistic forms.²¹⁰ In doing so, Walsh claims, performances of women in prison require the complexities of performed representation. In other words, using non-realistic theatrical dramaturgies repositions the audience to witness how "operations of power are understood through representation."²¹¹ By following this path of nonrealistic performance, the history of Clean Break shows how the abstract has not only been used to resist the darkness of "the prison imagination" but also cultivates a space of play that dramatically escapes confinement.

The early productions of Clean Break were not confined to realistic performance. One of the company's first productions, *Goody Two Shoes*, took place as a pantomime. The 1978 newspaper clipping of *Goody Two Shoes* describes how the production features "a 40-strong cast plus Horace the Horse, lent by York Theatre Royal property department" and "the Vicar of the

²¹⁰ Walsh, 314.

²¹¹ Walsh, 313.

Askham and the prison chaplain, the Rev. Stephen Dale, is donning drag costume for a cabaret interlude.”²¹² Though limited in documentation and archival access, the photos of *Goody Two Shoes* illuminate a theatrical space that satirizes the ideal citizen and engages in classic pantomime tropes. Incarcerated women built and performed this production, rooted in older forms of theatrical styles, and did so through their own choice. Later newspaper clippings show the company’s more realistic productions in which the women used the theatrical space as an area to reflect, process, and move forward.

Non-realistic theatre has worked well for Clean Break in the past decade. Professional playwrights, like Alice Birch, have worked with both incarcerated women and ex-offenders to build engaging productions, some of which do stray from realistic theatre, and to educate the public on the systematic oppression of the criminal justice system.²¹³ For example within Clean Break’s old model, Alice Birch’s scene 56 “Write” in 2018’s *[Blank]* works to circumvent the notion of incarcerated people as “bad” and instead shows the ease of corruptibility and unchecked power in the hands of the police when writing a report:

B: I need you to just write down what happened [...] What you witnessed

A: What I witnessed [...]

B: Yes

A: When you sat on her

B: For protection

A: For your protection

B: For everyone’s protection

A: When you sat on her for everyone’s protection

B: For her safety

A: For Her safety

B: Yes

A: When you sat on her Neck for Her safety

B: For everyone’s safety

A: But for Her safety – that’s what you’re saying you want me to say

²¹² *Yorkshire Evening Post* in 1978 as posted on “Clean Break,” *Unfinished Histories*.

²¹³ Though *[Blank]* meets many of the conventional forms of realistic theatre, the absence of named characters and the vignette style of scene arrangements push it into a different theatrical form.

B: Is there water

A: That was for her protection and everyone's safety – you sitting on her neck

B: That was not – That was as a Direct result of her behaviour

A: You want me to write that you sat on her neck because of her behaviour

B: Because that's what happened²¹⁴

In fast-paced dialogue, the two officers verbally punch back and forth over how to describe the scene that just unfolded. Through the course of the scene the audience learns that Officer B has physically detained a woman under the influence of drugs and attempting to shoplift tampons, diapers, baby formula, and makeup, by sitting on her neck. Officer A repeats back the statements Officer B makes while slowly adding in some questioning of the event to no avail. Together the cops create a false report knowing that the written word of the police will always trump the spoken word of a stigmatized individual.

The scene and others like it were performed at the Donmar Warehouse in 2019 by professional actors. In interviews with the cast, the women involved talked about the brilliance of working with an all-female team and the importance of telling stories for the “voiceless.” However written in these scenes are shadows of women who do exist, who have had these experiences, and who do have a voice. As much of the scholarship examines the 1990-2018 era, critical discussion on the company focuses (whether purposefully or not) on the professional aesthetic practices of Clean Break and as Walsh points out in her reference to professional practice by the company, the professionalization is what merits scholarly attention. In one study of Clean Break's old model, I analyze the implications of the organization and provide groundwork to contrast with Clean Break as it is today.

A case study of Clean Break's old model reveals the implications of the organization's focus on professional aesthetics. When researching the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy at the

²¹⁴ Birch, [Blank].

Victoria and Albert Museum's Archives in summer 2019, I asked to see all files available on Clean Break. Though limited in number, the files captured a specific moment in time when the company's profile grew.²¹⁵ Most of the black and white documents consisted of programs, press releases and reviews, and a packet of services and workshops provided by Clean Break. The complete program for the 1992 production, *Head-Rot Holiday*, stood out in terms of scope, length, and inclusion of partnerships with other organizations.²¹⁶ The inclusion of the program in this limited archive initially informed my reading of the organization in the early 1990s as directly responding to and acting against injustices at the state level through partnerships with other similarly minded nonprofits. However, critically close reading a program from an early 1990s production and in dialogue with recent discussions of ethics and representation in applied theatre, I assert that the structure of the organization limited its own work in directly advocating for women in the criminal justice system and, at times, even worked directly against their interests. Clean Break in the 1990s enhanced celebrity image, sparked female playwrights and actors' profiles, and functioned as a hierarchical nonprofit by primarily monetarily and publicly privileging professional artists over women in the criminal justice system.²¹⁷ Yet at the same time, they produced and actively championed open discussion and reform of women prisoners' treatment.

²¹⁵ Notably, two years after this endeavor, Clean Break released its first ever public archive in the summer of 2021 at the Swiss Cottage Gallery.

²¹⁶ WISH – “Women in Special Hospitals and Secure Psychiatric Units.” *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992). WISH is a charity primarily made up of volunteers advocating for the rights of women in these institutions; included in the program is a chart defining the characteristics of “psychopathy” in men and women, as displayed in the 1987 monograph, *Justice Unbalanced*. The chart lists six traits of psychopathy found in men versus twelve found in women. While no direct context or explanation for the chart appears in the program, the overt imbalance of diagnosis (and how this diagnosis came to be defined) informs the reader of the medical and judicial context from which the play was written. Hilary Allen, *Justice Unbalanced: Gender, Psychiatry and Judicial Decisions* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

²¹⁷ I acknowledge the difficulties of shifting funding structures in the 1980s yet by 1995 Clean Break received funding from the Greater London Council and Arts Council England.

These tensions position aesthetic concerns and professional performance over amateur performance and by doing so, limited the support and activism against the carceral state.

3.1.1 “If I Wasn’t a Celebrity, Would You Still Want to [See This Show?]”²¹⁸: *Head-Rot Holiday*, Casting, and Professional Theatre

In 1993, the performance of *Head-Rot Holiday*, set in Penwell Special Hospital, premiered under the professional direction of Paulette Randall at Battersea Arts Centre. Clean Break commissioned Sarah Daniels, a professional playwright, to write the original play built from interviews with seven women whose time in a Special Hospital totaled 70 years.²¹⁹ The term “Special Hospital” refers to a secure institution housing and treating people with mental disorders. At this time Clean Break was five years into using professional artists to portray the experiences of incarcerated women after its founders left the company. The play takes place at Christmas and exposes medical staff, particularly nurses, for the overmedication and mistreatment of women detainees. It then works to expose the overdiagnosis and misdiagnosis of female psychopathy due to overt sexist and racist medical and judicial systems. The program notes:

In June 1991, Clean Break’s Management Committee agreed that the 1992/3 production should be based around the experiences of women in Special Hospitals. Whilst touring in previous years, company members had frequently been approached by ex-Special Patients who felt that the time had come for the company to look behind that ‘other more distant door.’ The secrecy surrounding institutions such as Ashworth, Rampton and Broadmoor, and the difficult conditions reported when any information did come to light, convinced the company of the importance of tackling this subject.²²⁰

²¹⁸ Lyrics from NSYNC’s song “Celebrity” from *Celebrity*

²¹⁹ *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

The finalized script and subsequent production featured three professional actors, who trained at various British drama schools with an impressive number of productions from award-winning theatres on their resume. The lighting designer, director, costume designer all listed their professional credentials and practical training. Out of the cast and crew of fifteen women involved in the production, only three appeared to be members of Clean Break (based on their mentioning of the training program) who experienced the criminal justice system in some form.²²¹ These women occupied the roles of assistant director and two assistant stage managers. The selection of Special Hospitals as the site for the production opened up a new type of theatre criticism and response to *Head-Rot Holiday*, as a review of the final production premiered in the *British Medical Journal*. The review poorly received the production but did acknowledge that Clean Break “may have a point” about the sex-based inequalities of incarceration and labels of insanity.²²²

²²¹ The language used in the biographies of these three women says that they “took part in the pilot Training Programme” and earned “9 credits.” The Training Programme began the same year *Head-Rot Holiday* premiered. The Programme is described as a “fourteen-week course which runs twice a year and focuses on creating a piece of theatre from scratch [...] Accredited by LOCF (the London Open College Federation). Ibid.

²²² At the same time Sarah Daniels was writing *Head-Rot Holiday*, the UK was launching its first private prison. Thus, discussions around imprisonment and the detaining of populations reverberated in the country. Though *Head-Rot Holiday* focused on Special Hospitals, the remark of the ‘invisibility’ of detention-based institutions by an ex-patient, as noted in the program, speaks to the similar invisibility of private prisons, particularly concerning the lack of government oversight (which Special Hospitals do have). This prominence of invisibility of these populations informs Clean Break’s work then and now, although the manners of the work have changed and the structure of the nonprofit in relation to capital has shifted. Acknowledging the concurrent histories of detention that Clean Break responds to with their season selection connects the systematic institutional oppression that targets historically marginalized peoples for the sake of capital and reinforcement of gendered systems.

MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

Battersea Arts Centre, London *Head Rot Holiday* 13 October-1 November. National tour Spring 1993

Women with an axe to grind

"She's so sedated even her dandruff falls slowly" explains a character in *Head Rot Holiday*, the new play about the experience of women in special hospitals, currently playing at the Battersea Arts Centre, London.

Unfortunately lines like this, which promise so much in the first act, forsake a second half that is the theatrical equivalent of intravenous diazepam. The humour before the intermission is replaced by an axe-grinding attack on the treatment of women in special hospitals. The action takes place over Christmas in "Penwell Special Hospital," and the playwright seems out on manoeuvres, stalking any prey no matter how easy—who could fail to be sobered at the experience of Christmas in a special hospital?

While it is mainly nurses who are on the receiving end of a myriad of accusations of mistreatment, doctors are also pushed into the firing line: in one scene a self-mutilator's hand is stitched up without any local anaesthetic, apparently to discourage her from doing it again. Doctors are distant figures, only appearing on the ward to look for their lost opera tickets.

This sensationalised portrayal is all the more disappointing given the track record of the writer, Sarah Daniels—winner of the London Theatre Critics' Most Promising Playwright Award. The play's claims to authenticity are based on "research" among ex-inmates. Closer probing into the research methods reveals a sample size of only seven



Voices from inside a special hospital

women. The play was, however, produced with the assistance of WISH (Women in Special Hospitals), an organisation campaigning for better treatment for these patients.

The production also attacks the medical diagnosis of psychopathic disorder in women, suggesting that female psychopathy simply does not exist. Violent acts by women are, it says, an understandable response to male aggression. It is true that men are convicted of ten times more offences of violence against the person than women. Clouding this simplistic analysis is the depressing statistic that both male and female aggressors show a preference for victims of the opposite sex. Furthermore there seems to be a direct relationship between female emancipation and involvement in crime.

But if crime rates between the sexes draw closer together will their treatment by our penal system also become more equivalent? Women who kill are more likely to be judged insane than male murderers, and they are

much more likely to commit suicide after committing homicide than men. So somewhere in this complicated situation this theatre company—called Clean Break—may have a point; for crimes like homicide women have a longer sentence than a male counterpart.

Clean Break was founded in 1979 to provide a "powerful and unique voice" for women ex-prisoners. Disquiet over the treatment of inmates of special hospitals, reinforced by some well publicised deaths, has often focused on the behaviour of nurses. Introducing any dialogue between patients and staff is notoriously difficult but can be prompted by techniques like drama. After the recent innovation of introducing theatre into prisons it might be useful if Clean Break's voice was also heard inside the special hospitals. After all, some walls do have ears.—RAJ PERBAUD, clinical lecturer, Institute of Psychiatry, London

Figure 2 Review of *Head-Rot Holiday* in the *British Medical Journal*

Before fully producing *Head-rot Holiday*, Clean Break created a table-read for the first draft of the play. This read-through was open to the public in January of 1992.²²³ Quite significantly, Emma Thompson, Harriet Walter, and Sophie Okonedo performed the three-character play.²²⁴ Emma Thompson and Harriet Walter were already well-established actor-celebrities by 1992. Thompson appeared on West End and two BBC television films, and Walter had worked with the Royal Shakespeare company throughout the 1980s and performed on Broadway. The year before Okonedo's performance in *Head-rot Holiday*, she premiered as one of the leads in *Young Soul Rebels* which won the SACD Best Feature Prize at the 1991 Cannes Film

²²³ Since its premiere with Clean Break, Sarah Daniel's play has been produced at the Hope Theatre in 2018 as part of their Christmas season and The Cockpit in 2013 as a one-night only performance for their Arts of Wellbeing festival, focusing on the arts and health community.

²²⁴ In the program of the production, Sophie Okonedo's name was misspelled as 'Sophie Okenado.' *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

Festival.²²⁵ In the program of the show, Thompson and Walter are listed as patrons of Clean Break and continue to serve that role today. At the time of the reading then, all three actors were in the cultural zeitgeist and served to enhance the publicity of the show, the cause, and the reach of the company. Although the final production featured professional actors, these professionals' public visibility was not at the same level as the initial read through based on their actor biographies in the program. This casting shift may be interpreted as counterproductive in terms of drawing in larger audiences and communicating the issues of special hospitals yet the exact reason for changing casts for the production is unclear.

The archive does not leave us with character but with celebrity. As Lisa Freeman notes, audiences did not attend David Garrick's performances of *Hamlet* to see Hamlet, they attended to see David Garrick perform as Hamlet.²²⁶ Yet taken one degree further, particularly with new work development, audiences may attend a new reading particularly because of the actor involved. While I am unable to discern the precise reasons as to why the staged reading featured these women (although surmising the casting to gauge interest and funding appears likely) the record nevertheless shows the fusion of celebrity and professional artistry against the backdrop of criminal justice reform. What appeared publicly was this fusion of celebrity and professional performers while behind closed doors the educational, reparative, and healing practices for Clean Break students developed. This work, which informs the prominent mission statements, critical reception, and funding practices, was largely invisible during this era.

²²⁵ Cannes Film Festival note in "Young Soul Rebels," *IMDb*, accessed November 27, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103312/awards?ref_=tt_awd.

²²⁶ Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theatre: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002): 36.

The employment of professional artists based on the experiences of incarcerated women's severe trauma and violence superficially creates the positive notion of "community" in that these two groups of women can learn from and work alongside each other. In terms of public visibility, the Clean Break students (those who were involved with the criminal justice system and the precursor to Clean Break Members) are further erased due to the social stigma of incarceration and Clean Break's relationship with the criminal justice system leaving them to omit their educational work with Clean Break from their resumes. Essentially, if one puts on their resume that they took classes with Clean Break or labeled themselves a Clean Break student (the term used under the old model), the woman would be exposing herself as involved in the criminal justice system. Through professional aesthetic performance, Clean Break renders a complicated topic accessible for mainstream audiences to fulfill the expectation of aesthetic professional theatre.

In discussions and descriptions of Clean Break at the time of *Holiday*'s premiere, critics labeled the organization as "a company for women who are ex-prisoners" or a "theatre company dedicated to providing a voice for women in custody and ex-offenders" or "a company dedicated to prison reform."²²⁷ Therefore, the descriptions of the company itself versus public interpretation of the company obfuscate how the company produced its shows. The production was poorly reviewed with one critic even questioning the validity of the truth of the violent nature of women's psychiatric hospitals.²²⁸ Benedict Nightingale's deeply scathing, and blatantly sexist review of the play additionally labels the actors involved as "members" making it unclear of their relationship to incarceration, professional artistry, and the production itself. Even when attending the

²²⁷ Rick Jones, "Head-Rot Holiday Review – *Evening Standard*," *London Theatre Record* 12, no. 21 (1992): 1229. Paul Taylor, "Head-Rot Holiday Review – *The Independent*," *London Theatre Record* 12, no. 21 (1992): 1229. Benedict Nightingale, "Head-Rot Holiday Review – *The Times*," *London Theatre Record* 12, no. 21 (1992): 1230.

²²⁸ Benedict Nightingale with *The Times*.

production and/or receiving the program the lines between public performance, private educational work, and Clean Break's "siloed" structure remain unclear.

Clean Break's focus on the community, particularly the ex-offender community, evokes a particular focus on a marginalized group in addition to the superficial notion of community between professional artists and the ex-offender community. Yet to larger funding organizations and programs providing money to Clean Break, the funding body's role in this community becomes detached from the public work in Clean Break yet they still can claim their "partnership" with this community. In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph explores the relationship between the "Romantic narrative" of community, nonprofits, and capitalism. In her introduction she urges pause at the collective viewing of "community" as a positive concept and with this pause, to reflect on other ways to envision and describe collective action.²²⁹ Community, Joseph argues, connotes positive feelings of inclusion and she examines how "social relations and social activities are mobilized for particularly political and economic purposes."²³⁰ In terms of nonprofits, like Clean Break, these organizations work in and for "communities" and relate to capital by supposedly being not-for-profit.²³¹ The point of a nonprofit is to largely serve a smaller community where corporations or other institutions do not.

Miranda Joseph's analysis of the contradictory and messy connections between nonprofit/NGOs and the state, highlights the implications of Clean Break's model from 1987-2018: at the heart of the older Clean Break model is the hierarchy of capital in which professional artists receive funding from the government through the nonprofit organization at the expense of the financing of Clean Break members. Also, the model creates the appearance of community

²²⁹ Joseph, vii.

²³⁰ Joseph, xxxii.

²³¹ Joseph, 70.

between professional actors and Clean Break Members with mutual goals. Yet following Joseph's warning against the Romantic narrative, the marketed, capitalized, and performed community centers and uplifts professional artists at the expense of the women whose lived experiences informed the artistic work.

The archive remembers the celebrities who performed as and were informed by incarcerated women, but not necessarily the incarcerated women themselves. If, as Saussure argues, it is structure which makes meaning possible, both the structure of Clean Break as an organization and the structure of the production's archival material curates the symbiotic relationship between celebrity and social justice.²³² Within this use, Clean Break then employed "particularly talented" participants (those touched by incarceration) as paid members for a short time.²³³ The discussion of pay around Clean Break participants is largely absent from the archive with the exception of the program note. Based on the company's website and posts recruiting new members, pay for members during the old model only occurred with these "particularly talented" participants. In the overview of the *Head-rot Holiday* program, the description of the training programme reads "participants receive simulated auditions and careers advice, which encourage progression onto other training and employment in both drama-specific and drama-related areas. *Particularly talented participants can join the professional company, becoming a member of the cast or an assistant in the production team. From this they can receive up to three months paid work and an Equity card.*" (italics mine)²³⁴ The singling out of "particularly talented" individuals establishes an organizational hierarchy of celebrity, talent...and then lesser talented participants.

²³² Ferdinand de Saussure, "Chapter 2: Immutability and Mutability of the Sign," in *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 72-75.

²³³ Program: *Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

²³⁴ Program: *Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

Within this structure then, is the reliance on producing work that can compete with other professional companies and develop a new class of actors. Yet how does talent relate to processing the violence of imprisonment? How do nonprofit theatre companies rooted in community engagement and social change balance working for the needs of said community while competing in a saturated theatre market? Understanding the stages of Clean Break, particularly the lengthy stretch in the 1990s-2018 informs how the organization is currently adapting to and arguably rectifying their past engagement with incarcerated women.

3.2 Clean Break's New Structure: The Necessity of the Amateur and the Renegotiation of the Non-Profit Model

With the organizational restructure beginning in 2018, the rise of the amateur for Clean Break has come into the fore. Lucy Perman's tenure oversaw a structural hierarchy that mirrored societal hierarchy: professionals (particularly famous and 'up-and-coming people') above those who have fewer educational skills, job prospects, or freedoms. The workshops and education group functioned at a level of helping others adjust to life after incarceration but what was visible was the success and aesthetically good work coming out of the professional side of Clean Break. I would not go as far to say that the performance of these women's experiences was unambiguously exploitative, particularly because of Clean Break's cultivation of safe-spaces, funding of members, and the blatant avoiding of discussing members' guilt or innocence, but they were largely invisible to the public eye.²³⁵ There was a detached process in watching a Clean Break show with more

²³⁵ Herrmann acknowledges that the organization has no interest in who is guilty or innocent and that it is up to each member to decide whether or not they want to divulge that information.

professional input than performed experience. Viewing the production page for *[Blank]* on Clean Break's website, visitors can see the reviews, the synopsis of the plot, a quote from the show and a list of cast and crew. Included on this page and in the production are professional actors and designers with their own websites, IMDB page or Wikipedia page. In other words, this production, like the others before it, fell into the same method of relaying the plight of incarcerated women that much of the mainstream media does – by having someone else perform it, arguably for the sake of professional aestheticism. Through the role of the amateur and the continued praxis of play development and performance, Clean Break engages in postcarceral performance in order to raise awareness about female incarceration while directly serving those affected by the system. But what is an amateur and how does it tie into postcarceral performance?

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, postcarceral performance is a performance mode that consists of the continued practice of working with those impacted by incarceration, particularly recently released individuals, through artistic practice. The time spent working with this population, the public spaces involved with these practices, and the praxis of developing artistic performance (broadly conceptualized) result in a type of abolitionist-building future. It does so through the repetitive engagement with the systems of incarceration and the focuses on rehabilitation and the development of new lives post imprisonment. Clean Break's reorganization and reliance on amateur performance best exemplifies the praxis component of postcarceral performance.

The restructuring of the program speaks to the direct focus on the women involved as the active makers, rather than supportive characters and “inspiration” for professional artists who come to work with them. This is important because it directly centers praxis – the continual, process-oriented action of making and performing art developed by these women. Due to the

multiple layers of how Clean Break works between theatre audiences, workshops, and prison spaces through education, I specifically use the term praxis to highlight the educational components and processes of the work rather than a finished product. Clean Break's current model relies on amateurs in that it is through those who are conventionally untrained in theatre that the carceral system becomes the most visible to audiences. Through casting those who have experienced incarceration, the amateur's performances best create and transmit the labor of incarceration that lives on the body, highlighting the agency of these women in crafting their narratives. Within this practice, amateurs embody this praxis as postcarceral performance. Furthermore, the restructuring of Clean Break model behaviors for other arts advocacy organizations to embody. The work of an organization that uplifts women touched by the criminal justice system by forwarding their thoughts, actions, and desires plays into the utopic vision of life without incarceration.

Whereas the company's earlier model relied on individual professional actors to transmit carceral experiences, the new structure speaks to a collectivist model. The collective of amateur theatre-makers, all who share the weight of the carceral state, embarks on a type of political praxis that not only serves to process the past but, similarly to the work of Augusto Boal, incite revolution. The divide between the two models relates to Nicholas Ridout's analysis of collective theatre organization being a political act: "such an act might be political when and as long as it is not work, as long as it is praxis (a processual action) rather than poesis (the making of something)."²³⁶ Clean Break's current model deeply activates the ideologies of the Theatre of the Oppressed as the women working in these programs do not perform solely for the public but first for themselves,

²³⁶ Ridout, 17.

secondly for each other, and thirdly for a wider audience.²³⁷ This performance occurs not necessarily, or not only out of love, but out of the need to navigate ways out of incarceration.

Clean Break has had to continually navigate the increasing devastating effects of the carceral state since its founding. The funding for Clean Break has dramatically shifted from the end of the old model to the new one as well, partly informing the reason for the company's reorganization. As prisons grow, become private, and/or shift their funding structures, so too does Clean Break in order to best support the women they serve. As of 2019, prison deaths have risen 20% from 2018 and conditions of the prisons have only continued to worsen.²³⁸ Some public prisons in the UK have transferred to the private model and as of November 2020, plans to build 4 new private prisons are underway. I specifically provide this overview of incarceration in the United Kingdom to note the environment that Clean Break responds to through their work. This analysis stems from the dramatic decrease in state funding as shown on the Charity Commission page for Clean Break. In available government funding information for the company which only goes back to 2016 (this year still falling under the old model), Clean Break received £239,000 from government grants and £406,200 from donations. Their income was £1.12 million. Following the decrease in arts funding in 2017, Clean Break was forced "to make some tough decisions about the sustainability of the company's future."²³⁹ By 2020, they received only £45,000 in government grants yet £1.03 million in donations for a total income of £1.29 million. The shift away from celebrity (assumed to draw in audiences and donations) and towards working and highlighting

²³⁷ Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

²³⁸ Oliver Wainwright, "Epic Jail: Inside the UK's Optimised 'Super-Prison' Warehouses," *The Guardian* (September 2, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/sep/02/epic-jail-inside-super-prison-warehouses-architecture>.

²³⁹ "Clean Break Theatre Company - Charity 1017560," Charity Commission: For England and Wales, 2022, <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/1017560/financial-history>.

Clean Break members themselves actually helped enhance Clean Break's financial capabilities and audience reach.²⁴⁰ Without direct access to the company's finances, I can only surmise as to why the models changed so drastically in a short period of time. In my interview with Herrmann, she noted how Donmar Warehouse's Shakespeare Trilogy increased Clean Break's fame, despite only being loosely associated with the production. However in 2016 when BBC filmed the Trilogy and then the release of the film in late 2016/2017, the access to this production furthered Clean Break's spread. Ironically this celebrity (Harriet Walter once again) may have helped Clean Break receive donations. Economic pressure inarguably influenced the shifting of the model to decrease the use of professional actors. This then enhanced the company's mission to directly center women with lived carceral experience, a desire that those in the education sector under the old model of Clean Break held for a long time.²⁴¹

The Members Programme, which partly used to be the educational program, is open to women 17 years old and above who "have lived experience of the criminal justice system or are at risk of entering it due to drug, alcohol, or mental health issues."²⁴² Herrmann's experience as Director of Education (up until 2018) under the old model informs her current work as co-Artistic Director under their new model. With fellow Artistic Director Róisín McBrinn, Herrmann moved to create a structure that encourages Clean Break Members to partake in both the artistic practice and their own educational development. In a recruitment post on their website, Clean Break states that the Members Programme offers "a foundation of learning and skills in theatre performance,

²⁴⁰ Anna Herrmann discussed how the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy which employed a few Clean Break members helped increase the visibility of Clean Break as a whole. She specifically notes how Clean Break was not "that" involved with the Trilogy (particularly in comparison to the York St. John Prison Partnership Program) but because of the inclusion of Clean Break in the conversations and publicity around the Trilogy, the organization received an increase in attention. Interview with Anna Herrmann.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² "About Us," Clean Break, 2021. Transgender women are included as transgender women are women.

creativity and wellbeing, and opportunities to engage in professional, public facing performance projects. All workshops are led by esteemed female theatre artists and are underpinned by our comprehensive trauma-informed approach to support women reach their full potential.”²⁴³ This Programme differs from the old education program by more robustly engaging with drama therapy and skill-development while also allowing for women, if they so choose, to continue into the theatre world.

The new model additionally responds to the old structure’s use of scouting “particularly talented members” by creating the Young Artists Development Programme. Those wishing to enter into the professional theatre world can apply to join this year-long program which more concretely focuses on theatre training and preparation for a theatre career. The Members Programme, in contrast, is more holistic towards self-actualization through drama though without the concrete focus on professional theatre. Additionally, there does not seem to be a time-limit on the Members Programme. Roisin McBrinn used to oversee the Artistic Development group under the old model which was responsible for production development and commissioning artists before becoming the co-Artistic Director. Therefore, Clean Break’s restructuring process pulled from two separate programs within the company under Lucy Perman and combined elements of the organization to create a group more centrally focused on its women members. The women-only space is at the core of Clean Break’s identity, according to Anna Herrmann.

Clean Break’s focus on a women-only space works to build a specific coalition of individuals who have experienced discrimination and violence at the hands of cisgender men. When interviewing Ms. Herrmann I asked, “what space do transgender individuals occupy in

²⁴³ “Members,” Clean Break, 2020, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/members/>.

Clean Break and/or if there are future directions that the company hopes to embark on?”²⁴⁴ She stated that Clean Break’s space addresses the needs of trans women, particularly, due to the heightened rate of discrimination and violence in the carceral state. Trans women are welcomed and active members in the company. “Where we are finding less clarity,” she continued, “is with nonbinary individuals because it’s straightforward that a women-only space is there and if someone presents as a woman, she’s entitled to be in our women’s space. It’s less clear to us if someone doesn’t identify as a woman what their access is to women-only spaces.”²⁴⁵ The state apparatus rarely recognizes non-binary individuals and the carceral system still enforces a binary system. Until 2016, England assigned individuals to prisons that associated with their assigned sex at birth.²⁴⁶ Clean Break, therefore, struggles to find an inclusive response to the state’s forced gender binary in detention. Rather than conflate women and non-binary spaces, Clean Break defines the company as only accepting women because of the continued history of violence at the hands of cisgender men. The company’s approach to gender aligns with the heightened statistics of violence against women and how this violence limits their abilities to avoid the criminal justice system. While I advocate for spaces that attend to all historically marginalized communities and acknowledge how the cultivation of these spaces depend on many factors, Clean Break at this time functions as a space for women who have been subjected to the harshest forms of misogyny and patriarchal law.

To attend to the needs of the women following their prison release, Clean Break runs as a series of workshops and performances led by female theatre practitioners “and are underpinned by

²⁴⁴ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

²⁴⁵ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

²⁴⁶ Keren Lloyd Bright, “Gender Identity and Prisons in England and Wales: The Development Of Rights and Rules; Checks and Balances,” in *Law in Motion: 50 Years of Legal Change*, eds. Lisa Claydon, Caroline Derry, and Marian Ajevski, (Milton Keynes, UK: 2020): 171.

our comprehensive, trauma-informed approach to support women to reach their full potential.”²⁴⁷

The language used in Clean Break materials specifically provide a humanistic, compassionate read on those affected by the criminal justice system. Though arguably vague in how the company specifically functions, Herrmann notes how Clean Break allows for a broad range of structure and performance in order to include as many voices as possible:

What we wanted to do is be able to be multifaceted and to be able to produce much more diverse and different work that has collaboration in it with our members. This isn't one look. [For example] they could be the cast members, they could be mixed professional and nonprofessional cast members. They could makeup substantial parts of the creative team; what we want to do is try and find a lot of different ways of telling stories and ensuring that the women who we work with are involved and have agency in the telling of those stories. It's still complicated. When we produce a play, we're still working with commissioned playwrights and that is still their voices... But also, there's a legacy of new work with [these] playwrights and female writers who have produced an amazing cannon of plays around criminal justice, so we don't want to lose that either.²⁴⁸

Similar to the old model, the reliance on professional playwrights continues. This, however, is not fully engrained in the model itself but rather a continuation of past practices with the openness to adapt. Herrmann explicitly notes that the fluidity of their current structure allows for different types of new work development.

Additionally, COVID-19 has dramatically impacted the implementation of the model and as the UK moves through the pandemic, so too does Clean Break in building new production development. Within the Member Programme, there are also a limited number of Member Artists. These artists have an interest in professional theatre and typically perform in the large-scale annual productions.²⁴⁹ This set-up of Artistry diverges from the older model of selecting “particularly

²⁴⁷ The company also says, “It offers Members a foundation of learning and skills in theatre performance, creativity and wellbeing, and opportunities to engage in professional, public facing performance projects.” “Members” Clean Break.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

²⁴⁹ Herrmann: “In our cohort we've probably got about 350 women who engage with us as members. Probably about 50 women who we identify as our Member Artists are actively wanting to be in the [theatre] industry. We engage them in our more professional work. We also are trying to extend their networks professionally.”

talented” members in that the members themselves make their interests in professional theatre known rather than a scouting-style system. The flexibility and openness to a range of possibilities, a strong departure from the hierarchies and labels of professional theatre, creates a space that centers reflection and growth by way of theatre. While both the old model and new model have categorized groups within the company, the old model of three distinct departments (prison outreach, theatre education, professional production) disallowed overlap in the work. Under the old model, the training branch more directly involved working with formerly incarcerated women to develop skills to further gain education and employment while the outreach group specifically worked in prisons leading theatre workshops and re-entrance classes.²⁵⁰ Under the new model, new work development occurs across the company out of the ideas of the members themselves. The goal for those making the art becomes centered around their desires rather than the desires of the company.

Separate from the Programme are the teaching artists, some of whom have been working with Clean Break for years.²⁵¹ Teaching artists primarily instruct the Members Programme and the young artist development program. They additionally lead classes in prisons and women’s centers as part of the outreach program. With the renewed focus on women touched by the criminal justice system, teaching artists uplift the ideas and work of these women who inform production ideas and other creative projects. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Raymond Williams’s structures of feeling methodology can offer new ways to perform new epistemologies outside of old social norms. Similarly, the blurred process of devising and creating work, centering those with carceral experience alongside those with professional theatre experience creates new ways to critique and

²⁵⁰ Described in “Clean Break,” *Unfinished Histories* and in discussion with Herrmann.

²⁵¹ Comedian and Actor Jackie Clune frequently works with Clean Break and also was in Phyllida Lloyd’s Shakespeare Trilogy (playing Julius Caesar and Caliban).

imagine beyond the criminal justice system.²⁵² Even digitally, Clean Break quite literally reads as both a safe space for women and as an opportunity for self-actualization.

Within the organizational structure of Clean Break lie the questions of funding and transparency. As briefly discussed in the last chapter, prison theatre companies and similar arts nonprofits have to show they make some sort of progress or enhance the social good in order to continue to receive funding. Furthermore, those involved with Clean Break have a tumultuous history of including their work with the company on their resumes. By listing Clean Break, participants effectively admit their relationship with the criminal justice system.²⁵³ Anna Herrmann acknowledges the issues with the label for the women involved and for the funding practices: “It’s people’s own background and they should have the choice to declare themselves. We shouldn’t be in a position where our funding means that we need to kind of say how many of the people on the stage are members or if the audience wants to know who’s come up through the criminal justice system. It’s so complicated!”²⁵⁴ However, since both the societal shift in discussing incarceration and the restructuring of Clean Break, the omissions are less prevalent than it used to be: “I think because it’s no longer seen quite as much as a barrier, and I think that’s also because the industry is opening up to diversifying who the artists are that work within it.”²⁵⁵ This barrier reflects the theatre world’s dismissal of Clean Break members as “real” theatre practitioners, evoking not only a stigma against those with a carceral past but also against a lack of “proper” training. Under the new model, perhaps because of the direct collaborative work with professional playwrights and occasionally actors, Clean Break member artists are continuing to

²⁵² Similarly to how Aylwyn Walsh favors the non-realistic form to reach the same goal.

²⁵³ Anna Herrmann, “The Mothership,” in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, ed. Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham (London: Routledge, 2008).

²⁵⁴ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

grow their professional careers. While the professional theatre world may be opening to practitioners from varied backgrounds, the social stigma of incarceration plagues those who have been forced to endure it, particularly women, transgender, and non-binary people.

The stigma associated with incarceration continues in part due to the lack of discussion surrounding the reasons for imprisonment, the violence of imprisonment, and the continued label of “ex-offender” or “ex-prisoner” following release.²⁵⁶ In the second edition of *Resistance Behind Bars*, Victoria Law laments how “many activist-oriented publications mirror the mainstream media’s masculinization of prisons and prisoners, contributing to the invisibility of women behind bars.”²⁵⁷ Clean Break actively fights this erasure first through representing the stories of incarcerated women and now through performing lived experience under McBrinn and Herrmann’s lead. This new model points beyond representation and into performed experience.

The production of art by professional playwrights who have experienced incarceration as paid observers, can never fully capture the essence of those who have experienced it. Anna Herrmann acknowledged this problem of the position of the theatre practitioner against the goals and mission of Clean Break: “We’re trying to lose the silos and distinctions of education work and artistic work. Participation is at its heart with the artistic work, and we’ve made a commitment to the integration of those two aspirations being absolutely the bedrock of the work that we create.”²⁵⁸ Because of Clean Break’s lengthy history, audiences enter productions with a rough expectation of the performance. The content spans some area of detention and societal welfare, although the

²⁵⁶ “Ex-offender relates to an individual who has been through the criminal justice system and/or been on probation; ex-prisoner refers to an individual confined to an institution against their will. Both terms dehumanize individuals by defining them by their conviction history.” *Program: Head-Rot Holiday* (1992).

²⁵⁷ Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: PM Press, 2009): 128.

²⁵⁸ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

form, the time period and dramaturgy drastically shift. Even now under the new model, Clean Break maintains their focus in terms of productions highlighting the experiences of women and the criminal justice system. The new model specifically “builds on women with lived experience” and gives them the opportunity to tell their story.²⁵⁹ The new model specifically *needs* amateurism, primarily through the use of amateur actors.

The label of amateur frequently shifts and transforms when applied to varieties of artistic practices and geographical spaces. Scholarship on amateurism, such as pieces by Andy Merrifield and Jennifer Beth Spiegel, specifically equate the role of amateur with the act of love.²⁶⁰ In the opening of *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre*, Helen Nicholson points out how “amateur theatre is part of the biographies of public buildings, integral to community-building and place-making, and central to the creative and cultural lives of those who, year after year, *make theatre for the love of it* (emphasis my own).²⁶¹ The labor of love complicates how this labor functions in capitalist systems. As such, Julia Bryan-Wilson and Benjamin Piekut in a special edition on amateurism across the arts, propose “a variegated field of practice in which amateur artistic production is impelled by a range of circumstances that might have nothing to do with pleasure, including crisis.”²⁶² I follow this proposed field of practice by questioning where to locate the individual partaking in theatrical performance when incarcerated and when released and how these individuals work alongside professional actors. The specific notion of an “act of love” provides an agency that carceral systems comprehensively prohibit. The praxis of “love of craft” is secondary

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Jennifer Beth Spiegel, “Amateur Performance and the Labour of Love or Cultural Reproduction ‘After’ the Collapse of Capitalism,” *Performance Research* 25, no. 1 (2020): pp. 121-124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1747270>. Andy Merrifield, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, New York: 2017).

²⁶¹ Nicholson et al., 3.

²⁶² Bryan-Wilson and Piekut, 8.

at best in postcarceral performance, or a completely luxury at worst. Nicholas Ridout's examination of amateurism and communism in *Passionate Amateurs* identifies the role of the amateur as one with "communist potential." Passionate amateurs' work is a labor of self-production where theatre can become a site of productive consumption.²⁶³ The relationship between amateur, professional, modernity, and capitalism has been well fostered in the humanities but the analysis of the formerly incarcerated individual *performing* incarceration or otherwise engaging with it has been understudied.

Clean Break's productions, such as *Sweatbox* and *Voices from Prison* rely on the haunting nature of performance as both the rehearsal and execution of the shows serve to provide space for processing the ramifications of incarceration. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes, "the best performances don't disappear but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future."²⁶⁴ Postcarceral performance relies on those touched by the carceral state partaking in the praxis of performing. Clean Break Members can be interpreted as performing not necessarily (or not only) out of love of the craft but out of the need to navigate ways out of incarceration. The work becomes a site of processing – a term frequently thrown around and nearly devoid of meaning in the ways it is often colloquially used. I use the phrase to evoke the praxis of processing: the practice of acknowledging trauma (in this case, incarceration) to move forward in a society that inflicted said trauma. The process of new work development working with Clean Break Members facilitates a re-creating of the self through

²⁶³ Ridout, 37.

²⁶⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 104. Additionally, the themes and ideas in *Cruising Utopia* explicitly forward a queer epistemology. Queerness cannot be erased from this text and although I do not engage with queerness in this reading of two Clean Break case studies; the abject body and minoritarian positionality informs how I read the place of incarcerated women in society. Muñoz identifies the present as not enough for "queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (27). Surely, incarcerated peoples belong to those who do not see the present as enough.

the embodiment of others and/or the self, with other members who share similar traumatic experiences. The rehearsals and performances negotiate a delicate balance between past and future – the present is where the spectator meets the amateurs performing in a professional performance. The practice of the sweatbox, particularly to United States audiences, may be unfamiliar. Thus this performance and most performances of the practices of incarceration informs the broader public’s knowledge of imprisonment. How hope traverses through *Sweatbox* and *Voices from Prison* forwards the practical work of creating art with those who have experienced detention. Whereas *Sweatbox* performs an innate hopelessness (traumatic utopias) and *Voices from Prison* illustrate a hope of the future, both rely on the processing by those who have witnessed incarceration in order to identify how imprisonment functions and how to move beyond its carceral grip.

3.2.1 *Sweatbox*: “Is anyone listening to me?”

Police sirens swirl in the distance, the twinkling of piano keys begins to rise as the soft hum of an engine grows louder before eventually turning off. The black screen jumps to the image of a Black woman, sitting in what looks to be a cell of some sort as she softly picks at her manicured nails. The sound of a van door slamming can be heard alongside a bodyless voice yelling “Oi! Can we get out now or what?!” The woman on screen doesn’t take notice. “Is anyone listening to me? Where are we anyway?”²⁶⁵ Again, the woman on screen doesn’t respond but looks out the window, the sun lighting up her face. She looks at the camera with the answer: “HMP Bronzefield. They do

²⁶⁵ *Sweatbox*, Clean Break, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdTspE6ifKY>.

this. Stop the van right outside the gates then leave you sat there like battery hens. It's about setting a tone. Letting you know who's boss."²⁶⁶

The opening of the short film *Sweatbox* engulfs the spectator in a brief moment of confusion: confusion about location, about reason, and about time. Based on an immersive theatrical performance which originally took place in an old police van, *Sweatbox* as a film highlights the vicious practice of making new arrivals wait for hours in the police van, a sweatbox, before finally entering prison. *Sweatbox* features three Clean Break members who, having a history with the criminal justice system, assisted professional playwright Chloë Moss in developing the script.²⁶⁷ The performance exemplifies Clean Break's new model of centering amateur performance and by doing so engages in postcarceral performance through casting practices, new work development, and community outreach.

The story and timeline of *Sweatbox* follows Clean Break's shift in company model and ability to adapt to a constantly changing venue and audience. *Sweatbox* began in 2015 using a decommissioned prison van to travel England with this immersive-experience production. The short script allowed for a performance every 15 minutes with changing audiences. Playwright Chloë Moss and Clean Break members researched and developed the script as a group. This production diverged from the larger full-scale productions by using Clean Break members rather than professional actors. However, according to then-Education Director Anna Herrmann, the van broke down while in York and could not be repaired.²⁶⁸ The company brought the show back in late 2019 for Clean Break's 40th anniversary with a new cast, director, and van. The plans were for

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Original concept by former Clean Break Head of Engagement, Imogen Ashby.

²⁶⁸ Anna Herrmann and Róisín McBrinn, "*Sweatbox* Premiere," Clean Break, (June 15, 2021): <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/productions/sweatbox-film/>.

the van to travel to UK universities in May 2020, but COVID-19 thwarted this tour. Herrmann decided to turn the production into a short film in order to reach wider audiences as well as engage in dialogue with the country's plans to create 500 new spaces for women in prison.²⁶⁹ The production illuminates individual experience of a larger system which enacts violence on all involved.

The trajectory and refocusing of *Sweatbox* serve as a type of performative response to carceral feminism enacted by the state. A warping of feminism and justice, “carceral feminism is a kind of feminism that relies on the criminalization of the perpetrator, and often the survivor or victim, as a response to violence against women.”²⁷⁰ Largely indebted to White feminism, carceral feminism as defined by Elizabeth Sweet paradoxically works to end violence by encouraging violence by the state in terms of policing and imprisoning. This practice, pulling from Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that “power imbalances are the main cause of violence against women,” predominantly centers the “importance of economic structures” in the continuation of supposedly protecting women.²⁷¹ The state's practice of using policing and incarceration to address the needs of women instead of working to radically change the political and societal structures that disenfranchise women (but also BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ populations) maintains the continuation of violence against these groups under the guise of protection. With the 2020 production of *Sweatbox*, the building of a future without prisons relied on the specific and complex portrayal of the moments before entering prison, illustrating the current practice of violence.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Elizabeth Sweet, “Carceral Feminism: Linking the State, Intersectional Bodies, and the Dichotomy of Place,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 6, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820616655041>, 203.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

Via the complexities of Nina (Funke Adeleke), Rachel (Jade Small), and Steph (Posy Sterling), *Sweatbox* depicts a woman completely new to the prison system and two who are all too familiar with the system's mistreatment.²⁷² Throughout the film the three women reflect on their past while evoking striking imagery that pulls from one character to another. Nina reflects on her aunt's devout Christianity before Steph screams "Jesus Christ, let us out! We're not animals!" and then begins to discuss her past friend's dad who was a butcher. Rachel, new to incarceration, is seen hyperventilating, screaming how she cannot breathe, and reflects on how she has a three-year-old at home. All three women are separated in their cells and cannot see each other and only listen. Steph meanwhile screams to be let out because she has to use the restroom, and about halfway through the film the camera reveals that she is heavily pregnant. Nina tells Rachel to turn around in circles because that's how she coped with the panic for the first time she was in a van – Rachel does so before Nina remarks how she then threw up on herself and laughs maniacally. Rachel stops. Meanwhile the guards are outside, flirting with one another. Rachel was given a six-month sentence, Steph received eighteen months, Nina has four years. Steph reveals her dad was frequently incarcerated growing up, but she was told he worked on a cruise ship. Nina reveals a drug habit, implying that it is the reason she has been in and out of prison. She then begins to go through withdrawal as Steph talks to the camera about being scared of labor while Rachel yells again that she has a son. The ending of the film culminates in a connected stream of thought, all three linked together, terrified of what comes next:

NINA: Cramps are the worst. Getting off the gear. And then you start to throw up. Lasts for days. Feel like you're gonna die. But then you get through it and you think, that's it. That is it. Never again. But what are you left with? All that reality.

²⁷² Because of the continued iterations of *Sweatbox*, casts have changed a few times. Those in the short film were not involved in the original production but did assist in devising the short film as it deviates from the original site-specific, immersive production.

STEPH: And afterwards. What happens then?
NINA: It's starting now. Getting the sweats. Feeling it.
STEPH: Fucking let me out!
RACHEL: I've got a little boy.
STEPH: Don't talk about your kids.
NINA: Everyone's got kids. You ain't special.
RACHEL: I told him I'd keep us together.
NINA: Trying to keep it together.
STEPH: I can't hold it in.
NINA: Trying to hold it in.
RACHEL: He's three.
NINA: Four, five, six, seven...
STEPH: Breathe...
RACHEL: I can't breathe.
STEPH: I can't, I can't hold it in. I can't! [*She urinates*]²⁷³

After the camera pans down to see the wet stain on Steph's pants, the female guard opens up the van door: "Sorry about that, ladies, staff are back now, we can get you in. [*She looks at Steph and then the puddle*] Oh, lovely."²⁷⁴

The film captures the claustrophobia of the van as it encapsulates the violence of disconnection made by imprisonment. The dramatic form of the immersive theatre experience translated into a short film informs where and how audiences see the drama and abuse which in turn informs how audiences perceive the prison system. In Alison Reed's "Traumatic Utopias: Holding Hope in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*" Reed describes how "amidst pain, performance offers possibilities for spiritual and social transformation."²⁷⁵ Bridgforth's dynamic and genre-bending performance novel speaks to the importance of process over product. Feeding off each other, lived experiences, and the past, Reed describes how the production of *love conjure/blues* is just one component of the larger goal of collaboration and community engagement. While more

²⁷³ *Sweatbox*.

²⁷⁴ *Sweatbox*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdTspE6ifKY>.

²⁷⁵ Alison Reed, "Traumatic Utopias: Holding Hope in Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, no. 2-3 (2015): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2015.1034762>.

conventionally structured than Bridgforth's engaging work, *Sweatbox* similarly highlights the goals of process, experience, and community reach (for Clean Break).

The filming of the production is just one rendition of the script which was based on earlier stories from the company. Harkening back to its origins in 2015, other women who have been impacted by the criminal justice system embodied Nina, Steph, and Rachel. Other audiences witnessed their interpretations and experiences in the old, decommissioned prison van. Knowing Clean Break's history of reinvigorating past scripts, other women will most likely perform this piece again, informed by their experiences. Each of these renditions' rehearsals and performances all build on previous carceral experience thereby connecting generations of women's processing of state-sponsored violence. The resonance of the script and the experiences that informed the building of these three characters additionally speaks to how the causes, the legal responses, and implementations of incarceration remain constant, highlighting the continued battle against "violence against women" and furthering carceral feminisms rather than robust social change. If the script still "makes sense" then the causes and actions of the state have not changed which in turn informs the continued need for the script to be performed. As described in the introduction of this chapter, the performances of dystopias to move towards utopias relates to Clean Break's work behind the productions. What Alison Reed calls traumatic utopias, that is an embodied performance mode which "bring[s] together pain and possibility to remind us that remembering, and mourning are not incompatible with hope and healing," I see in conjunction with the praxis of self-actualization.²⁷⁶ While Bridgforth's work imagines utopias in the performance as hopeful futures, *Sweatbox* performs the dystopia of the present. By doing so, the film introduces a multi-

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 123.

layered message about the carceral state that calls for the dramatic reforming of the criminal justice system.²⁷⁷

The performance process of these actors' past experiences, whether similar or different from their characters' experiences, generates a space to process the past, inform the present, and imagine the future. The active work of Clean Break Members, particularly while in Clean Break immediately post-incarceration, becomes a praxis of self-actualization in which women enter into a shared experience to hold space for the recent traumas they have endured and build artistic performance to relay these traumas and their causes to wider audiences. By doing so, these women actively build towards their futures by gaining communicative and tangible skills to reorient themselves with society. However, even without the neoliberal requirement of having to show active impact in order to receive funding, holding space for this largely ignored and invisible population is radical.

3.2.2 *Voices from Prison: Digitally Concretizing Hope*

Amidst the violent isolation of incarcerated women due to COVID-19 dozens of women in UK prisons wrote messages of hope. Clean Break "invited women from all 12 prisons in England and Wales to submit creative writing pieces about prison life, prison during COVID-19, women's voices, and hope. We assembled a panel reflecting Clean Break's community and tasked them with selecting a range of pieces for an eBook which would reflect the breadth of experiences shared

²⁷⁷ I specifically use the term "reform" as Clean Break does not distinctly identify as an abolitionist group. The public discussion of abolition and its relation to the prison industrial complex differs from the United States. Rather than impose my experiences working as an American for abolition, I see much of Clean Break's work and their partners moving towards criminal justice reform and the dramatic decrease of incarceration.

with us.”²⁷⁸ Locked in their cells for 23 hours a day due to COVID, these women lost all opportunities to participate in available education and artistic programming and visitation rights.²⁷⁹ The call for submissions became a way for incarcerated women to creatively process their thoughts, relate their experiences, and imagine new futures. *Voices from Prison* became a way to make visible the women who were now “more invisible than ever.”²⁸⁰ Across the eBook, one can trace the painstaking care for each word, each image, that the writers choose as if these words are their way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. These messages of hope, laced with messages of despair, reflect past circumstances that led to the women’s current status, including abuse at the hands of others and the systematic oppression and inequality of the criminal justice system.

Radical performance based in self-actualization is a type of performance in dialogue with one of José Esteban Muñoz’s last calls to action, for “concrete hope” derived from Bloch’s “educated hope” in his posthumously published essay, “Hope in the Face of Heartbreak.”²⁸¹ In this essay following the conclusion of the latest edition of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz reclarifies the necessity of labor required to establish the possibilities of utopias through the praxis of hope and disappointment. He argues how by being disappointed with what we (his word) hoped for is “all the more reason to understand the nature of the incommensurability that structures our being with.”²⁸² And with this, “we can practice an indispensable excessive reach. Then, and perhaps only then, can the project of concrete hope commence.”²⁸³ The romanticized optimism, to cite Muñoz’s

²⁷⁸ “Voices from Prison,” Clean Break, 2020, <https://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/productions/voices-from-prison/>.

²⁷⁹ Prisons in both the United Kingdom and the United States have used COVID-19 as further cause to increase the practice of what is essentially solitary confinement.

²⁸⁰ “Voices from Prison.”

²⁸¹ José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope in the Face of Heartbreak,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

colleagues, of how some scholars read *Cruising Utopia*'s conceptualization of utopia neglects both the action required of building utopias and the role of hope and its dialectical tension with disappointment.²⁸⁴ Utopia is intrinsically tied to hope, and hope is fleeting. Yet hope endures and continuously calls for new action and the overcoming of obstacles.

The conglomeration of utopia as no-place and not-yet, but carried forward through hope, informs my reading of how life beyond and past incarceration in *Voices from Prison*, and into a world without incarceration, can simultaneously exist while living in and reflecting on the currently in place systems that created it. Concrete hope, a “mode of hoping that is cognizant of exactly what obstacles present themselves in the face of obstacles that so often feel insurmountable,” forwards Clean Break’s work throughout the pandemic.²⁸⁵ Paradoxically while COVID halted the majority of planned projects, this obstacle encouraged the actualization of the new model by publicly showing a vast variety of women’s voices. Unfortunately, further this visibility also came at the expense of systematic isolation by the state, although this issue derives from the systems that Clean Break pushes against rather than a result of their work.

I draw from Muñoz to define the importance of Clean Break’s organizational lineage and convey a current window into where the company (and postcarceral performance in general) may be headed through *Voices in Prison*. Clean Break follows the process of hope and disappointment. Hope in its founding by incarcerated women who then created work to depict the carceral system by those who have experienced it and disappointment in the adaptation of its model by forwarding celebrity or professional theatre practitioners to become (to the broader public) an aesthetic theatre company. Now, they experience newfound hope in reconceptualizing the company’s model to

²⁸⁴ Muñoz, “Forward” in *Cruising Utopia*, x.

²⁸⁵ Muñoz, “Hope,” 207.

meet the needs of women and provide a robust platform to allow these women to be profoundly visible more attentively and astutely. Muñoz acknowledges that “if activist politics and knowledge fail to touch in legible and knowable ways [...] they in fact represent a certain bad faith.”²⁸⁶ If Clean Break and the work it represents and envisions fails to continuously include and forward the experienced amateur (that is an amateur actor with carceral experience) then they, in a way, also represent a certain bad faith.

In *Voices from Prison*, these detained artists use the written space to process incarceration in a pandemic. After receiving these poems, Clean Break took their words and established a type of performative hope in their short film of the eBook. By reaching out, collecting, structuring, publishing, dramatizing, and publicizing, the company built a performance that transcends the physical space of the prison and encourages the voices of the so-called “voiceless women.” Occasionally in public talks, opening night interviews, and other spaces of public conversation, Clean Break’s creative teams (not, from what I have seen, the Members themselves) use the phrase “voiceless women” to show a type of camaraderie and support of incarcerated women. For example, in an interview with WhatsOnStage for *[Blank]*’s opening night, actor Jackie Clune reflects how Clean Break “educates and entertains” and “to tell the stories of women who are voiceless and on the margins of society.”²⁸⁷ As previously noted, *[Blank]* functioned under Clean Break’s old structure, whereas with *Voices From Prison*, the company illustrates how these women do have a voice and can tell their own stories if a platform is created for them. *Voices From Prison* is free and available to the public through the digital zine platform HeyZine. Clean Break’s goals of publication lie with education and discussion rather than profit. The table of contents of the

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 213.

²⁸⁷ WhatsOnStage, “[Blank] at Donmar Warehouse | Opening Night at Alice Birch’s New Play,” YouTube, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAJ_dAITaw4.

eBook breaks the stories into clean, tangible sections while the content freely flows across and between many similar narratives and styles. The instructions for reading the eBook do not follow the linear pattern of reading from beginning to end but as an act of self-care and protection, encourages the reader to engage with whichever piece(s) speak to them. The eBook can be read as a type of redressing the former characterization and discussion of how even the company, aside from the broader public, categorized and identified the abilities of imprisoned women. By centering their voices, thematically organizing their artistic works, and producing a piece entirely created by incarcerated women, Clean Break emulated their original model under Holborough and Hicks. Furthermore, those who selected the writings for publication spanned both board member positions and Clean Break members, signaling a collaboration across past structures of the company.

For those writing, the labor of production may be a labor of love, reflection, or even necessity. In one piece, “Lockdown in Prison” poet Kalie from HMP Eastwood Park writes “There’s only so much reading and colouring you can do, / Or watching TV and having a brew. / Prisoners’ mental health is getting worse, / Waiting weeks just to see a doctor or nurse / Constant jangling of keys is getting too much to bear, / Feeling so down and bored I could pull out my hair.”²⁸⁸ The boredom and isolation of lockdown in addition to the lack of care, particularly mental healthcare, in prison culminates in a devastating destruction of identity and self-worth. In the writing of these poems then, the work becomes a work of survival in that the act of writing and transmitting carceral situations outward makes perceptible the identity and trauma of these women like Kalie.

²⁸⁸ Kalie, “Lockdown in Prison,” in *Voices from Prison* (London: Clean Break, 2021): 51.

The last section of *Voices from Prison*, appropriately titled “HOPE,” includes seven pieces, six of which have “hope” as either their title or in the title. These writings do not negate the traumatic responses published in the pages before nor discredit the situations in which the “hope” pieces were written. Following the epistemologies of dystopia/utopia within both postcarceral performance and Clean Break’s current model, *Voices from Prison* begins to actively provide the spaces and praxis for simultaneously showing the violence of the present while working towards the future.

The poems in the HOPE section of *Voices from Prison* temporally move between past and future, with less focus on the present. Across these stories women reflect on how they lived or what led them to be incarcerated before quickly envisioning or even textually building their future. The present, particularly life in lockdown, reads as an in between space in which due to extreme isolation, living in the past and/or imagining a future are the only temporal spaces to occupy. In one vivid story, “Lady of the Manor,” artist Karine from HMP East Sutton Park paints a timeless reflection of living in an old English country manor. She awakes to the sound of a rooster and moves downstairs, “stepping down to the regal staircase with stunning centuries-old oak panels and intricate wood carvings, savouring every detail of the gorgeousness, feeling myself like a lady!”²⁸⁹ As she walks through “this labyrinth of history and utter beauty” to take her morning coffee, the woman ponders how this home became her temporary bedroom: “I must find some information about the Manor and the flamboyant Lord of the Manor who lovingly and tastefully created his magnificent home.”²⁹⁰ She continues, “What happened to him and his heirs and how

²⁸⁹ Karine, “Lady of the Manor,” in *Voices from Prison* (London: Clean Break, 2021): 29.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

did his grand boudoir become the temporary bedroom of the likes of me?”²⁹¹ Karine crafts a clear juxtaposition of her self-worth against the rich history of the unnamed lord of the manor.

By stating that she feels “like a lady” and regarding herself as unworthy to be in such a house, the woman in the story exposes not only class differences but also the hold of the past on the imagination as a means of both escape and reflection. She then muses on how once she leaves the manor her life will be “positively different” for the better. At the end of the story a guard reminds the woman that it’s time for roll check and she snaps out of her daydream: “Roll check? Oh, yes of course [...] in reality, I am still a prison and not quite the ‘lady of the manor.’ So, I step off the dream and step back onto the regal staircase and back to the room where my pad-mate is dreaming her own dreams, loudly snoring.”²⁹² The story’s fluid transitions between the past and the future, in which the present serves to highlight the grandeur of the manor as the woman moves through it, creates an atmosphere that feels antithetical to prison life.

The disappointment of not actually being the lady of the manor but still envisioning a future while dreaming of the past speaks to a type of utopic world-building that engages in concrete hope. The location of the prison offers a greater sense of humanity through the material objects that the lady enjoys – newspapers, real coffee, endless green fields – while still serving as a site of detention. Though materiality cannot placate the human right to freedom, creating a rehabilitative environment moves towards a world without imprisonment. Within this short story, the writer crafts moments of potential utopias through her enjoyment of the world around her and by doing so, offers ways in which the new rehabilitative structures can be built.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

The *Voices from Prison* film exemplifies this diverse work while forwarding the collectivist model of amateurism in that the script, structure, and majority of actors all experienced or are experiencing incarceration. Building from the eBook, the short film opens with a history of the origins of *Voices From Prison*. Clean Break submitted an invitation for poetry from women’s prisons in 1987. That poetry was then turned into a staged performance at Clean Break. The film notes how “since this date, the number of women in prison has more than doubled, despite consecutive governments acknowledging that most women do not need to be there.”²⁹³ With the COVID lockdown, Clean Break reinvigorated this past performance to directly showcase the work of these women. Clean Break member artists Lisa-Marie Ashworth, Funke Adeleke, Jennifer Joseph, Gemskii, and Shona Babayemi perform ten pieces from the eBook. The majority of these women have either been incarcerated or involved in the criminal justice system and are currently working as theatre practitioners outside of Clean Break. As Anna Herrmann noted in her interview, the goal of Clean Break is not to become a drama academy but rather to use theatre and the arts to render visible frequently ignored or erased populations. However, the most visible Clean Break members are those who have chosen theatre as their career and fall under the label “member artists.” Occasionally, they also work alongside already established professional actors to blend the distinction between the “types” of actors in order to “be multifaceted and to be able to produce much more diverse and different work.”²⁹⁴ The film, available for free on YouTube on Clean Break’s channel, actively engages with the work made by incarcerated women. By having women involved with the carceral state perform words made by currently detained women, the short film builds on the eBook via postcarceral performance’s praxis of centering carceral communities.

²⁹³ “Voices from Prison” (film).

²⁹⁴ Interview with Anna Herrmann.

The performance of the written word offers an interpretation of the text. For long-time Clean Break member artist Jennifer Joseph performing some pieces from *Voices from Prison*, her history of incarceration fuses with the experiences of those who wrote her script. There's an invisible relationship centered around carceral trauma between the writer and the performer in that they both share similar experiences and connectedness through their art with Clean Break. As Joseph acts the words of a still-incarcerated woman, Joseph's body activates some of the feelings of her time in prison. Additionally, this practice signals a transitional element of hope in that there are stages of incarceration and pathways to freedom, made visible by the Clean Break member-artist. Joseph's lengthy work with Clean Break signals a transformation from her past incarceration to a robust resume as an actor. Her continued performances on the topic of women and the carceral state also shows the lasting impact of incarceration and the theatre space as a site of processing.

Of course, such a linear process of incarceration followed by release does not accurately portray all processes of imprisonment in the UK but does signal the possibility of developing new skills and identities after release. Furthermore, *Voices from Prison* offers another type of engagement with amateurism, this time through the amateur writer. The use of the incarcerated amateur writer widens how Clean Break develops their productions outside of professional playwrights and more directly engages with the imprisoned population. Furthermore, the film of the eBook includes newer member artists who are less established in the professional theatre world alongside those who have moved between Clean Break and other theatre companies for years (like Jennifer Joseph).

3.3 Conclusion: “Changing Lives and Changing Minds”

Clean Break remains globally the longest running theatre company associated with incarceration since its founding in 1979. Their members’ practice of self-actualization and life “free from criminalization” through performance moves between aesthetic and applied theatre into the realm of postcarceral performance. Part of their lasting success may be due to their substantive focus on professional aesthetic productions under Lucy Perman’s tenure, yet their adaptability and return to original tenets speaks to the company’s continued drive in supporting women touched by incarceration. Though frequently mentioned in the field of prison theatre, Clean Break moves beyond such categorization. Under the company’s new model, the process of building performance is as important as the performance itself by cultivating a space for both processing experiences from detention and crafting new work. As prison theatre scholar Caoimhe McAvinchey notes, the company works in the space between care and justice: “Clean Break’s theatre practice with women affected by social inequality, and the work it does around consciousness raising through theatre about the enduring structural inequalities that shape their experience is, I argue, a political, social and cultural intervention that breeches this gap.”²⁹⁵ Yet while McAvinchey claims that Clean Break accomplishes this visible practice under the model from 1987-2018, I assert that their current model of amateur performance truly challenges society’s stigma against these women and better educates the public about the violence of incarceration because of the members’ lived experience. Clean Break’s return to prioritizing women with lived experiences partakes in amateur performance as these women craft utopias by exposing the frequently hidden world of incarceration. By actively building productions which highlight the challenges facing detained

²⁹⁵ McAvinchey, “Clean Break,” 124.

women (as well as the causes of their detention), the company directly challenges one of prison's most powerful tools: obscurity. The praxis of Clean Break, "changing lives and changing minds – on stage, in prison, and in the community" uses theatre and education to both heal the traumas inflicted by prison and to amplify the marginalized population of women prisoners.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Clean Break's motto.

4.0 “Dwell in the Contradictions”²⁹⁷: Visual Art and Alternative Temporalities

You are Parts of Me

Our Futures will be Written Collectively

*Freedom is a Practice.*²⁹⁸

A bright, tall yellow sunflower rises against a pitch-black abyss. Its delicate green leaves softly unfurl in a spotlight of glowing white, as if beckoning the viewer to come towards the brightness. Beneath the leaves stands the flower’s tall, thick stem, firmly rooted in between the ventricles of a human heart. Enmeshed in the heart’s chambers sprout the sunflower’s roots - curling and weaving out of that which holds them. The blood of the deep red heart drips down the roots, nourishing them as they descend out of the spotlight back into the darkness.²⁹⁹

This striking acrylic painting, “Bloom Where You are Planted” by Nichole “Pariah” Hollingsworth, premiered at Let’s Get Free’s fifth annual art show for creative resistance. In her artist’s statement, Hollingsworth reveals a secret to the painting, a secret invisible to the viewer but locked safe in the flowering of the piece: “Before I painted on the canvas, I wrote a prayer on the canvas so it would always be part of the painting.”³⁰⁰ The prayer, citing both the book of Psalms and the book of Jeremiah, calls for the freedom of two women who have been sentenced to life in prison, Barbara “50” Turner and Felicia “Woody” Jackson. Hollingsworth, Turner, and Jackson

²⁹⁷ etta cetera, unnamed banner, 2021, Let’s Get Free: Collective Resistance, Pittsburgh.

²⁹⁸ Noam Keim, *Freedom is a Practice*, 2021. Let’s Get Free: Collective Resistance, Pittsburgh.

²⁹⁹ Nichole ‘Pariah’ Hollingsworth, *Bloom Where You Are Planted*, 2021, Let’s Get Free: Collective Resistance, Pittsburgh.

³⁰⁰ Nichole ‘Pariah’ Hollingsworth, “Artist Statement: *Bloom Where You Are Planted*,” Let’s Get Free: Creative Resistance, December 13, 2021, <https://creative-resistance.org/heart-bloom-by-nichole-pariahollingsworth/>.

are all currently housed in an Alabama prison, although Hollingsworth is set to be released in 2022. In this prayer, Hollingsworth asks for these women to be “restored” and to return to the places from where they came, from “where you banished them.”³⁰¹



Figure 3 *Bloom Where You are Planted* by Nicole “Pariah” Hollingsworth

³⁰¹ The full poem: Lord, I dedicate this painting to you and to your people who are incarcerated. I dedicate this to Barbara “50” Turner and Felicia “Woody” Jackson and all your children who are sentenced to life in prison. I praise you for the changes you have orchestrated in these lives Lord – And I pray that you set these children of yours free. In Psalms 146: 7-8 you said, “you set the prisoners free, you open the eyes of the blind, you raise up the oppressed.” Lord, set these women free, to bring glory to your name. Lord, in Jeremiah 29:11-14 you said your plans for your children are plans to prosper, to give them a future and hope. Give these imprisoned women a future Lord; give them a hope. You said when they search for you with all their hearts they will find you – let them find you Lord. You said you’d restore their fortunes and gather them from where you banished them. You will restore them to the place from where you took them. Restore them, Lord. Bring your people back from exile for your name’s sake. I thank you Lord, for all of this in advance, and I praise your Holy name – In Jesus’ name I pray – Amen.” Ibid

Such language moves beyond the conventional phrases around being “released” from prison or “returning” to society. By evoking the act of “restoring,” Hollingsworth points to a result of incarceration: the brokenness of a place due to these women’s absence, an absence that has been felt for decades. Still, there remains the hope of healing this absence by restoring these women in their communities. To restore is to heal, yet the healing taking place has to not only answer for the event that led to incarceration but also for the fact that incarceration occurred. Examined more broadly, removing an individual from a community due to a crime supposedly protects the community from further harm. However, the repercussions of eliminating someone leaves long-lasting problems (from increased poverty due to diminished income, the breaking apart of the family structure, as well as emotional and mental trauma). When this absence occurs over decades in the case of lengthy sentences, particularly when it is compounded by a flurry of absences of incarcerated others, the community meant to be protected is instead decimated. Therefore the restoration of communities aligns with abolitionist practices by encouraging healing in the spaces where crimes have been committed.³⁰² The art presented works to restore by remembering historical institutions which paved the way for mass incarceration, acknowledging the inequity over relationships to time in relation to freedom, and identifying past trauma to break generational cycles of harm. The hidden prayer thus serves as the foundation for the heart and flower to unfold. Hollingsworth explains that “the bleeding heart is the soil where the seed of empathy is planted. The seed takes root through the watering of truth; causing solidarity to bloom in beauty.”³⁰³

Empathy and solidarity fuel the majority of pieces at the 2021 Let’s Get Free (LGF) art show. Founded in 2013, Let’s Get Free: The Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee is a

³⁰² Crimes that historically and predominantly occur due to poverty, lack of educational and occupational access, healthcare, etc.

³⁰³ Hollingsworth, “Artist Statement.”

local Pittsburgh organization endeavoring to end the sentence of life without parole or “Death by Incarceration.” While LGF works with and for prisoners of all gender identities and sentences, their primary focus on women and trans prisoners stems from the societal and cultural erasure of these types of peoples. Let’s Get Free’s primary mode of activism, fusing artistic expression and performance with community building, centers its goals on reforming sentencing practices, enhancing community care, and building towards the abolition of the carceral state.

I identify the creative work of abolitionist community-based programs like Let’s Get Free and artistic endeavors by incarcerated individuals and artists in solidarity as postcarceral performance in which the continuity of relationships and action of the art enacts alternative epistemologies to incarceration. These pieces work within the realm of the extraordinary, defying the apathy and complacency surrounding facets of prison life and forcing the viewer to contend with the harm of incarceration.³⁰⁴ Public conversation and civil reform stem from the artistic work created by both incarcerated and free activists. The art itself, as well as the artists’ statements, the curation of the pieces, and the discussions incited by the work, result in structures of feeling which reflect on the history of the systemic imprisonment, international uses of incarceration, community support networks, and political action. The work’s creation and exhibition capture the harsh realities of prison life.

Furthermore, the collaborative dynamic of Let’s Get Free’s board members and founders spanning incarcerated, released, and outside activists offers a unique model of postcarceral performance in action. LGF’s organizational model uniquely positions itself in a liminal space between prison and the outside world by consistently conducting business across these spaces. The

³⁰⁴ As informed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s work on carceral geographies. Particularly referencing her introduction in *Prison/Culture*. Sharon E. Bliss et al., *Prison/Culture*, San Francisco: City Lights, 2009.

prisoner advisory board “guides [Let’s Get Free]. Throughout each year we lean on them for guidance and advice.”³⁰⁵ Made up of over a dozen incarcerated individuals, the board communicates with outside members through mail and phone calls. Many of them additionally work on other programs outside of their role as advisors and have paved the way for a variety of campaigns aimed at transformative justice. While advisory boards for nonprofits are to be expected, the active work with the board and the fact that some of the board members are also the co-founders of LGF highlight how this organization centers those impacted by the carceral state.

Artistic performance in its many forms can serve as a practice to both capture human emotion and imagine new ways of being. Nicole Fleetwood’s groundbreaking book, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, investigates the role of prison art in carceral spaces and larger public art institutions. She maps the labor practices of imprisoned artists and makes visible this labor by exploring their artistic process as acts of resistance: “Prison art practices resist the isolation exploitation and dehumanization of carceral facilities.”³⁰⁶ While Fleetwood masterfully captures the artistic integrity and the prolific labor of prison art, I am interested in how this art constructs an anti-carceral environment and builds networks to activate change and respond to the violence of imprisonment politically. Furthermore, as this small art show received significantly less publicity and attention than *Marking Time*’s exhibit at the MoMA, I additionally explicate the role and reception of art outside of prestige and professionalism. The exhibition of carceral art in community spaces (like Pittsburgh’s Brew House) and outside of well-funded and publicized institutions brings this type of artwork and the discussions of incarceration to a more

³⁰⁵ “Prisoner Advisory Board,” Let’s Get Free, January 10, 2022, <https://letsgetfree.info/prisoner-advisory-board/>.

³⁰⁶ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020): 3.

localized group. This space allows for a wider variety of demographics to bear witness to introspective responses to imprisonment, particularly imprisonment happening nearby.

Across this project, I explore organizations attending to the politics of care against carcerality. Let's Get Free illuminates the possibilities of organizations robustly working across the spectrum of the carceral state, particularly with the employment and/or volunteerism of individuals who have left prison. Furthermore, their primary focus on women and trans communities, and, more broadly, LGBTQ+ incarcerated peoples emphasize incarcerated populations frequently ignored in the discussion of imprisonment. Building from Fleetwood's work, which derives much of its analysis from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's work on carceral geographies, I examine the role of access to abolitionist spaces outside of prison and how these spaces use artistic performance to educate, honor, and incite new epistemologies of freedom. Fleetwood questions the role of "art as politics" in the age of mass incarceration and asks, "How has the colossal reach of the prison industrial complex shaped contemporary art institutions and artmaking?"³⁰⁷ Moving from art institutions into broader public spaces, I question how performance subverts the colossal reach of the carceral state and presents alternative narratives to and about incarceration. How does this narrative build from and thwart notions of American progress? What does postcarceral performance reveal of queerness and queer temporalities? With Let's Get Free work occurring across social media, local galleries, digital prison access, courthouses and state capitols, and creative spaces, I track how the organization engages in dialogue about the meaning of time and the labor of community-building across these spaces. Through art's wielding of the intersections of history and memory in American culture, much of the artwork in this year's art show actively visualizes the effects of mass incarceration and carceral

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 4.

time. The cross between the past and present in the work and the viewer's physical crossing between art made on the 'outside' and the 'inside' reflects an alternative liminal space and time in which the art itself illustrates the complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of temporality.

4.1 Alternative Time, Alternative Selves: Time and Temporality in Postcarceral Performance

Despite a plethora of texts, films, shows, and stage productions on the incarcerated experience, very few (if any) adequately capture the trauma of incarceration related to temporality. In the introduction of *Prison/Culture*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore bluntly captures the passivity and inaction of those on the outside: "Prisons are a monumental aspect of the ghastly public infrastructure underlying a chain of people, ideas, places, and practices that produce premature death the way other commodity chains crank-out shoes or cotton or computers. *Why don't our heads burst into flames at the thought? Why is the prison-industrial complex so hard to see?*" (emphasis added).³⁰⁸ I second Gilmore's vivid questioning of why we, the general public, are not enraged and why we have become (if not always been) complacent with the carceral state. Arguably the desire of "ignorance is bliss," cheap goods, punitive laws and epistemologies, and familiarity with punishment – made pleasing through entertainment, allows society to turn away. In her discussion of American history, memory and reenactment, Rebecca Schneider reflects how "American innocence, lack of memory, and naivete are ideas that still carry weight today."³⁰⁹ The

³⁰⁸ Gilmore, "Introduction" in *Prison/Culture*, 1.

³⁰⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 24.

notion of innocence drives the carceral state by distinctly crafting an ‘us’ (the innocent) from ‘them’ (the guilty). But the performance of incarceration and the aftermath of the prisoner label once released can correct these ideas. In the performances of “them” (the guilty), I interrogate the temporal space of incarceration and the space of alternative temporalities built behind bars. Drawing from temporal drag, I examine the role of waiting and the convergence of the past, present, and future in artistic practice and the artwork produced.

Art produced by incarcerated people can provide a space, particularly through a performance lens, to re-examine what incarceration actually *is*. Nicole Fleetwood succinctly states, “one of the reasons why it is crucial to attend to the art practices of the imprisoned is because [...] shapes how prisons and people confined to them are viewed in public life. This power to reveal and hide prisons and the imprisoned has an enormous influence on how the larger public comes to understand the function of the prison and to justify the removal and incapacitation of millions.”³¹⁰ If society justifies this incapacitation because of the art of shows like *Law and Order*, then art and performance by the incarcerated can work to counter this acceptance. The production of this artistic work and its presentation to the public requires immediate action.

The roles of time, performance, and political resistance offer a generative constellation to examine the oft-ignored oppression mechanisms of the state. What Julius Fleming Jr. refers to as Black Time Studies grounds its scholarship in the forced and sometimes selective role of waiting in Black Resistance and the reorientation of temporality outside Western (White) notions of time. Time “as a technology of power” organizes bodies, enforces societal norms and structures, and informs economies.³¹¹ As Elizabeth Freeman describes in her rendition of Foucault, “the

³¹⁰ Fleetwood, 15.

³¹¹ Julius B. Fleming, “Sound, Aesthetics, and Black Time Studies,” *College Literature* 46, no. 1 (2019): pp. 281-288, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2019.0014>, 282.

predominating power modes of an emerging liberalism shifted away from public torture, with its focus on the visibly suffering body, and toward self-regulation.”³¹² The mechanism enacting this self-regulation was, of course, surveillance and the “anatomochronological schema of behavior.”³¹³ The control and temporal impact on the state-controlled body, however, predates Foucault’s work and his description of eighteenth-century torture in the opening of *Discipline and Punish*. More than two hundred years before the French crown’s violent display of power with the execution of Robert-François Damien, the control of bodies also came in the form of forced waiting. Ultimately, the transatlantic slave trade enforced an alternative structure of time, behavior, and captivity.

At the same time, the transatlantic slave trade was beginning, and much of the Western justice system utilized the spectacle of the scaffold to enforce state control. The choreography of the scaffold moved quickly in time – with justice served through execution. Yet the choreography of the Middle Passage and enslavement drew out time – justice not being the goal. Of course, these two historical scenarios are far more complicated and distinct than they are similar, but they illustrate the drastic difference in experiencing time when detained. In *Black Patience: Black Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*, Fleming argues that the concept and framework of black patience essentially “weaponizes time” and functions as “a way of naming and elaborating a specific brand of patience: one that arises from and sustains a global system of waiting that produces black suffering by compelling black people to wait and to capitulate to the racialized terms and assumptions of these forced performances of waiting.”³¹⁴

³¹² Elizabeth Freeman, *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods & Queer Sociabilities in the American 19th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 1.

³¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 152.

³¹⁴ Julius B. Fleming Jr., *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (New York: New York University Press, 2022): 9-12.

Speaking on the Civil Rights Movement and White politicians responses to Black leaders to “wait,” Fleming tracks how the virtue of patience became an anti-Black weapon and from this how Black performance practices thwarted the waiting discourse. Informed by this work, I expand on the role of waiting in prison as “forced performances” alongside identity performance and community building, which are made visible through art in defiance of the carceral state’s erasure of prisoners’ experiences.

Art makes perceptible the alternative temporalities experienced by the incarcerated. The effect of these experiences (of alterative time and life imprisoned) varies from person to person. For example, the art made in solitary confinement, such as T.R. work, alludes to the isolation of the individual but also the absence of the natural world, resulting in incredible contraband art made with the natural world. With other incarcerated people like Charmaine Pfender, the art produced illustrates her experience behind bars but also shows her plans and hopes for the future. Temporal drag, “the pull of the past on the present,” works as a fruitful framework to map out how the folding of the past into the present haunts those in detention.³¹⁵ In this chapter, I attempt to craft an assemblage of time theories and performance to fully engage with the artwork produced and the exhibit’s curation. In order to attend to LGF’s politics of care, I examine the artwork *with* the artist in mind and situate their product as an extension of their experiences. These artists and activists utilize performance to portray life behind bars and develop empathetic observation of the art in the hopes of observation becoming action.

³¹⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 62.

4.2 “What is this Correcting?”: Overview of Incarceration in Pennsylvania and the Founding of Let’s Get Free: The Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee

To fully highlight the postcarceral performance work of Let’s Get Free, one must understand the current status of incarceration in Pennsylvania and the United States. The history of the American carceral state remains so formative to its current construction, particularly through the use of solitary confinement and life sentences, that a brief overview offers insight into the system’s contemporary operations, reflecting its design and Pennsylvania’s current status as one of the harshest carceral states. With the rise of mass incarceration over the past 40 years, the systematic oppression of the historically marginalized shows a country obsessed with violence and detention. After providing an overview of the system generally, I then show the origins of LGF and how LGF wields arts and education and builds resistance narratives across imprisoned and free communities. To move beyond viewing carceral art and artmaking as solely rehabilitative or worthy for museum display, I trace how the creation, curation, and dissemination of this art and performance defies the dehumanization of the carceral state.

Much of the current U.S. prison system derives from practices started in Pennsylvania and the Quaker history of using incarceration as reformatory. In interviews with etta cetera, co-founder of Let’s Get Free, she acknowledged the impact of the Quakers’ history on both the Pennsylvania and national prison system.³¹⁶ The American penal system slowly broke from European, particularly English forms of punishment following the end of the Revolutionary War. The public spectacle of punishment, famously described in the opening of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, gave way to more private forms of punishment and eventually, following the work of

³¹⁶ etta cetera, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, December 17, 2021.

Jeremy Bentham and John Howard's 1777 report, *State of Prisons in England and Wales*, reorganized prison architecture.³¹⁷ While the American colonies followed England in forms of public punishment through the use of stocks and pillories, Pennsylvanian doctor and philosopher Benjamin Rush argued against this practice because it functioned to uphold the power of the monarchy. As the United States broke from England, such visible power, Rush claimed, was no longer necessary.³¹⁸

Instead, Rush argued for solitary confinement, away from the public, and long-term incarceration.³¹⁹ As Angela Davis notes, the reformatory movement of incarceration stemmed from making punishment more effective. At the same time, companies began regulating paid work schedules, and thus “the computability of state punishment in terms of time, days, months, years – resonates with the role of labor-time as the basis for computing the value of capitalist commodities.”³²⁰ Since the nineteenth century, the use of private imprisonment (private meaning hidden from the public) and the commodification of incarceration has only grown. According to

³¹⁷ Brief history covered in Chapter 3 “Imprisonment and Reform” of Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*.

³¹⁸ Robert R. Sullivan, “The Birth of the Prison: The Case of Benjamin Rush,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): pp. 333-344, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.1998.0024>, 334.

³¹⁹ In a report delivered at the home of Benjamin Franklin in 1787, “An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments upon Criminals and upon Society,” Rush wrote “It [the human mind] always ascribes the extremes in qualities, to things that are unknown; and an excess in duration, to indefinite time. The human mind is disposed to exaggerate every thing that is removed at a distance from it by time or place.” These axioms, as he called them, point to the effectiveness of psychological punishment through isolation which then would result in a reformed citizen. Part III of the Enquiry covers six general axioms supporting new forms of reformatory punishment: “1st, The human mind is disposed to exaggerate every thing that is removed at a distance from it by time or place. 2dly, It [the human mind] is equally disposed to enquire after and to magnify such things as are secret. 3dly, It [the human mind] always ascribes the extremes in qualities, to things that are unknown; and an excess in duration, to indefinite time. 4thly, Certain, and definite evil, by being long contemplated ceases to be dreaded or avoided [by the human mind]. A soldier soon loses, from habit, the fear of death from a bullet, but retains, in common, with people, the terror of death from sickness or drowning. 5thly, An attachment to kindred and society is one of the strongest feelings in the human heart. A separation from them, therefore, has ever been considered as one of the severest punishments that can be inflicted upon man. 6thly, Personal liberty is so dear to all men, that the loss of it for an indefinite time, is a punishment so severe, that death has often been preferred to it.” Benjamin Rush, “An enquiry into the effects of public punishments upon criminals and upon society” (Philadelphia: Joseph James, 1787; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011): <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N16141.0001.001>. Also discussed in Sullivan, 338.

³²⁰ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 44.

geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden Gulag*, “prisons both depersonalized social control, so that it could be bureaucratically managed across time and space and satisfied the demands of reformers who largely prevailed against bodily punishment.”³²¹ Gilmore acquiesces that the reformer movement succeeded yet still has “torturous conditions.” Nevertheless, how the carceral system has developed suggests that the reformer movement worked in tandem with the monarchists, who saw public punishment as necessary. Both views of public power and private detention have combined into one system which thrives on the commodification of incarcerated bodies and their labor and the execution of extreme sentencing. This combination of bodily control, both performed and enacted, connects to how postcarceral performance becomes a practice to defy the private brutality of the prison physically and mentally by exposing it through public dialogue.

My focus on Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh, more specifically, arises from the State’s widespread use of Death-By-Incarceration (DBI), a term referring to the sentence of Life Without Parole (LWOP). Additionally, the role of gentrification diminishing access to affordable living, healthcare, and education, dramatically contributes to Pittsburgh’s impact on a racially unjust legal system.³²² I follow the Abolitionist Law Center’s (ALC) use of “DBI” when discussing “LWOP”

³²¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 12.

³²² In order to become “the most livable city,” extreme gentrification, particularly in Lawrenceville and Downtown, have resulted in displacing thousands of low-income residents. Incarceration and gentrification may not have a direct causal relationship but there are clear connections. According to CourtWatch, an increase in investment properties typically align with an increase in police, which results in police surveillance and the likelihood of violence. Gentrification also informs the likelihood of returning citizens reoffending because as Michelle Alexander describes, “prisoners returning ‘home’ are typically the poorest of the poor, lacking the ability to pay for private housing and routinely denied public assistance.” The issues of available jobs dependent on education status and prior convictions result in an even larger obstacle for returning citizens, which are more likely to be people of color and low-income. Let’s Get Free works with other local and state-wide organizations such as Decarcerate PA to address the societal effects of structural inequality and Pennsylvania’s criminal justice system. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2nd ed. (New York: The New Press, 2020): 145.

due to its widespread use by incarcerated individuals when discussing their sentences.³²³ Furthermore, Philadelphia (the headquarters of ALC) leads the world in DBI sentences per population, and Pennsylvania’s racial discrepancy in incarceration continues to rise.³²⁴ In Pittsburgh, where the Abolitionist Law Center’s CourtWatch program is located, the racial makeup of the local jail is incredibly stark: while 13% of Allegheny County is Black, Black individuals make up 62% of the county jail’s population.³²⁵ This disparity has led to activists and scholars labeling Pittsburgh as an apartheid city, particularly in light of the widespread gentrification of the past decade.³²⁶ Let’s Get Free advertises the number 5,467 – the number of death by incarceration sentences in Pennsylvania. The Abolitionist Law Center and Let’s Get Free continue to fight to end LWOP sentencing.

³²³ Quinn Cozzens and Bret Grote, “A Way Out: Abolishing Death by Incarceration in Pennsylvania: A Report On Life-Without-Parole Sentences” (Abolitionist Law Center, September 18, 2018): 11, https://abolitionistlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ALC_AWayOut_27August_Full1.pdf.

³²⁴ Craig S. Lerner, “Life Without Parole as a Conflicted Punishment”, *Wake Forest Law Review* 48 (2013): 1101-1171. *George Mason Law & Economics Research Paper* No. 13-50, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2329864>, 48.

³²⁵ Dolly Prabhu, “Apartheid Policing in Pittsburgh: Why Defunding the Police Can’t Wait” (Abolitionist Law Center, December 15, 2020): <https://abolitionistlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ALC-APARTHEID-POLICING-IN-PITTSBURGH.pdf>, 6. Furthermore, ACJ has become one of the most dangerous jails in the country. According to available press releases from ACJ and investigation by the Pittsburgh Institute for Nonprofit Journalism, 13 men have died in ACJ since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the number could be higher because “reporting has revealed that not all jail deaths are reported publicly, and the jail doesn’t “count” deaths after men are released to the hospital, the total could be higher.” The majority of men had not been convicted and were awaiting trial. The rate of deaths (per 100,000 incarcerated people) in Pennsylvania prisons have increased from 13.5 in 2000 to 23.2 in 2020. These numbers are regarded as an undercount.

Brittany Hailer, “Thirteen Men Died after Going to the Allegheny County Jail,” *Pittsburgh Institute of Nonprofit Journalism*, March 24, 2022, <https://pinjnews.org/thirteen-men-died-after-going-to-the-allegheny-county-jail-here-are-their-stories/>.

³²⁶ University of Pittsburgh law professor and U.S. Congressional candidate Jerry Dickinson wrote about his experiences living and campaigning in Pittsburgh as comparable to South Africa two decades after state-sponsored apartheid ended. After talking about housing concerns with “a Black single mother of three young children on her porch in a dilapidated home in the city’s segregated Hill District” Dickinson connected the scene back to his own experiences visiting Alex in Johannesburg, South Africa. He describes how, “Black children in my hometown were growing up in [...] America’s apartheid city, not the nation’s most livable city.”³²⁶ Dickinson’s evocation of one of the most brutal human rights atrocities in the second half of the twentieth century immediately characterizes the drastic inequality of the city. Jerry Dickinson, “Commentary: Pittsburgh Is America’s Apartheid City,” *PublicSource*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.publicsource.org/commentary-jerry-dickinson-pittsburgh-is-americas-apartheid-city/>.



Figure 4 Let's Get Free's billboard outside of the Allegheny County Jail. Shown on the billboard from left to right are Tameka Flowers, Charmaine Pfender, and Sarita Miller.

Let's Get Free's most considerable focus is on ending violence against women and the termination of DBI sentences. The organization was founded by art-activist etta cetera, Avis Lee, Donna Hill, and Charmaine Pfender in 2013.³²⁷ Both Avis and Charmaine were given DBI sentences while Avis has since been released. Let's Get Free "uses art as an organizing tool" to render the atrocities of incarceration visible and provide community space to discuss carceral reform and political engagement. etta's work as a multidisciplinary artist inspires the organization's labor in multiple genres to continue this social justice work. In LGF's first year, "etta, with participation from Avis, set up a life-size prison cell acknowledging five women who were in prison for self-defense."³²⁸ While the crime and sentence do not need revealing to empathize and organize against the current carceral state, exposing the severity of punishments

³²⁷ Donna Hill is Charmaine's mother.

³²⁸ "About Us," Let's Get Free, February 5, 2021, <https://letsgetfree.info/about/>

against the age and situation of the committed offense can be beneficial in illustrating the injustice of the justice system. Thus, LGF openly describes the reasons for Avis and Charmaine’s sentences on their organization’s website: “Avis was the lookout for a robbery that resulted in a death and was sentenced under the Felony Murder Rule.³²⁹ Charmaine defended herself against a man attempting to rape her, resulting in his death, and as a consequence of ineffective counsel and a sexist, homophobic media smearing, she was convicted of murder instead of self-defense. We believe they both should be free.”³³⁰ Avis Lee’s sentence, given when she was 18, was commuted in February 2021. She was incarcerated for 40 years. Charmaine remains detained at SCI Cambridge Springs, where she has spent 40 years.

Pennsylvania has the second-highest number of people serving LWOP sentences of any state in the country. In Pennsylvania, a life sentence does not come with the possibility of parole (and it is one of only six states with this sentence). As of 2009, 9.4% of the prison population served life sentences.³³¹ In contrast, there are 15 states where less than 1% of people in prison are serving LWOP. The language shown in Figure 2 of LGF’s billboard “sentenced to die in prison” more accurately describes the actual passing of time of an LWOP sentence as “life” in prison cannot mean the same as “life” outside of prison. To quote Nikole Hannah-Jones, “language is important – particularly in the past, but, of course, in all contexts – because it can either clarify or obscure. It can either justify or explicate.”³³² The phrasing of “life in prison” attests that the sentence simultaneously continues the incarcerated person’s life but also distinctly separates them

³²⁹ The Felony Murder Rule is a legal doctrine which widens the crime of murder allowing accomplices to be found guilty of murder without committing actual murder.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ashley Nellis and Ryan S. King, “No Exit: The Expanding Use of Life Sentences in America” (The Sentencing Project, July 2009): <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/No-Exit-The-Expanding-Use-of-Life-Sentences-in-America.pdf>.

³³² Ramtin Arablouei and Rund Abdelfatah, “Nikole Hannah-Jones and the Country We Have,” *Throughline*, November 2021, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1056618320>.

from the general public. This phrase, in turn, provides comfort to victims' families through the frequently used idea that these individuals are no longer a threat to society or, more colloquially used, that "they can't hurt anyone anymore."³³³ It justifies the lengthy sentence. "Life" in this type of sentencing actually diminishes what existence truly looks like. ALC describes how using "Death by Incarceration" reformulates this erasure of life by emphasizing how DBI "invokes the social death experienced by the incarcerated, as they are subject to degraded legal status, diminished rights, excluded from social and political life, tracked with an 'inmate' number like a piece of inventory, and warehoused for decades in this subjugated status."³³⁴ Death by Incarceration's language forces the outside observer to shift from viewing time as living in prison for the rest of life (emphasizing time in a way that imbues time with length) to being forced to die in prison by the prison's hands (emphasizing time as under carceral control). This language and the ideas it contains appear in LGF's art show primarily through the show's theme: empathy. By recontextualizing the actual severity of sentencing – the art, artist statements, and curation of the exhibition work to correct and/or expand the viewer's understanding of incarceration.³³⁵

³³³ A comment frequently used both in judges' sentencing (witness when attending remote hearings of the Allegheny Courts in 2021) and in entertainment to provide a sense of security and comfort. In Pennsylvania around 63% of those serving life (both life and virtual life sentences) are Black while 27% are White. For comparison, Pennsylvania is around 75% White. Nellis and King, "No Exit."

³³⁴ Cozzens and Grote, "A Way Out," 9.

³³⁵ Though not the focal point of the show, Furthermore, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the status of private prisons in Pennsylvania, despite its small populations. Private prisons produce capital. Public prisons cost capital but make up for it through the outsourcing of companies supplying telephone access, commissary needs, and other functions in prison. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, for-profit prisons emerged during the Reagan and Thatcher era as a response to increasing incarceration rates (that their policies ultimately created). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the Reagan/Thatcher era and rise of private prisons coincided with the political goals of "War on Drugs." Scholar Sydney Young simplifies the goals of private prisons: "companies make contracts with their respective government in which they agree to manage correctional facilities in return for a payment for the state. They profit more by charging more than the cost of running the facility but less than it would cost the government to run its own public facilities." Essentially, the more individuals incarcerated in these prisons equals more profit for these companies. Incarceration serves as a money-making scheme. In 2021, the Sentencing Project released a report on the status of private prison populations in the US. Pennsylvania started off the twenty-first century with zero inmates in private prisons. Nearly 20 years later, the state now has 511. Next door in Ohio, the state had 1,918 private inmates in 2000 and 6,766 in 2019 or a 253% increase. Though private prisons remain astronomically smaller than the public carceral system, the introduction of profits over public interest and net gain over supposed "rehabilitation" quite

I went to the fifth annual Let's Get Free Art show on December 17, 2021. Housed in the Brew House Gallery in Pittsburgh's Southside, this year's exhibit entitled "Empathy is the Seed" featured dozens of paintings, sculptures, and multi-media works by both incarcerated and free individuals across the country.³³⁶ etta cetera, one of the co-founders of Let's Get Free, took me throughout the gallery, describing the intentions behind each piece, the artist, where the artist was detained or if the artist was in solidarity, and etta's interpretations of the piece. Last year's art show was the first to include a contest for both incarcerated artists and artists in solidarity. Commenting on the contest's second run, etta described the complexities of using a contest format with nuance:

This is our second contest -- we feel a little bit weird about contests. Like saying one [piece] is better [than another]. So we changed the language of our prizes; instead of last year where it was first, second, third place, this year it was [broader categories] such as "a piece that embodies empathy," "a first-time submission piece," "a piece that moves us." We're trying to get away from "best" language, but we're still being flexible. People like winning money! But yeah, we can't give everybody money, right? So until we figure out -- like it's illegal for prisoners to make money -- there's just a lot of rules... we're figuring it out and wrestling with it.³³⁷

While the rules of earning money while incarcerated continue to shift and change based on state and even prison regulations, inmates participating in outside contests usually can earn prize money. More importantly, the modification of contest awards for the art show exemplifies LGF's desire to validate the labor and artistic process of the artist as well as emphasize the connections made

prominently reveals the main desire of the carceral state as a whole: detain to gain. Sydney Young, "Capital and the Carceral State: Prison Privatization in the United States and United Kingdom," *Harvard International Review*, September 23, 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/us-uk-prison-privatization/>. Additional information from Angela Browne, Alissa Cambier, and Suzanne Agha, "Prisons within Prisons: The Use of Segregation in the United States," *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 24, no. 1 (January 2011): pp. 46-49, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fsr.2011.24.1.46>. "How Many People Are in Solitary Confinement Today?," Solitary Watch, March 19, 2022, <https://solitarywatch.org/2019/01/04/how-many-people-are-in-solitary-today/>.

³³⁶ Let's Get Free past art shows: Empathy is the Seed 2021, End Death by Incarceration 2020 (virtual): Glow Home 2019, Letters and Liberation 2018, and Contraband 2017. LGF's first art event was *Chin to the Sky: The Avis Lee Play* in 2016.

³³⁷ Interview with etta cetera. Earning money while incarcerated depends on state law and incarcerated individuals in Pennsylvania are allowed to earn money from contests with certain limitations. Here etta refers to the larger system put in place that prevents incarcerated individuals from *easily* obtaining funds outside of outsiders sending money into the prison.

between the art and outside audience members. The contest adds an air of excitement to the art show as well as the opportunity to make some money. It also encourages direct participation with attendees who are able to vote for a variety of categories. Moments passed where it felt as though we were in an exclusive private showing of the latest art in the city as we moved about the large space, overwhelmed with high ceilings and the industrial look of the trendiest parts of the Steel City. Yet the artwork itself forced me, forced any viewer to contend with the painful, real effects of detention.

Key to this process and performance is the concept of time – that is, the acknowledgment and portrayal of what life sentences (Death by Incarceration) truly look like, how they impact communities, and how abolitionist goals and care for communities require consistent and continual programming and engagement. Time functions in a range of ways in postcarceral performance. One example is how postcarceral performance organizations like Let’s Get Free continuously engage with and for incarcerated people. Just as Clean Break uses theatre to uplift women and educate the public about the criminal justice system, so does Let’s Get Free revolve around rendering observable life experiences within the U.S. judicial system. At the heart of their labor is raising the visibility of those erased mainly from society. The organization’s continuous and consistent work is prevalent in their response to upcoming commutation hearings, organizing in response to legal and judicial proceedings, actively fundraising and donating to local mutual aid groups. More specifically, their routinely scheduled work of the “Write Time” – Wednesday weekly letter-writing meetings to incarcerated women and trans prisoners, reveal a sustained effort of care that lasts. Operation Break Bread, one of LGF’s newer initiatives, schedules in-person visits with those at SCI Cambridge Springs. These visits are funded by LGF and occur several times a year. SCI Muncy, being further away from Pittsburgh, has facilitated virtual visits since

the onset of Covid.³³⁸ Rather than waiting for release, waiting for commutation, or waiting for the legal system to change, LGF facilitates active communication and personal networks to support incarcerated individuals. The annual art show both renders visible the struggles of the imprisoned but also showcases LGF's other activities and initiatives to encourage attendees to get more involved.

Due to the theme of this year's show, many of the artworks highlighted the healing effects of nature and the natural world and used the seasons to signal time passing. One piece, a colored pencil drawing entitled "Every Sentence Comes to an End," depicts a glowing sunset of red, orange, and yellow with the silhouette of a bird flying in the distance.³³⁹ Beneath the skies stands a chain-link fence with barbed wire curling along the top. The shadow of a guard stands in a tall tower, appearing to aim his gun below. With their back to the observer, an inmate outstretches their arms in jubilee towards the bird flying overhead. The clear juxtaposition between the embrace of the sunset and the bird against the darkness of the fence, the guard, and the gun signal the paradoxes of humanity. The artist, Gary Farlow, writes:

For me, art, whether visual or written, can be symptomatic as well as reflective. Whether tranquil or feverish, it can capture the temperature of the times. Art and poetry can open the doors the heart has closed and deadbolted. It can slow time down or speed it up, using lines and stanzas, strokes, and colors, to create suspense calling the attention to moments when the ordinary experience changes and flares into vivid portrayal. Art can give one strange yet intoxicating possibilities. Amidst this barren wasteland of humanity called prison, there lies the spark of creativity. Like a tender shoot pushing up through a crack in cement, art lives in the most dismal of places. It is a reminder of hope, a beacon for survival, a measure of worth. Man's own inhumanity to man cannot destroy the beauty that lies within each of us, pushing its way out in exultation of a free spirit.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ "About Us."

³³⁹ Gary Farlow, *Every Sentence Comes to an End*, 2021, Let's Get Free: Collective Resistance, Pittsburgh.

³⁴⁰ Gary Farlow, "Artist Statement: *Every Sentence Comes to an End*," Let's Get Free: Creative Resistance, December 13, 2021, <https://creative-resistance.org/every-sentence-comes-to-an-end-by-gary-farlow/>.



Figure 5 *Every Sentence Comes to an End* by Gary Farlow

Farlow alludes to the juxtaposition of humanity’s brutality and hopeful possibility within the art and the statement. Time is the thread between these two ends in which performance (that is, both the process and the product of artistic endeavors in this scenario) pinpoints the effects of incarceration. Following the setting of the drawing, the guard and the inmate experience their surroundings differently. For the guard, time passes in a traditional, linear manner in which time passes between both work, home, and recreational parts of life. He most likely works in shifts, putting in common work hours in exchange for a paycheck, and returns home. The incarcerated individual, however, occupies a single space behind the barbed-wire fence where time is controlled for him – from waking and roll call to yard time to “free” time mainly used for calling loved ones and showering. Time is never the inmate’s own.

Examining the piece alongside its title, “every sentence comes to an end” adds another layer of time. The exaltation or relief of the inmate’s outstretched arms to the sky signals freedom to return and begin anew. But put in conversation with much of the other art and the sentence of

Death By Incarceration, for some, that sentence's end is only through death. The guard holding the gun, will he inflict death? Is this the prisoner's ending? Is he trying to escape, or is he finally free, and the guard signals the constant monitoring which occurs after release? Such questions swirl around the piece illustrating the complexities of what carceral sentences impart on the incarcerated individual as well as the temporal impact of being removed from society. With each stroke of the colored pencil, Gary Farlow continued to serve his sentence as the clock ticked by. The artist's statement furthers the hopeful interpretation of the piece that this drawing is of an inmate finally free from imprisonment, able to walk out into nature past the dark shadows of the guard, the fence, and the barbed wire. He indicates that the finishing out a sentence, a return to a new type of freedom, inevitably occurs; the question is, how does it end for the imprisoned person?

The past lives in the prison. The prison itself does not so much hold the past as those within its walls are haunted by it. The origins of the American prison, as I've noted, embrace the practice of stasis to reflect on past crimes. Put another way, some of the prisons' designs enforce solitude under the guise of reflection. The effect of incarceration reaches far beyond labels of guilt or innocence, between imprisoned or free; it seeps into the family structure, individual self-worth, member of society, and even the ability to dream about life past tomorrow or the next day. Death by Incarceration sentences limit the ability to dream and create new ways of being due to the enforced caging of humans by the judicial system. Yet through performance, and connection with those both inside and outside, the act of hoping and the development of long-term communities dedicated to fighting a DBI sentence or even fighting to survive any type of sentence, creates an environment that crosses paths of self-discovery and educational outreach. How can performance reframe how those on the outside view incarcerated time and what does this reframing do?

4.3 Re-Memory and the Cycles of Oppression: An Artist in Solidarity Speaks

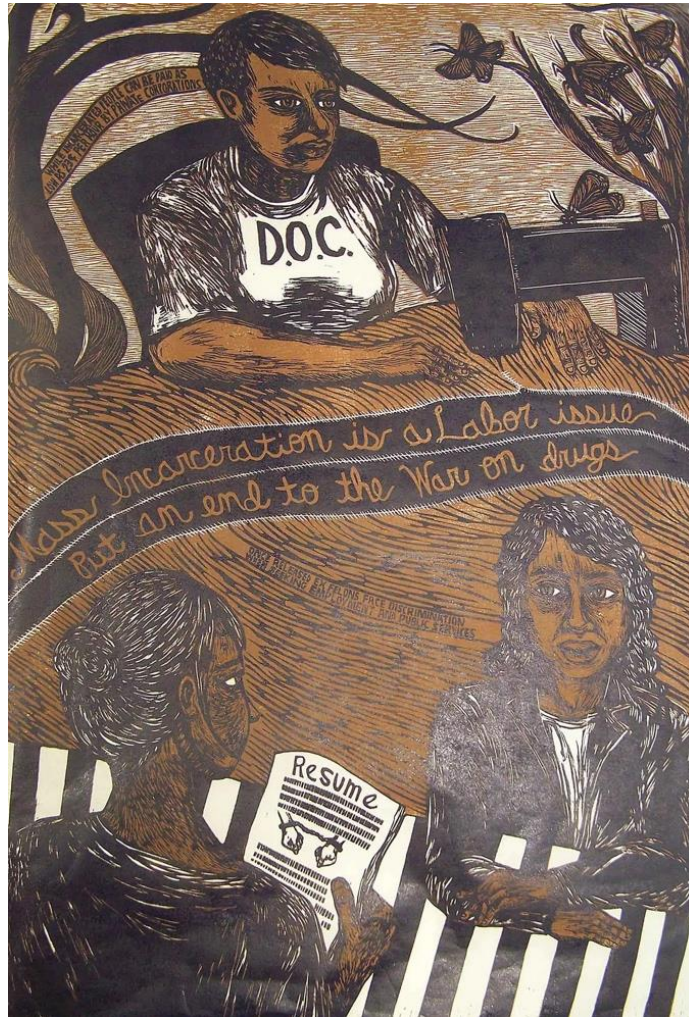


Figure 6 *Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue* by Meredith Stern

From the corner of my eye, I saw a large painting, a linocut.³⁴¹ Deep brown hues contrasted with vivid whites filled the piece with a clear division between the top and bottom. I could make out the word “resume” on a piece of paper covering the bottom half of the piece and a pair of brown shackled hands beneath the word. The artwork was displayed as part of the “Artists in

³⁴¹ Meredith Stern, *Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue*, 2014, *Let’s Get Free: Collective Resistance*, Pittsburgh.

Solidarity” section of the exhibit in between five other pieces, most of which fit the muted color style of this large print. Through its playing with time, this image overshadowed the surrounding pieces and captured both the temporality in prison and the afterlives of incarceration. On film or television, a five-second clip reading “five years later” marks how much time has passed, but to the observer, those five-year experiences can never be accurately portrayed. Heteronormative time tells us that five years or 1,825 days have passed. But what does that mean or feel like? By evoking queer time and queering time, I suggest how the art produced at the Empathy is the Seed Art Show pulls from various temporal theories and solidarity practices. Drawing from queer time and Black time studies, I track how Meredith Stern’s artwork disrupts temporality from heteronormative, White, Anglo-American notions of time. In particular, “Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue” weaves together the role of time, history, and memory in American culture through the citation of enslavement and imprisonment. In so doing, the artwork expands the viewer’s focus to connect the histories of Anglo-American slavery with modern mass incarceration. Through the evocation of the slave ship diagram and the illustration of mass production via the sewing machine, the linocut highlights how forced imprisonment has served mass production by paying unlivable wages (if at all) in order to keep consumer prices low. By queering time, that is, by cohesively evoking the transatlantic slave trade with modern-day sweatshop labor within the same piece, Stern’s linocut directly coalesces fuses together forced labor and captivity to support Anglo-American capitalism. By doing so, Stern creates postcarceral performance – as an artist in solidarity – which bears witness to the current injustices of the contemporary state of prisons and also the continued racist practice of profiting off of captive Black labor.

The intersections between forced detention and racialized labor ricochet across American history. In 2020, the increased demand for hand sanitizer to combat the COVID-19 pandemic

pulled back the curtain on legalized forced labor. Then New York governor, Andrew Cuomo, authorized the use of prison labor to produce hand sanitizer made in his state. Such a move reflected an attempt to avoid the price gouging of personal protective equipment. Before much of the country entered lockdown in early March 2020, Cuomo’s highly publicized press conference revealed that each gallon of sanitizer would only cost the state six dollars to produce – because incarcerated men were making the gel for less than a dollar an hour.³⁴² Though the 13th amendment allows for penal labor under the requirement that the individual was “duly convicted,” scholars and activists often describe incarcerated work as legal slavery.³⁴³ By April, over a dozen states were using prison labor to fight the pandemic, often forcing workers to work twelve-hour shifts instead of their typical six-hour work day.³⁴⁴ Using this labor to make hand sanitizer readily available for the general public at an affordable price was meant to show progress in fighting COVID-19. Cuomo’s press conference and other states’ subsequent statements on increasing production depicted the American ideal of progress, of moving forward past obstacles to create a better tomorrow. But behind this curtain of progress stands the actual harm to individuals no longer (if fully ever) regarded as citizens.

The narrative of the early days of COVID-19 swirled around “getting through it” or “seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.” Finality and endings of diseases coincided with a return to what was – that is, a return to in-person work, absence of face masks, lack of fear of contagion, and a

³⁴² There is no centralized tracking of incarcerated pay. However, the Prison Policy Initiative has collected available data and noted that the average pay of an American incarcerated individual is 63 cents an hour. Wendy Sawyer, “How Much Do Incarcerated People Earn in Each State?” *Prison Policy Initiative*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>.

³⁴³ Ava DuVernay’s *13th* offers a fantastic overview of the ways this amendment and subsequent interpretations of it contributed to the systematic oppression of Black Americans and mass incarceration.

³⁴⁴ Carlee Purdum, “States Are Putting Prisoners to Work Manufacturing Coronavirus Supplies,” *U.S. News*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-04-21/states-are-putting-prisoners-to-work-manufacturing-coronavirus-supplies>.

generalized take on 9-5 schedules.³⁴⁵ Time, essentially, became a battle between returning to the past or rushing to meet the future: a future, it seemed, which looked like the now-immediate past. Major news organizations’ “return to normalcy” dialogue reinforced the notion that the past is better than the present and that the future should look like the past. Stuck in between were and are the incarcerated individuals who largely live in this not-present space. With this, I mean the solitary and regimented use of time allows for (if not encourages) the mind to wander between the past and the future as the present is not desirable. In *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History*, Jaclyn Pryor describes how “straight time not only negates a trauma survivor’s lived experience of past events, it also reproduces the logic of capitalism: the system, that is, that creates the conditions under which racial, gender, sexual, and economic violence gets enacted in the first place.”³⁴⁶ The capitalistic desire to manufacture, sell, collect profits and repeat constructs a system of temporal organization that benefits financial gain. The assembly line, the eight-hour workday, the five-day work week – the Western world’s construction of time emphasizes productivity over any other human act of survival. How deeply ironic is it that those incarcerated individuals are subject to forced labor only to meet profound stigma in finding a job upon release.

Making art allows for reclaiming time by carving out a space of time that is one’s own to live in creativity. The practice in prison fights what Pryor, drawing from philosopher Jill Stauffer, cites as “ethical loneliness” or “the violence of original harm [by humanity] compounded by the

³⁴⁵ All of which, it should be noted, speak to a White middle-class view of existence.

³⁴⁶ Jaclyn Pryor, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History*, (Chicago: Northwestern Press, 2017): 4.

violence of a harm not heard.”³⁴⁷ Postcarceral performance addresses the violence of the carceral state and the larger societal ignorance of the harm of incarceration and release through the collaboration of art and performance practices with outside, inside, and returning individuals. Furthermore, it pulls from centuries of injustice by evoking haunting imagery of forced labor before mass incarceration.

In “Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue,” I noticed how above and below the hands and resume label stretched small black rectangular shapes in neat rows. Based on the layout of the shapes surrounding the shackled hands, my initial interpretation was that this was a reimagination of enslaved persons crossing the Atlantic.³⁴⁸ This art explicitly follows broader Black performance scholarship identifying the transference, adaption, and continuation of abolitionist art beyond the nineteenth century. The diagrams of ships containing enslaved individuals repeatedly appeared in my history textbooks up through high school – a stark image presented as a mere matter of fact in the list of important eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American events.³⁴⁹ The image that came to mind, “Description of a Slave Ship,” was originally printed in England in 1789 on broadsides based on woodcut and copperplate engravings.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ Stauffer originally defines “ethical loneliness” as “the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” cited in *Time Slips*, 7. Jill Stauffer *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 1.

³⁴⁸ I do not know the artist’s full vision behind this part of the artwork as she did not mention it in her artist statement. Yet the fact that this image was the first connection I made and that it cohesively supports the overall message of the piece supports the multiple ways of absorbing the purpose of “Empathy is the Seed.”

³⁴⁹ More vividly than the history textbooks were *Welcome To [American Girl]’s World* books by *American Girl*, of which I voraciously read them all. Felicity and Addy’s books contained the “Description of a Slave Ship” image. Cheryl Finley additionally acknowledges these books in her work. Catherine Gourley, *Welcome To Felicity’s World, 1774: Growing Up In Colonial America* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications, 1999); Susan Sinnott, *Welcome To Addy’s World, 1864: Growing Up in During America’s Civil War* (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publishing, 1999).

³⁵⁰ *Description of a Slave Ship*. London: Printed by James Phillips [for the London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade], 1789. Two broadsides.

The image of the slave ship and similar diagrams have been disseminated across the trans-Atlantic for centuries. Cheryl Finley’s description of “the slave ship icon,” that is, the circulation of the vivid image of these diagrams, has ultimately entered into cultural memory and played a crucial role in what Paul Gilroy calls “the Black Atlantic.”³⁵¹ She tracks how the image began with British abolitionists’ plan to publicize *Brooks*, the slave ship, to fight to end the transatlantic slave trade at the end of the eighteenth century. The image then spawned new lives through its use in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. Whether or not the imagery reminiscent of slave ships was the artist’s intention, its space in cultural memory, particularly when placed alongside the demographics of mass incarceration, connects to the American practice of detaining Black individuals. In building off of Paul Gilroy’s and Harvey Young’s work to define “black patience,” Julius Fleming Jr. traces the genealogy of Blackness and time in performance studies: “A key dimension of the historical relationship between blackness and time coheres around and reproduces a historical condition that black performance theorist Harvey Young has called ‘the wait,’ or the forced suspension of black bodies in time and space.”³⁵² Performance genealogies track the circulation and use of these types of images, fusing the connection between history, cultural memory, and temporality. Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* pushed the boundaries between archive and performance by analyzing scenes of slavery, emancipation, and its aftermath. The “aftermath,” or “the recognition of the humanity of the slave,” Hartman notes, “did not redress

³⁵¹ Cheryl Finley, *Committed To Memory: The Art Of The Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity And Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁵² Fleming, 5.

the abuses of the institution” but reconstructed the violence of the institution of slavery in more sinister ways.³⁵³

By examining scenes of the past, particularly through objects, Hartman traces the aftermath of the violence enacted on Black bodies both during slavery and Reconstruction. A twentieth-anniversary reflection on Hartman’s book describes that “while the whip itself no longer physically registers its brutal imprints on black flesh itself, its power is primarily turned inward toward the affective registers that then discipline the flesh into proper methods of embodiment.”³⁵⁴ I draw on Hartman specifically because of her profound use of performance to render visible the continued affective reverberations of violent institutions. Similarly, Stern’s evocation of the slave ship affectively illustrates the containment of bodies across time – whether through enslavement or incarceration.

³⁵³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 6.

³⁵⁴ Sampada Aranke and Nikolas Oscar Sparks, “Reading and Feeling After *Scenes of Subjection*,” *Women & Performance* 27, no. 1 (2017): 1.



Figure 7 *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* by Josiah Wedgwood

Iconic imagery and material objects resonate in a manner that collapses the distance between centuries past and the immediate present. Their status as recognizable images, as “historical images,” offers an alternative historiography that produces a throughline from one moment in time to another. In 1787 British potter Josiah Wedgwood produced an anti-slavery medallion whose image would become the symbol for the anti-slavery movement in England and the U.S. The inscription of “Am I not a man and a brother?” beneath the rendering of an enslaved man supplicating to unseen powers quickly became popular iconography for the abolition of slavery in the United States. By the 1830s, the image was remade to include a woman and appeared in broadsides alongside John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem, “Our Countrymen in Chains.”³⁵⁵

³⁵⁵ The poem, alongside the image, additionally noted, “England has 800,000 Slave, and she has made them free. American has 2,250,000! and she holds them fast!” Josiah Wedgwood, “Am I not a man and a brother?” 1837,

However, Saidiya Hartman's interpretation of Wedgwood's imagery closely follows the haunting of the Euro-American past on display in Meredith Stern's piece. Hartman describes:

His clasped hands were folded as if he were praying and his head was upturned slightly as if he were looking for God, but I understood that it wasn't God to whom he was looking and praying but to the people of England or France, who might as well have been God [...] Needing to make the case that we have suffered and that slavery, segregation, and racism have had a devastating effect on black life is the contemporary analogue to the defeated posture of Wedgwood's pet Negro. The apologetic density of the plea for recognition is staggering. It assumes both the ignorance and the innocence of the white world.³⁵⁶

The evocation of nineteenth-century imagery doesn't have to appeal to the sympathies – it should not appeal to sympathy (at least not only); instead, it serves as a continuous reminder of the continued practice of forced detention. The transference of a nineteenth-century image of slavery to a twenty-first-century piece on labor practices post-incarceration does not have to spell out the connection. The “fit” of its inclusion marks the systematic continuation of White supremacy. Stern's own description of her artwork acknowledges that it speaks to the barriers formerly incarcerated people face upon entering the workforce. Some of these barriers originated over 400 years ago. The purpose of Stern's piece is not to evoke pity or sympathy but to mark these connections that, in terms of mass incarceration today, little has been overcome from the time of the icons in this painting.

The act of etching into a material to print “Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue” repeatedly elicits continued reverberations of this history and its permanence. As if by marking it multiple times (through the engraving and then the printing, which can be reproduced), there lies a solidifying of the image and its hold on the archive. The circulation of the image with its

Broadside Collection, portfolio 118, no. 32a c-Rare Book Collections, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661312/>.

³⁵⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008): 168-169.

permanence in text carries forward a history. It continues to tell the story of the Middle Passage, connecting the forced detention of then to the forced detention now (a story that no justice system or prison warden would willingly share). The immediate present focus of detaining people – with police working to meet quota, gentrification causing an increase in houselessness leading to detention – poverty, the war on drugs, the backlog of the courts – all of these issues and the system that oversees them functions to keep people imprisoned. Because of these issues and the cash bail system, the agonizingly slow trek towards release relies on lengthy detention. Getting people into prison is fast and simple. Getting them out is slow and difficult. Thus, through Stern’s work, through the citationality of the shackled hands and the slave ship with the clear connection to finding work post-release, the linocut collapses the history of state-sponsored detention from the beginning of this country to today. I am additionally reminded of the epilogue of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which the novel’s ending questions the continuation of painful histories: “this is not a story to pass on,” and the notion of re-memory elicits the complex space between remembering the past and building a better future. Re-memory, the sudden recollection of forgotten moments, uncanny in their nature due to their repression, is physically and emotionally haunting: “Some things you forget. Other things you never do. [...] 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.”³⁵⁷ Looked at another way, what do Americans want to “pass on” and what have they passed on?

Postcarceral performance actively lives in the present yet is fueled by hope to attend to the still-present violence of incarceration, educate the broader public, address the trauma of recently released individuals and imagine (through reform practices) a world without prisons. The artist

³⁵⁷ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004): 43.

Meredith Stern's statement succinctly describes the sections of "Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue" artwork:

This is a print that I made for the Just Seeds installation in Milwaukee based around Labor Issues. An incarcerated woman in a Department of Corrections uniform sews while in a scene below her, a woman interviews for a job. The tethered butterflies symbolize a yearning for freedom for the woman above, while the bars along the bottom represent the barriers which exist for people who seek employment once released from prison. The text reads: Mass incarceration is a labor issue. Put an end to the war on drugs. While incarcerated people can be paid as little as 23 cents per hour to work for private corporations. Once released, ex-felons face discrimination when seeking employment and social services.³⁵⁸

Returning to Morrison's re-memory and the slave ship icon, the art helps us (the viewer) remember what the general public has forgotten: organizing labor through violence in order to maintain a social hierarchy. By including the slave ship icon in the artwork, the connection between slavery, prison labor, and labor accessibility once released invites a remembering of this country's continued reliance on forced labor. The history of the American past informs its present as forced labor continues. Even as one may additionally interpret the shapes of the resume section of the piece as filler text (blocks standing in for where the text will go) rather than the slave ship icon, the text remains illegible, and the core piece of identity is still that of a non-citizen. The shapes merely signify the work the formerly incarcerated woman has completed but are obscured by the overt glare of her "convict" status.

Saying that "we," as an American society, have improved and grown as a culture is integral to American identity. The phrases "American progress" and "the American Dream" heighten that we are better now than we were before — yet rising mass incarceration throws a wrench in that

³⁵⁸ Meredith Stern, "Artist Statement: *Mass Incarceration is a Labor Issue*," Let's Get Free: Creative Resistance, December 13, 2021, <https://creative-resistance.org/mass-incarceration-is-a-labor-issue-by-merideth-stern/>. Just Seeds is an artist organization devoted to using art for collective action. The organization has members from all over the United States and Canada. Pittsburgh, PA houses their distribution center.

cultural thought. However, postcarceral performance works within that temporal landscape of progress through its focus on the individual behind the inmate number and the reclamation of space and time control when leaving prison and continuing to thrive outside of prison through the continuation of art and community engagement. Organizing labor as in the labor of organizing subversively continues the thread of American progress in the next section as one artist in solidarity defines the vision of “raising the flag.”

4.4 (Re)Enacting Freedom: “Solidarity Builds Change”



Figure 8 *Solidarity Builds Change* by Charmaine Pfender³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ Organizations listed: ACLU – American Civil Liberties Union, ALC – Abolitionist Law Center, ALP – Amistad Law Project, CADBI – Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration, Decarcerate PA, FAMM – Families

At first glance, Charmaine Pfender's colored pencil drawing appears relatively simple – a reimagining of “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” photo by Joe Rosenthal taken on February 23, 1945. The Pulitzer Prize-winning photo became arguably the most vivid embodiment of patriotism as World War II ended in May 1945. No stranger to reinterpretations, “Raising the Flag” has been redesigned for many political and social causes. In 2005, prolific queer photographer Ed Freeman remade the photo with four men raising the rainbow flag for the cover of *Frontiers Magazine*. The image resurfaced with much controversy in 2015 following the marriage equality ruling by the Supreme Court, with some decrying the new interpretation's “disrespect” for the military.³⁶⁰ When examined with theories of reenactment, queer identity, temporality, and bearing witness, Pfender's drawing of “Solidarity Builds Change” captures some of the alternative epistemologies present in and possible through postcarceral performance. For Pfender, these performances activate historical and familial memory and, for the viewer, invite reinterpretations of solidarity. The gender-expansive and nonprofit spin on the WWII photograph into this colored pencil drawings gestures to who can “fight” as it reframes the enemy from the Axis Powers to the Department of Corrections.

In 1984 and 1985, news reports on the murder of Engin Aydin swirled with homophobic and misogynistic remarks around the two women charged for his death. The headline of *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* read “Man-Haters?” with the first line citing that the Pittsburgh police

Against Mandatory Minimums, FFLE – Fight For Lifers East, FFLW – Fight for Lifers West, HOAW – Hearts on a Wire, HRC – Human Rights Coalition, J&M – Justice and Mercy, Jail Break PGH, LGF – Let's Get Free, Lifers Inc., PPS – Pennsylvania Prison Society, Reconstruction Inc., SA – Straight Ahead (Part of ALC), WLR PPA – Women's Lifers Resume Project of PA.

³⁶⁰ Dan Lamothe, “Iwo Jima Marines, Gay Pride and a Photo Adaptation That Spawns Fury,” *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/07/01/iwo-jima-marines-gay-pride-and-a-photo-adaptation-that-spawns-fury/>.

used the phrase to describe Pfender.³⁶¹ Later in the same article, reporters asked if she was a lesbian. Following this reporting and the trial, other news outlets latched onto the homophobic trope.³⁶² The violence against Pfender's history of suffering domestic and child abuse, as well as the coverage of her trial and the sentence of DBI, illustrates an all-too-familiar narrative of women and LGBTQ people suffering at not only the hands of imprisonment but also another branch of the carceral state – the media.³⁶³ I discuss this brief history of Pfender because it contains the multitudes of violence that postcarceral performance works to both convey and demolish.

By evoking queer time, by artists queering time, I recognize how the art produced at the Empathy is the Seed art show pulls from varying understandings of time in which how to bear the brunt of the weight of this detained time shifts from only the person who has that sentence and onto the other who listens, learns, and yes, empathizes with the prisoner. While still incarcerated after thirty-eight years, Pfender's artwork, co-founding of LGF, life experience, and personal reflection straddles the multi-spatial realms of the carceral state: working for those inside it, those who have left it, those who may return, and those who may never leave, all while still being inside. The art show's "Artists in Prison" unearths the vast space that incarcerated individuals occupy, defying the suppression of the individual by imprisonment. Their existence and creative process disobey the state's attempted silencing of their senses, emboldened by many artist's identities as BIPOC and LGBTQ: "Queerness, blackness, and brownness is itself disobedience, the swerve, the ontological and historical priority of resistance, and a break from the standard measure, the

³⁶¹ Jim Gallagher and Harry Tkach, "Man Haters? Suspect Claims Self-Defense in Killing Turk," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, August 11, 1984, <http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-11-1984-page-1-34/docview/1860057877/se-2?accountid=14709>.

³⁶² See the *LA Times* and *AP*.

³⁶³ In 1985, Charmaine Pfender and Sara Mae Richardson were charged with the murder of Engin Aydin..

constant, the straight line, or of the major.”³⁶⁴ The redesign of “Raising the Flag” disobeys the original message and transmission of the photograph and instead envisions an alternative to mass incarceration through the fore-fronting of grassroots organizations.

The rendition of “Raising the Flag” activates the American consciousness and transports it into the original artwork’s scenario: war.³⁶⁵ Even if the viewer does not recall the title, remember the battle, or the war, for many, the image itself lives in the American memory as a moment of defiance and perseverance in war. Of course, when non-white cis male bodies partake in the physical act of raising not only a flag but a different flag, the scenario shifts and no longer remains stable in America’s embrace of patriotism. Pfender’s rendition, like Freeman’s before her, complicates the role of ownership and relationship to raising a flag in solidarity. Furthermore, solidarity is only one half of the importance of “Raising the Flag;” the second half symbolizes freedom. As Joshua Chambers-Letson explains in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, “Freedom is a problem. Freedom has been colonized, absorbed, stolen, and made a utility by and for white liberal political reason. Freedom, within white supremacist liberal capitalist modernity, is largely understood to be a possession or right: the freedom to own, to enter the market, or to buy and sell one’s labor.”³⁶⁶ To the incarcerated individual, freedom becomes something else and yet remains the same. The capitalist desires that Chambers-Letson lists remain, but for incarcerated individuals, freedom additionally means to *return*. While I discuss imprisonment’s forced removal of an individual from society more in Chapter 4, acknowledging

³⁶⁴ Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 31.

³⁶⁵ “The scenario makes visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes [...] simultaneously setup and action...” Furthermore it functions as “a paradigm for understanding social structures and behaviors” or “formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal parody and change” and “refer to more specific repertoires of cultural imaginings.” Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 28-29, 31.

³⁶⁶ Chambers-Letson, 6.

the simultaneous looking to “get back” to what was mixed with the passage of time invites a theoretical reading of queer of time in prison and its role in postcarceral performance.

Queerness emanates in the structure, work, visual presence, and artistic creations of Let’s Get Free, particularly with Charmaine Pfender’s piece. In J. Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, the notion of a queer time and a queer place helped spark a new era of queer temporalities. Similar to the work of José Esteban Muñoz, Halberstam’s generous and generative reading of pop culture and the queer communities offers alternative models for examining the function of time across wide groups of people and institutionally. *In a Queer Time and Place* views queer time as an antithesis to heteronormative time, which largely centers around the role of reproduction. Halberstam examines how those living outside of heteronormative time, “ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed,” release themselves from the reproductive temporal structure (whether willingly or not) in which case a new time structure emerges.³⁶⁷ Both Halberstam’s and Pryor’s theories of queer time in relation to reproduction or the absence of it relate to its absence in prison in that carceral space, through its organization and categorization of bodies primarily by sex, additionally prohibits the physical and social role of reproduction. Beyond the location of queerness and reproductive time, Pryor’s connection of queerness and temporality applies to the tracking of the functionality of time in postcarceral performance: “these works are queer not (only) because [...] they were created by lesbian, queer, and/or transgender artists, but because they queer, or question, spectator’s internalized straight sense of time.”³⁶⁸ Queerness traverses between the embodiment, action, and resistance to heteronormative hegemonies.

³⁶⁷ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 4.

³⁶⁸ Pryor, 13.

Pfender's artwork establishes alternative epistemologies on incarceration through its magnification of the collective of incarcerated individuals and abolitionist and/or grassroots organizations. Because of the pointed use of a famous historical American image, Pfender's piece reconstructs solidarity against an adversary: long-term incarceration. Diana Taylor's framework of scenario as both a setup and an action encourages viewers to examine historical moments or practices (such as conquest) to mark the social structures and repetitive behaviors at play. Banding together to enact a symbol of ownership and success, visual confirmation of a battle about to be won has been remade from its World War II setting into the present-day fight for abolition. The image's decades-long use as a symbol of patriotism shifts from statues to postcards.

Pfender's work embodies temporal drag – looking to the past and redefining what a moment in American history, a moment celebrated as solidarity/bravery in the face of an enemy turns into. How does a symbol of American greatness on the battlefield get remade into a symbol against America's biggest institutions? For Pfender, the remake comes from community support groups and nonprofits banding together to overtake prisons (labeled as DOC). Furthermore, Pfender's catalog of interviews, essays, and work with LGF additionally speaks to her work as a recipient of these groups' support but also as a mentor. Long-term incarceration does not solely affect the incarcerated individual. The solidarity against long-term incarceration comes in the same temporal frame as the sentence: long-term support.

As etta stopped in front of Charmaine's piece, she paused – briefly looking deeply at the artwork before beaming:

This [piece] is Charmaine Pfender, another one of our co-founders. [She] created this piece which we really love, it's taking the classic army– the Iwo Jima [photo] and turning it into solidarity. Like even a person in prison is part of it. These are all our local organizations, and even these are statewide coming together to hoist the flag. It's super gender-expansive

– yeah, we really love the boobs and beard here. And it’s simple! This one actually won the solidarity award for the artists on the inside category.³⁶⁹

The visually queered body in this image, particularly Charmaine’s use of herself as a queer woman, reminds us of those historically marginalized communities who unite to fight against oppression. This minoritarian performance breaks the white male cis het embodiment of solidarity, pride, and defiance by visually broadening who can “raise the flag.” Performance, its ability to continuously frame and reframe how we approach and understand an event, similarly offers a way to approach abolition. Abolitionist texts call for new ways of thinking, of imagining beyond, and of deconstructing the supposed normalcy of the justice system. Postcarceral performance as a practice decenters linear modes of time and reconstitutes means of belonging through using the past as a site of reimagining. The temporal drag of “Raising the Flag” both reimagines this scene of the past and winks towards identities that have always been there, though not always visible. It also gestures toward collective world-marking through mutual aid, community support, and a network of abolitionist collectives. This experience of time comes through in the art but more structurally speaking, the exchange of the art, the crafting of a show, and the increase in prisoner visibility highlight these alternative temporalities. As shown in Pfender’s piece, the artmaking process collapses conventional time by recreating a WWII image with present abolitionist organizations enacting a future scenario of freedom and continued collaboration with these groups.

Eighteen organizations stretch across the multi-colored flag. Some groups, such as the ACLU and HRC, broadly serve and support civil rights in the U.S., sometimes in direct opposition to the work of other groups in the flag. Others, such as the Women’s Lifer’s Resume Project, focus on specific issues such as highlighting women’s rehabilitation and reformatory work while

³⁶⁹ Interview with etta cetera.

incarcerated. Though the ACLU could hardly be considered part of the Undercommons, Pfender's citationality of the broad spectrum of these groups for invisible populations speak to the networks of working in the "unimaginable" towards an unknown future.³⁷⁰ The embodiment of solidarity, pride, and defiance by the bodies and the grassroots groups within Charmaine's drawing encapsulates Harney and Moten's use of planning as oppositional to the structured forms of organization dictated by the state. Instead, it is "this ongoing experiment with the informal [...] the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible."³⁷¹ Harney and Moten's epistemic space of the Undercommons and planning defies traditional organizational methods and their focus on the invisible populations furthering knowledge production outside of well-funded and protected institutions reverberates in Pfender's reimagining of the iconic image.

Let's Get Free thwarts this two-dimensional characterization of inmates as living embodiments of their crimes through organized visits with those on the outside. Elias, a queer youth participating in LGF's "Operation Break Bread," which organizes visits to SCI Muncy and SCI Cambridge Springs, met with Charmaine in 2019. LGF's Instagram page posted the familial bond between Charmaine and Elias, highlighting their kinship and the importance of chosen families ("Char invited Elias to be adopted by her"). Elias described their conversation as posted by LGF:

We spoke a lot about the differences of what it is like to be queer now compared to when she entered prison, which was informative, and I think mutually beneficial. That it was much less safe and there was so much more shame. But also how transness and exploitative conceptions of gender have impacted new queer community [sic]. We also talked a lot about her dreams and fantasies/great organizing project ideas she has for when she gets out. We shared about our different lives, and she shared many hilarious and absurd stories

³⁷⁰ Drawing from Halberstam's forward in *The Undercommons*.

³⁷¹ Harney and Moten cited in Chambers-Letson, 29.

about her life both on the inside and on the outside. It was a really meaningful connection.³⁷²

The act of remembering and exchanging of times of queer life now and then, meeting in this transient space (for Elias) and forced captivity (for Charmaine), yields new relationships. From this and the work of Operation Break Bread, LGF builds networks across those on the inside and the outside in order to humanize and empathize with those subjected to detention. This personal connection of two queer persons speaking across a forty-year gap. The crossing of this gap reveals the change in societal reception to queerness (“it *was* much less safe, and there *was* so much more shame”) while acknowledging new waves of “impact” in the queer community.³⁷³

Instead of flying the flag of a colonizing country, Charmaine Pfender flies the flag of solidarity. This piece serves as an example of an alternative epistemology concerning the carceral state – grassroots organizing triumphing over the department of corrections. Pfender’s change of the original photo greatly minimizes the massive base that the Marines used to plant the American flag. While the original photo contains a sprawling heap of metal, debris, and rock, this base labeled with “DOC” shrinks beneath the individuals planting the flag. The rock-as-DOC collapses into a *small* base, perhaps only necessary for extreme needs of incarceration. The organizations raise and swirl as the frontline defense, prevention, and treatment for the vast majority of issues that lead to incarceration. In her artist statement, Pfender reflects:

The woman & Trans [sic] inmates feel the empathy from all the groups that fight, along side [sic] of LGF with the same agenda, to see us released from prison. But these groups also work with us to make sure our needs are being met while in prison. And because we are included in the work, we feel a part of our growth and the change it is bringing about. The Truth in this drawing is shown in the action of driving our flag into the DOC until it cracks & begins to bloom Change. Obviously, Solidarity is shown that many groups &

³⁷² Instagram post from LGF’s account (@womeninprison) on November 14, 2019.

³⁷³ I am unable to ascertain what was meant by the sentence “How transness and exploitative conceptions of gender have impacted new queer community [sic].”

hands of groups are on that flag forcing the DOC to listen to our Collective Voices. The cracks & flag itself created bloomage in the action of cracking the rock.³⁷⁴

The “cracking of the rock” or the foundation of the Department of Corrections explodes the firm foundation of incarceration as the solution to “crime” but more broadly used as a solution for poverty, addiction, and in the case of many – self-defense. Notably, the DOC not disappearing reflects co-founder etta’s remarks that abolition “doesn’t happen overnight” and that there is no one way to enact abolition. I will speak more on etta’s discussion of abolition at the conclusion of this chapter but must acknowledge etta and Charmaine’s shared mindset of reform as the way through abolitionist ideals. Additionally, the sprouting of flowers from the DOC rock and the spurts of grass along the ground signifies the promise of growth and healing through the comradery and collective action of dismantling the carceral state.

To return to the drawing’s relationship with the original photo, I note the layers of history and projections of futurity in the piece. The individuals reenact defiance in the raising of the flag. By using one of the most memorable images in American culture, Pfender plays with the relationship between spectator and expectation. This American image, taken by an American man of American men, yet not on American soil and in defiance of an invisible enemy (not pictured), became a symbol of freedom. Yet, for Charmaine, the image holds a more personal connection:

I have a little bit of history with the Iwo Jima statue. My great grandmother Susan Burke worked in Pittsburgh welding (a regular Rosie the riveter) for the government. It was during the war when women had to work these male jobs (back then). She was building all the parts to build ships. Her proudest moment was that the flag that was raised by the real men in Iwo Jima that the statue was created from came from a ship she built. So I always think of that statue and how it takes even the most unlikeliest [sic] people to play a role in a historic event. I guess that is what came to mind when coming up with this concept for LGF. No matter how small your part, if we work together, we can achieve great things, like cracking the stone that is the DOC.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Charmaine Pfender, “Artist Statement: *Solidarity Builds Change*,” Let’s Get Free: Creative Resistance, December 13, 2021, <https://creative-resistance.org/solidarity-builds-change-by-charmaine-pfender/>.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

In this statement, Pfender harkens to the invisible bodies, particularly women, who contributed to the iconic photo.³⁷⁶ She traces the assemblage of things to Rosenthal's piece. Essentially, she makes visible the discarded individuals who made the U.S. successful in the spring of 1945. Creating art can be a radical act of self-worth. Charmaine's crafting of familial history, particularly of women, femmes, and non-binary identities, reclaims her narrative and the broader narrative that the media spins around arrest and incarceration. The simplicity of the piece – with the crisscrossing blue strokes filling in the sky and the careful, clean penmanship spelling out social justice organizations forces the viewer to reckon with the humanity of the individual behind the piece. Perhaps the viewer can then reckon with the inhumanity of the system that contains her.

4.5 Making Time Visible

The cultural understanding of incarceration arises from the embodied experience of being subject to the carceral state as both a direct participant and, more prominently, a distant observer. The artwork and performance art produced by Let's Get Free reveals the slippery meaning and ownership of time in light of carcerality and visibility of the mechanisms of imprisonment. The waiting is unseen and enforced, as Fleming notes, the sheer cost of how many days and years waiting engaged in the same monotonous routine while waiting for the answer of guilty or not guilty; for commutation or continual imprisonment – how that time moves is largely invisible to

³⁷⁶ According to Survived and Punished, a volunteer-run organization for the abolition of imprisonment for victims of abuse, "the majority of people serving LWOP in women's prisons are survivors of abuse, including intimate partner battering, childhood abuse, sexual violence and trafficking." This statement appears at the end of a short biographical film on Pfender on Let's Get Free's website: "A Ticking Heart." "Let's Get Free - The Women and Trans Prisoner Defense Committee," Let's Get Free, April 13, 2022, <https://letsgetfree.info/>.

those detached from the criminal justice system. This visible invisibility showers the annual LGF art show, striving to expose the human impact of the carceral state. Some artwork made in solitary confinement reveals the depths of the system itself but particularly the liminal space between incarceration and commutation.

Visibility is a throughline in many recent pieces reflecting on prison arts – particularly popularized through Nicole Fleetwood’s book, her Rutgers exhibit, and later MoMA exhibit of the same title she guest-curated. Visibility is a fundamental start to recognizing the trauma of imprisonment and humanizing prisoners but following this visibility – what’s next? How can these performances not only humanize the incarcerated artists behind the canvas but reframe how the outside world swiftly and simply? In my section on Charmaine Pfender’s work, I explored the use of historical images, simplistic style, and queer identity to humanize incarceration. Here I examine two artists with prestige and professionalism, both featured in “Empathy is the Seed” and in the “Marking Time” exhibits. One artist, Todd ‘Hyung-Rae’ Tarselli (also known as T.R.), is on LGF’s Prison Advisory Board. The other, Mark Loughney, was an artist prior to incarceration. Both are incarcerated in Pennsylvania.

To counter the acceptance and complacency of the carceral state, Gilmore explains how “to affect what lies beneath these structures [...] requires radical revision. By turning *what becomes ordinary towards the extraordinary*, our expressive figurative works cause what disappears to be visible, palpable, present here and now.”³⁷⁷ The works in the art exhibit reveal varying degrees of talent, similar to a school’s art show. The artists featured in exhibits, the ones who are publicized the most like Mark Loughney or Todd ‘Hyung-Rae’ Tarselli (also known as T.R.), are deeply talented in the way audiences may conventionally throw around the description

³⁷⁷ Gilmore, “Introduction” in *Prison/Culture*, 1.

of “natural talent.” Both T.R. and Loughney’s *extraordinary* works of carceral aesthetics perform the trauma of incarceration and reflect personal desires and dreams while detained.³⁷⁸ If following performance studies’ embrace of performance as a *doing*, then the creation and display of Tarselli and Loughney’s works actively make real the incarcerated individual, an individual that the viewer must reckon with. Furthermore, their art standing on display in the MoMA enhances their power, harkening to both a prestige and label of talent and an opportunity to force attendees to bear witness to their stories and the stories of other incarcerated peoples.

Hyung-Rae was born in South Korea and orphaned at the age of 5. According to his LGF profile, his birthdate was inaccurately printed during his adoption “due to a mistake in interpreting cultural age counting. Korean culture considers a child 1-year old on the day of birth while the U.S. does not.”³⁷⁹ This error labeled him 18 instead of 17 at the time of his sentencing, and he was given LWOP/DBI. Hyung-Rae has been friends with etta for over twenty years and frequently works with the organization. The prison considers some of his most prolific works contraband, as he paints scenes from nature (all from his memory) on leaves; these are prohibited materials in Pennsylvania’s prisons. LGF’s first visual art exhibit showcased his works on leaves, a collection which he titles “Contraband.” T.R. is currently housed in a supermax prison and lives in what can essentially be regarded as solitary confinement. He completes many of his pieces using coffee grounds, paper bags, and white pencil. Yet his contraband series, so vivid in their realism, open up a space to break apart the cruel temporal experience of incarceration, particularly solitary confinement.

³⁷⁸ Carceral aesthetics as defined by Nicole Fleetwood is “the production of art under the conditions of unfreedom; it involves the creative use of penal space, time, and matter,” 25.

³⁷⁹ Let’s Get Free, April 13, 2022, <https://letsgetfree.info/prisoner-advisory-board/>.

The experience of time greatly differs from the actual enforcement of carceral time. Despite the brutal regimented enforcement of prison time via corrections officers and down-to-the-minute scheduling, the experience of being incarcerated – particularly in solitary confinement – cognitively and emotionally overpowers this regimented time. In the appendices of this project, there is a personal essay by Kabasha Griffin-El, the focus of Chapter 4, that graphically describes the mental and physical effects of solitary confinement. Time, rather than a structure to move forward and count the days, ceases to exist cohesively, thereby causing horrific mental anguish. Art shown in “Empathy is the Seed” conveys the effects of incarceration, and through the public display of the art, particularly relatively famous works like T.R.’s pieces, encourages public discussion on the abolition of the prison industrial complex.

I use T.R.’s artwork to break apart what art made in solitary confinement means in terms of creativity and humanity— through its framing, exposing, and reforming of how performance can articulate the prison violence. I sat with T.R.’s artwork for quite a while, shocked at the piece’s intricacies but even more so the process of creating it. Knowing T.R.’s solitary imprisonment, I knew how limited supplies and access were to him. In tracking all the ways one could take in T.R.’s piece, I crafted a list of what I imagine the step-by-step guide to making one of his contraband nature pieces would look like: 1) Make a painting 2) Make a painting of still life in nature 3) Make a painting of still life in nature without direct reference 4) Make a painting of still life in nature without direct reference or actual access to nature 5) Make a painting of still life in nature without direct reference or actual access to nature thereby relying on memory 6) Make a painting of still life in nature without direct reference or actual access to nature thereby relying on memory and paint this on contraband material 7) The contraband material is of nature itself – a leaf 8) Make a painting of still life in nature without direct reference or actual access to nature

relying on memory and paint it on a leaf, a contraband material, while in solitary confinement. By listing out the process, I depict the mental turmoil of solitary confinement. The reliance on memory and quite literally living within one's mind comes into focus by deconstructing the artmaking process by an individual like T.R. Furthermore, the process and production defy carceral control because of the contraband material. While I do not know how T.R. gets his materials (nor should that be made public), he inevitably would have had to make some connection or partnership with an individual outside of his restricted housing unit. Thus, when examined from the beginning to the end of the artistic production, T.R. does far more than painting nature's still-life. The artmaking process in solitary confinement opposes dehumanization.³⁸⁰ It is an act of radical rebellion by evoking one of the most basic human experiences of being outdoors. Like fellow artist Mark Loughney, TR's painting keeps and visualizes time when analyzing the making of the work. In other words, artistic production works as timekeeping in a space "without" time.



Figure 9 *Deer* by Todd 'Hyung-Rae' Tarselli

³⁸⁰ Nicole Fleetwood discusses this in greater detail in *Marking Time*.



Figure 10 *Pyrrhic Defeat: A Visual Study in Mass Incarceration* by Mark Loughney



Figure 11 *It Requires All of Us* by Mark Loughney



Figure 12 *Love Each Other* by Mark Loughney

Moving from contraband material and art made from memory, Mark Loughney's work relies on the imprisoned figure and portraiture. Loughney's visual art cannot be contained to one

style or general description. His portraiture, particularly a grid of 500 hundred faces (when displayed in 2021) entitled *Pyrrhic Defeat: A Visual Study of Mass Incarceration 2014-present*, visualizes the person behind the inmate label. The piece has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review*, and *NPR*, some of which cover the work in tandem with *Marking Time*. Loughney's piece began in 2014 as a way to study penal time – to curate “calm amidst chaos.”³⁸¹ To create these drawings, Loughney has each individual sit for 20 minutes to capture their image in a serial process that continues today, now reaching 703 portraits. The title derives from Jeff Reiman and Paul Leighton's 1979 study “The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison,” which itself integrates the theories of Kai Erikson and Émile Durkheim.³⁸² As defined by Reiman and Leighton, “Pyrrhic defeat theory argues that the failure of the criminal justice system yields such benefits to those in positions of power that it amounts to a victory.”³⁸³ In other words, those with the power to change the carceral state work to continue its success as it benefits their social standing. The criminal justice system contains crime but assures that some crime remains visible to the public, reinforcing the need for the justice system itself. The amount of portraits mirrors a number that Loughney describes as “not even a drop in the bucket of our 2.4 million brothers, mothers, sisters, and fathers that are locked away in prisons in our country.”³⁸⁴ Loughney's time spent with the incarcerated men serves as an act of solidarity and caring, an active human connection by sitting with one another, focusing on one task ahead, even with dozens of other men around them. The set time that

³⁸¹ Maurice Chammah, “Portrait of the Artist as an Incarcerated Man,” *The Marshall Project*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/10/04/the-prison-portraits>.

³⁸² Jeffrey H. Reiman and Paul Leighton, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice*, 11th ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016): 45. Kai Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* and Émile Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society*.

³⁸³ Discussed in Fleetwood, 134.

³⁸⁴ “Mark Loughney, *Pyrrhic Defeat: A Visual Study of Mass Incarceration, 2014-Present*,” Zimmerli Art Museum, October 2, 2021, <https://zimmerli.rutgers.edu/art/exhibition/mark-loughney-pyrrhic-defeat-visual-study-mass-incarceration-2014-present>.

Loughney establishes, and the work produced at the end (work that hangs in the MoMA) only took 20 minutes, but to the outside observer, those 20 minutes created and transmitted an entire identity that an observer may have otherwise ignored. Moreover, the mass scale of the series, particularly when exhibited in a large space, communicates, as Loughney notes, a “drop in the bucket” of how many people the U.S. incarcerates.

In stark contrast, Loughney’s collection of pieces featuring botflies diverges in both style and message. Botflies are parasites that burrow under mammals’ skin before emerging out of the skin. Loughney’s conception of botflies (as there are many different species) “represents a transitional life stage. Their black and white stripes are indicative of a prisoner [...] Prison is a land of repetition and regimentation, so I’ve depicted that in my paintings by organizing my Botflies into rows and columns.”³⁸⁵ The process of creating the art, choosing to partake in repetition while living in repetition, paradoxically releases Loughney, even if for a moment, from carceral control because Loughney is asserting his agency. The repetition Loughney speaks of conveys the rhythm of time with his repetitive motions. More broadly, this repetition and regimentation also signals history repeating itself with an assembly line of incarcerated men, a never-ending cycle of the prison industrial complex. The gesture of desiring repetition mixed with the symbolism of a parasite who looks like a prisoner entangles the ease of analysis and purpose of the piece. Is the prisoner the parasite, or is the prison the parasite? Even without an answer, the fashioning of structured, repetitive, black and white beings mixed with bright colors and doodle hearts – Loughney actively uses this art series to play with carceral expectation and youthful cheekiness. The use of parasites can be looked at in two ways: one is that prisoners are parasites

³⁸⁵ Mark Loughney, “Artist Statement: Solidarity Builds Change,” Let’s Get Free: Creative Resistance, December 13, 2021, <https://creative-resistance.org/hearts-by-mark-loughney/>.

leeching off of the state and federal governments who spend thousands on their incarceration. Yet another more likely (and generative) way is that while to those on the outside, the prisoners may “be” parasites, to the prisoners, the prison, and by extension, the government are the parasites who live off their labor. Furthermore, with for-profit prisons and companies that partner with prisons, this practice earns money by incarcerating as many as possible.

Returning to these artists’ role in both Let’s Get Free’s exhibit and *Marking Time*, each exhibit’s social status, accessibility, messaging, and dramaturgy suggests the afterlives of this work. Though the artwork both makes visible individual experience behind bars and showcases this to the broader public, the visibility because of its occupation in an institution (MoMA) becomes the focus rather than the experience and embodiment of the person behind it. The art, in other words, can carry more weight and outside focus than the person who made it, thereby once again erasing the incarcerated individual.

Some of the aftermath comes down to the reception of Fleetwood’s work and the locations of the exhibits that, because of their institutional (oppressive/exclusive) legacy, seem to benefit from showcasing imprisoned artwork. To be clear, this is not a discrediting of Fleetwood’s work, dramaturgy, or experience but of societal institutions and their role in public support. How the media received Nicole Fleetwood’s collection celebrated the work in this emotionally difficult area but also fell along the lines of “wow, look what prisoners can do!” This is not the fault of Fleetwood or the artists themselves but rather how these large institutions like the MoMA circulate cultural capital with their exhibits and the societal interpretation of prestige with the works. In contrast, the selection of work ranging from artists who were also in the MoMA to first-time artists refocuses the attention back into the carceral experience. T.R. and Loughney’s artwork in Pittsburgh’s Southside, alongside Nichole “Pariah” Hollingsworth and Charmaine Pfender and artists in

solidarity, create a vastly different space for community engagement than the MoMA. Because of Let's Get Free's role in the show, the specificity and clarity of the theme of "Empathy is the Seed," and the selection of a wide range of artistic talent and style, the postcarceral performance at hand supports incarcerated individuals, creates a space for public dialogue, exposes carceral logics as oppressive and violent, and invites the broader community to learn more.

4.6 Conclusion: Admitting We Have a Problem



Figure 13 Unnamed Banner by etta cetera

The work (art, artist statements, curation, guide, multimodal access, archival, contest) further empowers and enhances art show attendees' critical consciousness of the carceral state. The awareness of human connection and the necessity of empathy in order to maneuver systematic change overtakes the knowledge of the inequity of incarceration rates and lengthy sentences. The human behind and in the piece becomes the way through for a person on the outside to interrogate personal biases and assumptions about prisoners and imprisonment. By interrogating and

generating knowledge related to abolitionist practices, the art show can serve as more than entertainment or becoming an informed citizen. Instead, the banner of “dwell in the contradictions” openly invites reflection on the sheer difficulty of imagining life without prisons while reckoning with the harm that humans can and do cause towards others.

In my interview with her, etta clearly describes the contradictions and difficulties of this thought process by initially breaking down her understanding of abolition:

CC: Where did abolition start for you, and where has your understanding of it grown or changed?

ec: Well, first, I learned about the prison system through having pen pals in prison and through the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal. So really understanding and learning about the punishment system and how rooted in racism and classism and how just unfair it was... So when you learn about all of that, then you ask what else? What else is there that can be done? How else can we survive harm? How do we deal with societal problems because this isn't working clearly! So you know, I think it was like a process of just like really understanding the criminal punishment system and its historical legacies and then just asking the question -- You know, I use art as the way that I communicate and interact with the world and group of my friends, and I created a play called *The Hardest Question Ever*. So at the heart of the hardest question ever is, what do you do when someone harms someone, and you don't believe in prisons? [...] I think that abolition is anything working for a new paradigm or working for a new way of coming together and knowing we don't have all the answers and not knowing what's going to work. But knowing that different things work for different communities, there isn't a one-size-fits-all, right? It's all a different answer for harm, and there are a lot of promising examples from the beginning of time to the current day of different ways that society has organized itself to respond to violence and deal with violence. But I think step one is admitting that you have a problem...³⁸⁶

etta's blunt questioning is in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on the role of coalition building, mutual aid, and community support. In “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer

³⁸⁶ Interview with etta cetera. Mumia Abu-Jamal is a political activist, journalist, and former Black Panther Party member who received a death-sentence in 1982 for the murder of a policeman. The case has remained one of the most contentious in the past few decades, particularly due to the well-documented corruption and racism of the Philadelphia police. The death sentence has since become a LWOP sentence as of 2011. Abu-Jamal has maintained his innocence and many ongoing campaigns are working to free him from decades long incarceration. Bret Grote of the Abolitionist Law Center represents Mr. Abu-Jamal. Katie Meyer, “40 Years after Mumia Abu-Jamal’s Arrest, the Case Is ‘a Symbol’ of a ‘Broken’ System,” *WHYY*, December 9, 2021, <https://whyy.org/articles/40-years-after-mumia-abu-jamals-arrest-the-case-is-a-symbol-of-a-broken-justice-system/>.

Movement with Everything We've Got" in *Captive Genders*, Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade chart big problems, "official" solutions, and transformative approaches. Similar to etta's discussion for new paradigms, this chart centralizes the importance of community organizing. For the societal issue of disproportionate policing and imprisonment, Bassichis, Lee, and Spade note how the "official" solution is to "advocate for 'cultural competency' training for law enforcement and the construction of queer and trans-specific and 'gender-responsive' facilities; creative written policies that say that queer people and trans people are equal to other people in state custody; stay largely silent on the high rates of imprisonment in queer and trans communities, communities of color, and poor communities."³⁸⁷ Cultural competency training for the police obviously cannot fix an occupation designed to protect property over people. The silence of politicians and local leaders on the disproportionate imprisonment of the groups listed above points to the dramatic need for organizations like Let's Get Free. *Captive Gender's* transformative approach to the issues stated centers on continuous and consistent relationships with incarcerated and returning citizens as well as "work to abolish prisons and establish community support for people with disabilities and eliminate medical and psychiatric institutionalization."³⁸⁸ The transformative approach – of dialogue and community networks requires activists to "dwell in the contradictions" and ask "the hardest question ever."

These transformative approaches rely on prevention. The common general response against abolition, "what do we do with the rapists and the murderers?" can be partially answered through preventative measures. Yet, the logic of developing prisons for the treatment of select cases like rape and murder is not a robust long-term solution, nor does it reimagine what society

³⁸⁷ Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2016): 19.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

could be (which is the key tenet of abolition). Furthermore, police and prisons will not disappear overnight. The creation of systems that offer other resources aside from calling the police, the building of that social network will allow for the eventual dismantling of police and prisons. The question of how to handle these very real and very violent crimes functions as a latter question, first examining how our justice system incarcerates majority people of color for low offense crimes that white individuals rarely are imprisoned for and then changing that system is an abolitionist practice.

In this chapter, I have tracked how Let's Get Free engages in dialogue about the meaning of time and labor while incarcerated. Their additional work strives toward community-building across both carceral and free spaces. This work actualizes change for formerly imprisoned women in vital ways. For example, Naomi Blunt was serving a life sentence in Pennsylvania and now works for Lieutenant Governor Fetterman. etta explained:

Naomi Blount – she now works for Fetterman. She was the second woman to be commuted after a 30-year hiatus where nobody was getting commutation – well, no women but maybe five men? So since Governor Wolf's election, people have just started getting their life sentences commuted. I think 40 people have my latest count. Since then, Lieutenant Governor Fetterman became passionate about [this issue]. I mean, that's how he got the job, you know? When Fetterman was running for Lieutenant Governor (he's from Braddock). We had him at our art show [because] a friend of a friend knew his wife who asked him to come to our event...and he kind of sat there listening – I think that was his first-time meeting family members of lifers. He was talking to Saleem Holbrook, who also had a life sentence and got out. So we [are] using the art gallery as an organizing tool to push politicians to change policies and ultimately bring people home.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁹ Interview with etta cetera.



Figure 14 *Women Who Have Applied for Commutation Since 1990* by etta cetera

Let's Get Free was able to successfully lobby a politician to expand their political focus to include prison reform dramatically. The art gallery functioned as an organizing tool resulting in political accountability by constituents. To abolish policing and prisons, society must first truly acknowledge, engage with, and publicize how our criminal system actually functions.

Postcarceral performance works within the murky temporal landscape of progress by focusing on the individual behind the inmate number and the reclamation of space and time control when leaving prison. Prison time is chrononormative. The clear schedule, monotonous routine, orderly lines, and even set bathing routine craft an environment reminiscent of the military. Yet carceral time, the expansive time encompassing arrest, sentencing, trial, incarceration, commutation/release, or full life sentences, drastically diverges from chrononormativity. In

essence, as I have shown, carceral time is queer time. The art makes visible and legible queerness inside the prison but also highlights alternative temporalities formed through the experience of incarceration. Through its ability to elicit empathy and spark dialogue, the art made by those imprisoned and in solidarity expands the knowledge of carcerality to wider demographics. The art gallery as a community space invites participants to begin imagining a world without prisons.

5.0 “Heavy on My Mind”: Navigating Space, Defying Disillusionment, and the Role of Trying in Postcarceral Performance

There’s so much pain here. It’s all around me & I seem to absorb it from others in addition to my own. It’s this system... “Corrections.” It’s a systematic crime against humanity. My hope is that changes are made soon, & that those changes present my exit strategy. I know it’s coming, but I’m just not sure how or when...³⁹⁰

I met Kabasha in the spring of 2020. My partner worked for a local news organization at the time and interviewed Kabasha Griffin-El about his organization, the Unit Literacy Group, a literacy-based recovery group currently out of SCI Somerset, a Pennsylvania state prison. When discussing the group’s work (ULG), my partner relayed how he “clicked” with Kabasha and how much he valued the work Kabasha was doing while incarcerated. At the time, I was working on my prospectus for this dissertation – a project which inevitably and considerably changed by summer 2020. While looking at incarceration and performance in the Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy, Kabasha’s group and his story were never far from my mind, and we remained in contact. In December 2020, Kabasha asked if I would like to become the executive director of the Unit Literacy Group. I immediately responded that I would have no idea where to start and that I was completely unqualified. Kabasha would not take “no” for an answer: “you’ll learn just as I learned to do all of this. You’re smart, and you care – why wouldn’t you be qualified?”³⁹¹ Eventually, I

³⁹⁰ K. Kabasha Griffin-El in email to author, December 11, 2021.

³⁹¹ Griffin-El on phone call to author, December 2020.

accepted, and my partner came on as Communications Director. Due to the pandemic, many of our goals of developing a concrete plan for expanding ULG past SCI Somerset and building a support network comprised of outside members have been difficult. While Kabasha has solidified (though continuously adapts as needed) the work of ULG in the prison, what the outside work looks like continues to shift. My research focuses on ULG's work in SCI Somerset by the ULG, how its members learn from, respond to, and expand the group's functionality, and how the labor illustrates spaces for rehabilitation and exposes systemic issues in the US justice system.

I follow La Donna L. Forsgren's vibrant and vital work in *Sistuks in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theatre and Performance* by working within critical performance ethnography to validate the lived experience of Kabasha and those he works with. My writing reflects my familial relationship with Kabasha in that I do not attempt to hide my love for the person and this work. I enter this research area with my own political opinions on prison reform, abolition, life sentences, and capital punishment but attentively listen to Kabasha and other ULG members discussing their own viewpoints stemming from their lived experiences. While I intricately know the details of Kabasha's crime and his court records, I actively strive to focus on the group and the individuals involved in it as they are now rather than who they were when they became incarcerated. To found research on the individual in relation to their reasons for being incarcerated would prohibit the acceptance of individual growth and transformation, the entire point of the founding of the group. Informed by E. Patrick Johnson and D. Soyini Madison, La Donna Forsgren notes, "critical performance ethnography, with its focus on ethical responsibility, encourages researchers to recognize their own positionality."³⁹² As a White, privileged, female

³⁹² La Donna L. Forsgren, *Sistuks in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020): 11.

scholar, I acknowledge the drastic differences between my past and present and Kabasha's. My approach to this material roots itself in compassion and connection, cultivating relationships to track the rehabilitative and recovery work of the literacy group. Furthermore, I understand the possibilities for growth and further discussion of both ULG and postcarceral performance in general by including it in scholarly work.

While “knowledge is power” has become a given (and perhaps a cliché) – applying this fundamental truth to ULG unveils how the absence of education (and its many forms) upholds the carceral state. The Unit Literacy Group (particularly Kabasha himself) *tries* to build a better world by rectifying literacy gaps, building self-esteem and self-worth, and fighting against the carceral state and, within that state, the disillusionment of the detained. To be in solidarity against oppressive institutions, ULG provides the educational tools needed to *try* and *make the space to try* in order to subvert, oppose, or reimagine the carceral state. I specifically use the word “try” in connection with self-determination because within acquiring literacy and healing practices, individuals may temporarily quit the group or avoid certain therapies for a variety of reasons. I use the methodologies of “as performance” and performance spaces to track how ULG employs a narrative of resistance and reclamation. This chapter examines the development of postcarceral performance inside prisons, highlighting how the practice functions both inside and outside of prison walls. The use of postcarceral performance here shows how incarcerated people use the arts to gain skills to become returning citizens by navigating the complex processes of commutations and pardons and/or eventual release. While incarceration attempts to turn individuals into numbers, ULG works to turn these numbers into individuals again. Members of the Unit Literacy Group strive toward self-actualization and individual healing through performance-based practices. In

particular, creative writing and dramatic reading create an introspective space to reflect, imagine, and plan new pathways post-incarceration.

5.1 Situating Solidarity: Summer of 2020 and Performativity

Amidst the growth and shifts in my project – of phone calls and messages with Kabasha and navigating closed archives came the long overdue but far too brief social reckoning of summer 2020. As I scrolled through Instagram on June 2, 2020, images of blank black boxes filled my feed. People I went to high school and college with, who never had posted anything about Black Lives Matter, let alone human rights or equality, were suddenly sharing a black box with the hashtag #BlackOutTuesday or #BLM.

The origins of #BlackOutTuesday stemmed from an initiative by music executives Brianna Agyemang and Jamil Thomas, titled #TheShowMustBePaused. The account on this initiative’s Instagram page read, “the music industry is a multi-billion-dollar industry. An industry that has profited predominantly from Black art. Our mission is to hold the industry at large, including major corporations + their partners who benefit from the efforts, struggles and successes of Black people accountable.”³⁹³ Thus, the protest stemmed from the work of two Black women, working to identify the Black foundations of the music industry as we know it. Yet within hours, the initiative had transformed into, at best, a show of solidarity with the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement and, at worst, a signaling of supposed “solidarity” without actually working for a cause.

³⁹³ J’na Jefferson, “What Is Blackout Tuesday? Industries, Brands and More Go Black in Solidarity of Black Lives Matter,” *The Root*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.theroot.com/what-is-blackout-tuesday-industries-brands-and-more-g-1843852383>.

Furthermore, the 14.5 million blank posts filled the Instagram algorithm with black boxes instead of key pieces of information on protest sites, donation sites, and other needed materials for work against the anti-Black judicial structure of the United States.³⁹⁴

In the days following and for much of summer 2020, journalists, grassroots organizers, and many on the internet lambasted #BlackOutTuesday as being “performative.” In a *Vox* article covering the viral event, journalist Rebecca Jennings quoted Feminista Jones’s frustration with the social media storm: “This performative ally stuff is not helping, and this really catered to the people who want to show that they care. They thought this little black box was going to be solidarity.”³⁹⁵ I push against Jones’s inference that those posting thought that the box was going to *be* solidarity so much as it was going to *enact* solidarity. This discrepancy highlights the murky use of performative in the public sphere, particularly in social justice. On a larger scale, this event exposes the question of solidarity: what does it mean to be in solidarity against oppressive structures? Where and how does performativity play a part?

For those posting the boxes, they may be changing their own image to followers or situating themselves in a political stance. For those who initially started the posts, they were working to change the labor and pay inequity of the music industry. Both are similar in terms of “change,” but one more directly and broadly strives for a social change. Following J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words*, performative utterances (although in this case, digital visual posts) enact some sort of change; the utterance is a *doing*.³⁹⁶ And while “I do” completes a marriage ceremony,

³⁹⁴ Rebecca Heilweil, “Why People Are Posting Black Squares on Instagram,” *Vox*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/2/21278051/instagram-blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter>.

³⁹⁵ Rebecca Jennings, “Who Are the Black Squares and Cutesy Illustrations Really for?,” *Vox*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/3/21279336/blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter-instagram-performative-allyship>.

³⁹⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

posting a black box does not complete the mission of Black Lives Matter.³⁹⁷ Diana Taylor writes in *Performance*, “as with performance, performatives are all about the frame.”³⁹⁸ The framing of the event shows how posting black boxes is performative in different ways: the posts’ goal was for Black music industry employees to halt the use of social media, a profitable tool in the advertising and capitalizing of music consumption. This act required a secondary act, the act of specifically *not working* in accordance with the post. Black employees of the music industry’s refusal of labor meant to become a financial and social signal to the music industry of the importance of Black labor and Black art. The early posts were performative in that they exerted power by both doing (posting) and not-doing (leaving social media for a day). Yet what the movement snowballed into, a larger, more generalized use of the boxes as symbolism of solidarity with Black Lives Matter, also falls under the performative, albeit differently.

Deconstructing performativity and its role in the public makes apparent how the intersection of language and action informs broader social views of mass movements. From dissecting this relationship, I will then show how it informs a more comprehensive understanding of the carceral state and imprisonment. How the term ‘performativity’ moves in the public sphere exposes this relationship as either embarking on rectifying inequity or the more common use of the term as indicating falsehoods. In the *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard states that “the performativity of an utterance, be it denotative or prescriptive, increases proportionally to the amount of information about its referent one has at one’s disposal. Thus, the growth of power, and its self-legitimation, are now taking the route of data storage and

³⁹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

³⁹⁸ Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 118.

accessibility, and the operativity of information.”³⁹⁹ The mass use of the black boxes on Instagram simultaneously limited the amount of information about actual, physical #BLM protests and social justice events while increasing the power of signaling allyship without having to engage with the knowledge and operations of dismantling the criminal justice system. The *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* published a special issue on performativity in spring 2021, attentively responding to how the term travels, engages, and transforms in the public lexicon. In “The Performance of Police and the Theatre of Protest,” William Mariotti explains how “the specific denunciation of protest as performance rests on assumptions in keeping with classic attacks on theatre as pretense and falsehood, as a frivolous or even ill-intended pursuit against order.”⁴⁰⁰ By relying on the use of “performative” as intrinsically linked to “theatre” and “theatre” linked to “fake,” such a label swiftly categorizes any action as performative as inauthentic and indebted to sensationalism rather than critical attention.

By breaking apart the nuances of language, interpretation, and framing of performativity and solidarity, I examine the functionality of another component of postcarceral performance – the space in which performance and communal action invite self-actualization. Public discourse shapes our understanding of the world around us and informs how history will document these events. The use of performative can critically call out the use of co-opting a movement to gain credibility. Still, it also can lead to nihilistic behavior that if everything can be performative (when really meaning “fake” or ungenune), then these issues cease to be relevant – or put plainly, nothing really matters. The swiftness of pessimism around social movements contributes to the stalling of

³⁹⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 47.

⁴⁰⁰ William Marotti, “The Performance of Police and the Theatre of Protest,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): pp. 117-123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0009>, 118.

the work and the ease of discrediting its goals. In other words, if #BlackOutTuesday is just for show and it's part of the BLM movement, then is the BLM movement colloquially performative? If individuals outside of social justice movements want to become active and join the movement but witness the negative feedback surrounding how they started in the group, does this discourage the expansion of the movement? Of course, there is no clear answer to navigating such a scenario, and many issues stem from White participants claiming space and language and movements of which they are not the center of – yet, as I discussed in Chapter 3, empathy, as difficult and at times oppositional to the drive of the movement can be, facilitates actual solidarity.

Furthermore, examining “performativity” sets the foundation for how postcarceral performance in the public sphere requires crafting of language to either enact social change or spark it and how performativity and performance can become a tool for rendering visible the mechanisms of sentencing, incarceration, and their impacts on the individual both in and out of prison. #BlackoutTuesday increased the conversation surrounding performance and social justice as passive and/or negative, but what the acknowledgment of performativity allows in this study is how scholars frame the relationship between solidarity and performativity. Aaron C. Thomas’s “Infelicities” follows the genealogy of performative and expertly shows how, in varying ways, performance studies scholars defining and utilizing “performative” mainly use the term in meaning “performance.” I follow Thomas’s model of interrogating the performative in that “the question, ‘How is this performative?’ is always more interesting than a conclusion that something is performative.” To return to my question asked at the beginning of this section, how did #BlackoutTuesday evoke solidarity, and how does performativity play a part?

Solidarity necessitates performativity in that the actions occurring in the name of social justice, whether boldly aligning in an act of meaningful change or enacting an allegiance to a cause,

nevertheless activates a belief. How these beliefs function and the actions that develop from them show how performativity and solidarity are intertwined but also how they function on a spectrum rather than in binary opposition. I incite the questions of performativity and solidarity in light of the summer of 2020 and postcarceral performance because of the symbiotic relationship between showing, enacting, and working within and for solidarity against inequitable institutions. Thomas notes how the use of performative as meaning “interventional performance” can obscure performances (particularly theatrical performances), yet this categorization of interventional is exactly where postcarceral performance lies – intervening in the carceral state. For the active solidarity work of navigating the everyday in prisons, “performativity” situates how the practice works.

In the past three chapters, I have explored theatrical and visual aspects of postcarceral performance, particularly examining the roles of praxis and time in *Clean Break* and *Let’s Get Free*. Chapter 4 focuses on a literacy group for incarcerated men in Somerset, Pennsylvania, and the role of space and self-determination. What I call postcarceral performance involves the organizational practice of working with those impacted by the carceral state who participate in artistic events as a means of employment, therapy, or similar forms of self-determination. As exemplary of postcarceral performance, I argue that the Unit Literacy Group uses performance-based methods, such as dramatic reading, reflective writing, and character-building, to imagine new futures to fight against the carceral state and work towards self-determination and eventual abolition. Furthermore, these performance practices build surrogate communities for incarcerated men. The communal space enacts solidarity against carceral violence in prison, similar to (yet distinct from) the solidarity work of *Let’s Get Free* or *Clean Break*.

Through my interviews with the founder of ULG, Kabasha Griffin-El, and the analysis of the structural and written work of the group, I unveil what is made visible by trying – trying to gain literacy, and emotional processing through art makes visible the systems and experiences which inform the lives and actions of those in prison. To trace the impact of art and recovery, I first briefly discuss the environment of Kabasha’s upbringing prior to incarceration. I then read the work of the ULG as performance which offers a way to view how these individuals work to transcend the confines of an unjust legal system. ULG uses performative methods to rectify the harm of incarceration and create pathways toward abolition between the space of a prison cell and a multipurpose room. They *try* to enact a better world.

5.2 “Create the Solution You Desire”: Meeting Kabasha

Kabasha thrives on laughter. During our fifteen-minute phone calls (the time limit enforced by the prison), he immediately starts laughing after I say, “Hi!” Between the check-ins and updates on our work and family relationships, he usually manages to get in three or four jokes on my behalf while I feign indignation. In short, the early moments of our conversations work as a scripted yet flexible performance of light-hearted humor. The comfortable pattern of moving between serious conversation and humor has become a way to navigate painful experiences and trauma. In the course of two years, two pandemic years, my partner and I have come to view Kabasha as family. He sends us birthday cards, calls twice a week, sends packets of his writing, and writes down the date of every event we mention so he can ask us about it on the next phone call. The relationship can occasionally feel terribly one-sided as we do not have the option to call him, have to wait days for the prison to check our emails before sending them to him, and have to wait even longer for

our mail to be scanned, printed, and mailed back. The Kabasha I know through the phone, through video visits, and over the unreliable ConnectNetwork email system drastically differs from the court documents of his case and how he writes about his past self. Yet, the openness and desire to share his past and dream about his future encapsulates a man who fiercely believes in rehabilitation, both his own and of others.⁴⁰¹ Due to Kabasha's love of language and his building of the Unit Literacy Group, I will frequently use his own words to discuss not only his past (which fuels his work) but also his reflections on the carceral state in order to support a postcarceral performance analysis of ULG.

Although the group has a sizable amount of members, fluctuating between 15-20 men, due to the pandemic, I only have access to a limited number of writings approved by the incarcerated men who wrote them. In ULG sessions, members write in various forms to process and reflect on their healing and recovery; many of these pieces then grow into longer forms and are sent out to friends and family. I primarily rely on my interviews with Kabasha and his own writings because he uses his work to help stimulate the writing and healing process of others in the group (by purposefully showing vulnerability). By making a multipurpose room and the open common area into a performative space, an area that functions as a transformative area of growth and empathy, the Unit Literacy Group cultivates a community practice through gaining literacy. The process of learning literacy in a communal environment result in ULG members reflecting on the past and imagining new futures. The education provided by ULG does not become the sole focus or outcome. Rather, in an environment that stifles these connections (prison), the development of a

⁴⁰¹ Due to the limiting of in-person visits, SCI Somerset and other Pennsylvania prisons have introduced video visits over Zoom. These visits last 45 minutes and like the phone calls and emails are recorded.

community through the addressing of past traumas and inadequate educational opportunities actualizes the promise and progress of ULG.

In a small attempt to build on the crafting of the ULG archive outside of SCI Somerset, I aim to document Kabasha's words in a way that the court system and the military denied him the opportunity. The research and analysis of ULG strive to serve those who created and continue to create it and, more broadly, engage in dialogue with community members touched by the justice system and abolitionist practitioners. Kabasha's words from his writings and interviews form an archive in which those wading through the detention struggle can connect. The ways in which this archive of the structure and activities of ULG capture its work can serve as a starting place to work towards building future branches or similar groups in prisons across the country. While the goal is for prisons to cease to exist, providing literacy and communicative tools to those incarcerated by making accessible this group's work enacts a rectifying process of the limited education received in prisons or even before incarceration. The first part of recovery and rehabilitation begins with addressing the past and acknowledging one's story prior to incarceration.

Kabasha has told his history many times and in many ways: across ULG's founding documents, in emails, over the phone, in video visits, and through visual art, poetry, and short essays. In late 2020, my partner and I assisted Kabasha's work by building ULG a website. For the "Meet the Founder" page, Kabasha wrote the following:

My given name is Keith F. Griffin. However, in 2001 I adopted the name "K. Kabasha Griffin-El," and I'm known as "Kabasha." I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I'm a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps., diagnosed with service-connected Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Regrettably, in 1995 (within two years of my honorable discharge), my actions resulted in someone's death and my consequent life sentence. None of that ever should have happened. Sadly, upon my discharge, I was simply a selfish, emotional wreck, in deep denial. Others were able to see that I had changed after my military service. They were polite, and attempted to encourage me to seek psychological support, but at that time, I was unable to acknowledge my need for help. I grew angry each time someone would attempt to intervene. I took offense, believing the

false hype of stigma, which promoted the idea that mental illness was for weak people. As a Marine, I claimed strength, and considered myself to be strong. So although living in anguish--fighting internal battles of conflicting thoughts and emotions — I told myself I didn't need any help. Unfortunately, the worst happened before I could humble myself enough to express the words, "Help Me."⁴⁰²

In the opening of his biography, Kabasha activates agency by cultivating two selves: one that lives in the past and one that lives in the here and now. Growing up poor, Kabasha and his two brothers experienced severe physical and emotional abuse from his parents, who suffered from addiction. His parents have been in and out of Kabasha's life since he was incarcerated in 1995, and he now believes "that their consciousness has awakened and that all three of their sons serving prison sentences is too much to face. When they are ready, I will embrace them. Until then, I must do my best to live in wellness."⁴⁰³ The practice of living in wellness works to heal the failures of support and education in Kabasha's upbringing and speaks to his forward-focused mind, determined for a future outside of prison. His experiences speak to what Michelle Alexander discusses as the pervasive question, "Where have all the Black Men gone?" as Kabasha and his two brothers are all experiencing incarceration, one of whom has been in solitary confinement for decades and is in severe mental decline. The addressing of Kabasha's past self and the embrace of his current self, all while acknowledging the constant need for individual growth, illuminates ULG's acts of solidarity in incarceration: love for the self, which then leads to love for others. In his direct confrontation and honest examination of his past as it informs who he is now, Kabasha models the work of self-actualization and self-love that he works to facilitate in the ULG sessions.

In his essay, "A Visit from My Mother," Kabasha crafts a narrative that, on the surface, covers the emotional difficulty of unexpectedly seeing his mother since being incarcerated. On a

⁴⁰² K. Kabasha Griffin-El, "Meet the Founder," Unit Literacy Group, 2021, <https://www.unitliteracygroup.com/meet-the-founder>.

⁴⁰³ Griffin-El in email to the author, November 1, 2021.

deeper level, this powerful work exposes the limited social and educational networks available to both Kabasha and his mother. In the opening of the piece, Kabasha continuously shifts between remembering who she was and absorbing the woman in front of him: “I was in the past, present and future all at once, taking everything in, trying to be present as my mind kept drifting.”⁴⁰⁴ The autobiographical piece lays out the visit in terms of the beginning of their meeting and then time fluidly moves between the present exchange, childhood past, and comparisons to past visitors. He recalls how he felt more emotion and excitement seeing the mother of an old girlfriend than seeing his mom in person. He reflects on the violent fights between his parents (“They fought like gladiators”) and accusations of adultery. Throughout, the reader follows Kabasha’s own “therapizing” of himself, acknowledging his mistakes but also confronting the brutal past and its deep hold on his psyche:

My mother kicked me out of the house at the age of fifteen. I haven’t been back since. She used to beat me, and my brother Jerome like we were slaves. We had to strip butt naked and hold on to a chair, railing, or bedpost, as thick leather belts (and even an extension cord in Jerome’s case), tore into our flesh, leaving swollen and bleeding marks covering our butt, legs, back and flailing arms. Our mother, the woman sitting there with me for the first time in seventeen years did, that to us. She brought up the fact that she was wrong for “SPANKING” and “WHOPPING” us. I didn’t allow it to show, but her word choice pissed me off. In the moment, it seemed to minimize the horrible child abuse that was inflicted upon me and my brother, by both her and our father. [...] I was gentle in my approach at rebuking her word choice, by simply saying, “you know that all of that is considered to be child abuse today?” She agreed and went on to share how abusive my grandparents were to her and her siblings. She continued with, “Mom was young, and I didn’t know how to properly discipline y’all, you know, how to give y’all time outs or make y’all stand in a corner. I didn’t know how to hug y’all and love y’all. I didn’t know how, you know. I did what was done to us, you know. I’m sorry. Mom is sorry.” I appreciated her vulnerability, and the sincerity of her apology.⁴⁰⁵

37. ⁴⁰⁴ K. Kabasha Griffin-El, “A Visit from My Mother” in *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery* (2020):

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

In writing about violent events in his childhood, Kabasha explicitly chooses his words to best articulate the experience and fully document the account with accuracy. Through his writing, Kabasha signals the acknowledgment of the complexities and abuse of his youth, informed by lack of access to recovery spaces, as deeply contributing to who he is (and where he is now). Black's Theory of Law, as interpreted by social work scholar Rudolph Alexander Jr., notes how "social reality, such as families, organizations, cities, revolutions, conversations, friendships, and governments, manifests itself through behavior."⁴⁰⁶ Kabasha's performative writing, framing his relationship with his mother as she frames her relationships with her elders, signals how he has come to remember and make sense of the past while also refusing for it to be lessened in severity. The past, as the writing shows, is not over but continues alongside Kabasha's act of descriptively drawing out foundational moments of his life.

This essay was one of the first pieces of writing Kabasha shared with me; thus, the piece stands in as a reflection of whom Kabasha sees himself as and how he internally thinks vs. outwardly reflects. His mother's apology, with the explanation of not knowing how to enact discipline or show love stemming from her own childhood experiences, reflects the cyclical pattern of abuse. In the act of documenting not only his abuse but also his mother's, Kabasha acknowledges generational trauma but begins healing through the documenting of the memories and exchanges. The direct examination of one's past and the sharing of these truths in the ULG group creates a space of vulnerability and honesty. This encourages other members to follow Kabasha's lead and develop their healing process through examining the self.

⁴⁰⁶ Rudolph Alexander Jr., *Human Behavior in the Social Environment: A Macro, National, and International Perspective* (London: Sage, 2010): 101.

In his twenty-six years behind bars, Kabasha has participated in educational courses, vocational training, and the eventual founding of ULG. He fully admits, however, that these opportunities do not speak to the generosity of the prison system nor its focus on rehabilitative efforts. Regarding what the prison system offered, he remarked: “My fortune was at the expense of others’ misfortune – I got [to do] all of these things because no one else was doing it, so I got into those empty spots [for pre-existing programs].”⁴⁰⁷ Kabasha’s experience and discussion around educational opportunities negate claims made by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The BOP claims that they offer courses in skill development and literacy to assist individuals gaining employment following release. Aside from the well-known fact of the tremendous difficulty of gaining employment above minimum wage post-incarceration, these courses are not equally available at every prison across the country.⁴⁰⁸ Additionally, the increase in school vouchers, privatization, and inadequate public education funding cyclically connect to incarceration. As BIPOC and low-income students receive fewer resources, the likelihood of being sent to prison increases.⁴⁰⁹ Then, while incarcerated, the educational system offered functions just as unequally as those on the outside.

Kabasha built the Unit Literacy Group in 2017 to combat the silence he experienced in prison when asking about program development. He began participating in small, already-established groups and volunteered to be the secretary of various groups to learn how these groups functioned: “I quickly realized that so many of these meetings were just bitching sessions. I’d say

⁴⁰⁷ K. Kabasha Griffin-El, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, January 25, 2022.

⁴⁰⁸ Additionally, those in solitary confinement, a widely used practice, do not receive the same educational opportunities if they receive them at all. “Education Programs,” Federal Bureau of Prisons, accessed May 11, 2022, https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/education.jsp.

⁴⁰⁹ The U.S. Department of Justice acknowledges this disparity. A 2003 special report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics traces the growth of incarcerated individuals without high school diplomas in comparison with the general population. Caroline Wolf Harlow, “Education and Correctional Populations,” Education and Correctional Populations § (2003): <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf>.

[along the lines of] ‘ok, yes, we know this – so what are y’all gonna do about it?’ And they’d just stare at me.” Following completion of classes and other programs throughout the ‘90s and early ‘00s, Kabasha began working as a Certified Peer Specialist. The CPS program began in Pennsylvania in 2004 under the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS). The Pittsburgh network of the program defines a CPS as “a person who is willing to self-identify as a person with a serious behavioral health disorder (mental illness, or co-occurring disorder) with lived experiences.”⁴¹⁰ These specialists serve to support those going through recovery in various environments and situations. The Certified Peer Specialist’s work develops a “relationship between peers is characterized by mutual trust and respect, sharing of experiences, learning about the recovery process, supporting the peer in multiple settings, achieving goals and moving toward a more meaningful life in the community.”⁴¹¹ The building of community and communal spaces in prisons can be the first time many individuals find support groups. Social and educational exclusion and lack of opportunities due to the country’s embedded racism and oppressive financial systems result in a well-known statistic of disproportionate incarceration of poor Black and Brown peoples.

Though they offer select educational programs, Kabasha laments how the Department of Corrections cares more about oversight and bureaucracy, particularly including favorable phrasing of plans, than the people they claim to serve: “They cover themselves with this bullshit, it’s on paper, but it’s not [happening.] We’ve had to send requests over and over again to get programs; if you’re not persistent, you won’t get it.”⁴¹² The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections website

⁴¹⁰ “Certified Peer Specialist,” Peer Support & Advocacy Network, accessed March 11, 2022, http://www.peer-support.org/?page_id=28.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Griffin-El, January 29, 2022.

cleanly and concisely separates the structures of incarceration in terms of programming, spending, researching, and protecting. Kabasha’s analysis of the beauty of these words on paper (or on screen) aptly examines how carefully constructed “Corrections” appear. Kelsey Blair’s concise reading of academic versus mainstream use of ‘performative’ states that conventional academic use of “performative” “is often used to examine the relationship between utterances and their effects,” whereas the mainstream/popular use of the term “names a gap between utterances and their effects [and] describes utterances or actions that benefit a performer but fail to produce, or even contribute to, meaningful effects.”⁴¹³ Thus, the use of DOC’s advertising of programs or similar actions essentially “do” something in terms of the person or institutions posting the message but not actually the issue they say they are attempting to impact.

The “initiatives” tab on the PA DOC website lists thirteen programs geared towards addressing “the differing needs of incarcerated individuals.”⁴¹⁴ Education programming, artistic practice, or other rehabilitative work do not appear. Instead, the initiatives range from suicide prevention to juvenile lifers’ information to the death penalty. The last two are not so much initiatives as responses to court rulings and descriptions of how these practices occur.⁴¹⁵ Programs started by inmates, like the Unit Literacy Group, are not included on the website, thereby showing a limited number of programs that actually exist. Of course, this limited number reflects the

⁴¹³ Kelsey Blair, “Empty Gestures: Performative Utterances and Allyship,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, no. 2 (2021): 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0005>, 54.

⁴¹⁴ The full list of “initiatives”: Suicide Prevention, Medication Assisted Treatment, Mental Health Services, Budget Considerations, Juvenile Lifers Information, DOC Parole Board Consolidation, Grant Letters of Support, Administrative Segregation and Violence Reduction Initiative, Death Penalty, Recidivism Risk Reduction Incentive, Newsroom, Scandinavian Prison Project, Puppy Programs. Out of these thirteen pieces, less than half are clear initiatives. “Initiatives,” Department of Corrections, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.cor.pa.gov/About%20Us/Initiatives/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁴¹⁵ For example, the Death Penalty page states that the DOC has no position on the death penalty. The page then shows photos of execution sites, featuring gurneys, witness rooms, and holding cells. “Death Penalty,” Department of Corrections, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.cor.pa.gov/About%20Us/Initiatives/Pages/Death%20Penalty.aspx>.

limitations of the carceral state and not the active work for self-actualization completed by incarcerated people on their own.

When first entering prison, Kabasha received little support from fellow prisoners: “I’ve never been to prison before. I didn’t know how to start something or get grants or anything. I kept asking how to learn, and there were just no answers. It was just silence from everyone.”⁴¹⁶ When asked why the silence, Kabasha acknowledged that showing vulnerability can be extremely dangerous. The silence protected these incarcerated men from not only exposing that they did not know the answer but also that limited literacy prevented them from knowing the answer. Difficulties in opening up to new relationships and navigating long-term incarceration further compounded this silence. Most starkly, however, was the silence as an act of power in a space that prevents agency. “I wanted to do things differently. I *want* to help people so they don’t have to go through what I went through,” states Kabasha.⁴¹⁷ In the preface to the tenth-anniversary edition of *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander notes how “every system of injustice depends on the silence, paralysis, confusion, and cooperation of those it seeks to eliminate or control.”⁴¹⁸ The silence surrounding Kabasha’s yearning to learn and build something of significance actively embodies this system’s reliance on confusion and cooperation. Though I infer that these men ignoring Kabasha were not doing so to help strengthen the control of the prison, they nevertheless enacted its power through silence. The decision to share knowledge to prevent further difficulties for other incarcerated men signals Kabasha’s rehabilitative efforts in a space still labeled as reformatory or “corrective.”

⁴¹⁶ Griffin-El, December 6, 2021.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Alexander, xii.

The role of rehabilitation, by whom and for what purpose, contributes to my analysis of ULG as postcarceral performance in that the rehabilitation stems from the individual rather than the system's design. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the desired failure of "rehabilitation" as paramount to the carceral system's continuation. The discourse surrounding rehabilitation informs "general tactics of subjection."⁴¹⁹ Liat Ben-Moshe reads Foucault's analysis of power in that it "works precisely because it is not merely destructive but productive. It produces particular subject formations and, by so doing, constraints and reifies them in the very discourse that created them."⁴²⁰ Thus, by labeling work in prison as well as imprisonment itself as reformatory, the system reinforces its power by making subjects. As frequently discussed with Kabasha, there remains a fine line between "bettering oneself" (his phrase) through educational and artistic outlets while incarcerated and participating in the bureaucratic and oft-restrictive classes promised to those imprisoned as good ways of "showing that you've learned from your mistakes."⁴²¹ In other words, participating in prison activities because of encouragement by prison officials can reinforce the prison's power over the individual. Prisons do not rehabilitate, but rehabilitation happens in prison.

In his years of being imprisoned, Kabasha witnessed a dramatic shift in the way elders and younger inmates interact. This shift, informed by intensified prison rules and disillusioned younger generations, informs the dynamics of ULG's space as a space of recovery and attempts to build individual differences. The contemporary work of self-rehabilitation and communal rehabilitation loosely derives from the historical practice of incarcerated social justice activists and protesters.

⁴¹⁹ Foucault, 161.

⁴²⁰ Liat Ben-Moshe, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 4.

⁴²¹ Griffin-El, November 15, 2021.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes in “The Prison Fix” in *Golden Gulag*: “[the] post–World War II civil rights movement’s courtroom successes encouraged prisoners to use the system against itself [...] The movement also influenced prisoners from behind bars because the criminalization of political activists brought them into the prison population.”⁴²² The incarceration of political activists in the 1960s through the 1980s resulted in the furthering of abolitionist visions and imagining new futures without inequity built into the state.

Collectivist models of abolition have grown within the past few years, particularly due to social media use and the spring/summer of 2020.⁴²³ Yet inside prisons, the work that began with the detainment of political prisoners and the spreading of advocacy has not kept up at the same speed. To reintroduce a quote from Chapter 3, “This work is never a solo project. Individuals tire and fade. Movements deepen and continue.”⁴²⁴ While the editors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* use these notions to discuss abolition feminist ecosystems, this idea can and should be applied to work occurring on the inside.

Using the system against itself has started to fade, according to Kabasha. The exhaustion and near-apathy are most prominent in millennials. In one video visit with Kabasha, he explained the general state of the generational divide and its effects:

The sense of unity is gone. I’ve never heard from so many young people say, “I ain’t got no friends,” you know than I do right now. They don’t treasure or value friendship, they don’t value unity. They don’t read policy; they don’t stand up for their rights or know their claims. Their claims may be founded on something that’s genuine; however, they’re not able to argue their claim properly where they can get release even within the system because they won’t read policy. They don’t like to read. So they’re not adequately prepared to self-advocate. [...] There’s a great divide. Elders have given up their role of being an

⁴²² Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 81.

⁴²³ Angela Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

elder and the sense of communal responsibility, and it becomes more of a mindset of us and them.⁴²⁵

Rather than blame younger generations for not caring or older generations for avoiding communal responsibility, Kabasha laments the lack of trying on both groups' parts. I will discuss this generational divide in more detail later in the chapter, but this broad observation of incarcerated youth characterizes those who navigate both imprisonment at SCI Somerset and work with the ULG. When Kabasha discussed the avoidance of reading policy, I noted the sadness in his voice because these observations reveal complacency with the situation of incarceration and disillusionment with escaping said situation. The complacency stems from many socio-economic factors, including the 2008 financial crash, continued underfunding of public schools, infrastructure, and healthcare, and the consistent rise of over-policing and mass incarceration. This is not to say that there are not incarcerated populations constantly working to actualize abolition and make visible the violence of the state (Black Mamas Bail Out Action, Let's Get Free, The Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee), but that current discussion of abolition fails to adequately discuss the disillusionment of incarcerated people.⁴²⁶ The work of the Unit Literacy Group provides the tools necessary to not only prepare one's court arguments but to fundamentally restructure lives and provide a foundation for self-advocacy.

⁴²⁵ Griffin-El, January 29, 2022.

⁴²⁶ Abolition Notes is "an evolving project mapping political education tools on abolishing racial capitalism and the carceral state." They track abolitionist groups of both incarcerated and free people. "Abolition Notes," *Abolition Notes*, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://abolitionnotes.org/>.

5.3 The Space to Try: ULG at Work

Rehabilitation and recovery form the foundation of ULG. To deny the rehabilitation performed by incarcerated peoples on their own terms would neglect their labor towards new futures. Even within the prison system, under its watchful eye, rehabilitation can take on many forms and becomes a method of agency in both surviving incarceration and building a life post-detention. The Unit Literacy Group produces an empathetic, performative space through the educational work completed that encourages and supports the individual quest for knowledge and healing. Inmates actively try to process past trauma and gain intellectual skills to reenter society and/or navigate the legal system in the quest for commutations, pardons, retrials, and release.

In terms of structure, the Unit Literacy Group works as a singular unit and is facilitated through three sessions (which function similarly to courses): Tutoring Sessions, Book Club Sessions, Creative Writing Sessions. Across these writing/educational sessions lie group discussions. Although the schedule has drastically changed (and had been temporarily shut down in April 2020 but resumed in winter 2021), the guidelines state that the group will meet once a week for an hour and a half and that the group is open to “any person that shares our Vision, Mission, and Goals.”⁴²⁷ Following some structure learned from college courses offered in prison, Kabasha has set the overall completion course equaling 24 classes or 36 hours per session (out of the three offered). If one completes all three sessions, students receive 108 study hour credits. The ULG guidelines state how a recovery environment sustains these three types of sessions. The Tutoring Sessions (on teaching literacy) were the main courses in ULG’s beginnings in 2017, followed by the Creative Writing Sessions in 2018 and the Book Club in 2019. In this recovery

⁴²⁷ K. Kabasha Griffin-El, *Unit Literacy Group Orientation Packet*, 2019.

environment, each individual develops their own understanding of what it means to be in recovery with assistance from facilitators and other members: “We believe that each individual is best suited to define for themselves their personal meaning of recovery, and to establish their own recovery plan of action.”⁴²⁸ The defining of recovery and educational work in a group setting facilitated by other incarcerated men of all ages allows for a transformative space reliant on vulnerability, determination, and creative expression.

From site-specific theatre to the curation of a museum exhibit, the interdisciplinarity of performance studies offers multiple methodologies for framing space and noting its possibility. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced through societal and personal values and meanings. Drawing from Gramsci’s work on hegemony, Lefebvre explores how hegemonic powers use space to assert power (like prisons): “Today the state and its bureaucratic and political apparatuses intervene continually in space, and make use of space in its instrumental aspect in order to intervene at all levels and through every agency of the economic realm.”⁴²⁹ The prison space, as shown, works for the neoliberal economy and, through its widespread (mis)use in BIPOC communities, upholds the goals of tough on crime politicians. However, resistance happens in spaces meant to uphold hegemonic power. Informed by Yi-Fu Tuan’s reading of space as movement and place as pause, I track the use of space in its many forms for the ULG as both a physical movement to make an empathetic community setting and intellectual movement to readdress gaps in education.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, ed. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 2009): 378.

⁴³⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 6.

The ULG requires an area, usually in a multipurpose room, to cultivate their empathetic recovery space. Kabasha repeatedly discusses how the pandemic and the confinement to one's cell ultimately prevented ULG from accomplishing its work. Aside from the difficulties of not connecting with other members outside of one's cell (assuming that these members are within the same cell), having a separate space that at least momentarily transforms into a complete recovery space, outside of the site of near-constant detainment, improves the likelihood of actual transformation. Kabasha has more freedom of space than most inmates due to his work as a CPS. Additionally, Kabasha has his own cell without a bunkmate due to health issues. Yet how Kabasha uses this relative freedom is not to benefit himself but rather to expose himself to the wider population of incarcerated persons in order to provide much-needed mental assistance. This experience as a CPS, which Kabasha continues to do, inspired the founding of ULG as the people he encountered privately admitted that they struggled with reading and writing.

The Unit Literacy Group began at SCI Greene, where Kabasha was before moving to SCI Somerset. At this time, ULG *is* essentially Kabasha with frequent discussions on expanding. Many discussions of the work, particularly involving the physical space of ULG, stem from the time at SCI Greene unless otherwise noted. Kabasha frequently talks about the impetus for the group's founding (shown in two different ways in the interviews) and how pronounced the education inequities are for incarcerated individuals.⁴³¹ In a conversation on February 7, 2022, nearly two

⁴³¹ In a recently edited orientation packet (March 2022) Kabasha discusses the criteria for the ULG: "In an attempt to combat the proliferation of drugs, violence, self-harm, and suicide within prison settings (in addition to academic materials), the ULG introduces recovery focused personal affirmations; mental health related literature; and exercises that promote critical thinking, coping skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution as part of a holistic approach to wellness and recovery. Doing so further provides the safe space of a recovery environment by validating participants and their experiences with anger, abuse, addiction, depression, anxiety, PTSD, self-loathing, suicidal thoughts/failed attempts, failed relationships, despair, low self-esteem, and academic challenges (such as difficulties reading or writing), all of which are exasperated by the stress of imprisonment. As such, any imprisoned person that shares the Vision, Mission, and Primary Goals of the ULG, is eligible to become a ULG Participate." Griffin-El over email, March 2, 2022.

years into our friendship, Kabasha acknowledged how the trauma of incarceration and the lack of educational opportunities in prison still emotionally affects him and drives his work “You don’t realize how much of a need there is for it in here. It brings you to tears sometimes, you know? Because a lot of these guys, they really don’t know that they have another choice instead of getting caught up in all types of nonsense and the expression ‘this is all I know’ – you hear it all the time.”⁴³² Kabasha wanted to create an opportunity to encourage choice through recovery. He discusses this founding in a more concrete and specific manner in a written interview over ConnectNetwork. To Kabasha, the need for a recovery space – fulfilling intellectual, emotional, and generational healing became clear:

In 2013, I received official training required to become a Certified Peer Specialist in Pennsylvania. Combined with my earlier training as a Certified Tutor, I was fortunate to be entrusted with the responsibility of meeting with my fellow prisoners (when necessary) to help them to cope with and overcome various crises. Sometimes I would simply sit with them, listen, and present kindness. [...] There it was...I saw the need, and although I felt as if I couldn’t take on any more responsibilities, I founded the Unit Literacy Group. Initially, the idea was solely to help men learn to read and write. We were just a small group that met three days each week, developing our reading & writing skills. While doing so, I became more aware than ever that prison is full of men and women suffering enormous pain (myself included). Many (if not all) of our participants have lived lives full of trauma that has taken a terrible toll on their self-esteem. Naturally, the concept of the ULG evolved. I felt an overwhelming responsibility to provide a recovery environment for the men, where they could feel safe sharing. It’s amazing to witness actual healing take place...through literacy. As a veteran of the US Marine Corps diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, and depression, I acknowledge that the ability to read and write has literally saved my life. Literacy empowers me and has boosted my self-esteem. I’m honored to witness this power as it transforms others.⁴³³

In creating a recovery space at SCI Greene, he used the multipurpose room to create a space that mimics sites of speech through the use of a podium. Kabasha says the podium helps overcome shyness and insecurities and better prepares the members for interviews for parole boards and jobs.

⁴³² Griffin-El, February 7, 2022.

⁴³³ Griffin-El, March 2, 2022.

Even more so, the practice of occupying this space, a space typically associated with power, becomes “less intimidating,” which will help in self-advocacy, particularly in parole board hearings.

The podium additionally became a small stage for creative exploration. Literacy, to ULG, stems beyond solely acquiring the tools necessary to navigate the justice system or gain employment. Literacy additionally builds self-esteem and confidence through creativity and exploration. Kabasha excitedly reflects on one particular session where the group read aloud a short story and turned it into a play:

One of the books the principal had brought in was a collection of short stories. And in it was one short story called *\$100 and Nothing*, I think. And it was a really interesting story that I selected because they talked about abuse, for one, and it talked about selfishness and generosity and talked about it in a way that all of these things were incorporated in this story in a way we were able to — some the language that was being used and the various slang words and phrases, and it was really fun because we read it in that way turn it into acting! Yeah, everybody was doing it SO MUCH, and it broke things up because we didn't do that all the time, and so that was really interesting. And they were asking, ‘When are we gonna do another reading?!’⁴³⁴

The ULG performance of J. California Cooper’s 1984 short story in *A Piece of Mine* captures the intersection of creativity, humor, embodiment, literacy, and recovery in one small act. Cooper’s folk short stories powerfully pair with the work of ULG in using the arts to wrestle with issues of abuse, poverty, and race in America. The shared story and embodied reading of it created a sense of community through art in active defiance of the continual work of incarceration’s isolation. In *\$100 Or Nothing*, protagonist Mary is in an abusive relationship with Charles, who continuously berates her despite attempts to appease him. Notably, Mary, a Black woman, grew up in a White orphanage and, after aging out of it, bought an acre of land and eventually opened a store. To

⁴³⁴ Griffin-El, April 2022. Since April 2022, ULG has added another dramatic reading event. The group worked with Charles Dickens’s short story, “A Child’s Dream of a Star.” The story holds special significance for Kabasha as he marks it as the first piece of writing that affected him as a young teen.

negate Mary's success, Charles's insult of "I could take \$100 and nothing and have more than this in a year!" becomes the crux of Mary's revenge.⁴³⁵ Diagnosed with a terminal illness, Mary rewrites her will to essentially leave Charles \$100 and nothing else. With arrangements made prior to her death, their home then becomes an orphanage for Black children. The story-telling structure and mannerisms of the piece make it apt for theatrical performance. Yet more deeply lies the story's simple yet specific and direct characterization, which offers an opportunity for reflection.

Kabasha described the connection to the story working so well for ULG because of the transparent faults and abusive behavior in the story. The catharsis, he noted, began in the vulnerable space to track the connections between the ULG member's past and the short story.⁴³⁶ These abilities to connect and embody another character in processing individual traumas have been well documented in the prison theatre field. As I discussed in Chapter 1 regarding acting Shakespeare, some theatre practitioners argue that using pre-written work, usually published, helps incarcerated individuals identify their past experiences through the words of a character.⁴³⁷ While one may question the oversaturation of Shakespeare in prison theatre or prison arts programs generally, the use of embodying other figures to enact empathy and understanding is at the heart of theatre and generative to incarcerated individuals. Within ULG, performing one of J. California Cooper's short stories emphasize Black voices and overtly draw on contemporary experiences. Though never divulging the past legal challenges of group members, Kabasha broadly speaks to the poor behavior choices of those incarcerated with him and how these choices require accountability. Taking accountability in this space includes acknowledging harms done but also the choice to grow as an individual:

⁴³⁵ J. California Cooper, "\$100 Or Nothing," in *A Piece of Mine* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011).

⁴³⁶ Griffin-El, March 4, 2022.

⁴³⁷ See Balfour, McAvinchey, Shailor, Niels, Lucas, Dreier.

I had to also include the mental health aspect [for the group] beyond just tutoring. So we concentrate on that and our communication skills, our own power, and our own choices. A part of this process is accountability and the acknowledgment of past actions combined with the educational and emotional tools necessary to examine social, familial, and personal factors that contributed to where the members are at that moment. People need the opportunity to express themselves and work through things. We would work on issues like the importance of body language. Some of these guys don't know how threatening they come across. So we would then practice different body language and learn how to read and enact this.⁴³⁸

Kabasha's train of thought flowing from education grounded in mental health to processing past traumas to practicing body language speaks to the fluidity of the ULG as a radical healing space, rooted in solidarity and recovery as brothers.⁴³⁹ In other words, separated by enacting another text rather than their individual stories allow ULG members to examine the societal structures surrounding their lives *as well as* provide a platform for accountability and healing.

Continuing this enactment and literary components, the space of the ULG invites temporal crossing by way of individual reflection and personal history. As Rebecca Schneider argues, "to read 'history,' then as a set of sedimented acts that are not the historical acts themselves but the act of securing any incident backward – the repeated act of securing memory – is to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition."⁴⁴⁰ Taken collectively across both embodied dramatic readings, creative writing, and even the educational space of ULG, these acts pull at the memory of what came before. As a recovery-based environment, the acknowledgment of the crime or incident(s) leading up to incarceration and the memory of it co-exists and reverberates with the acquisition of new knowledge. The ritual repetition can be, as Schneider states, "the physical acts of reading,

⁴³⁸ Griffin-El, February 7, 2022.

⁴³⁹ 'Brothers' is the term that ULG members call each other.

⁴⁴⁰ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 104.

writing, educating.”⁴⁴¹ From this repetition, and I would add from the continued entrance into the ULG space, the ULG members continuously rethink history, their history, to then move forward.

When discussing individual recovery plans, the ULG member’s prison sentence comes into play. Every member is in a different stage of their sentence, and the processing of life sentences, Kabasha’s sentence, occurs alongside those who are soon to be released. When discussing sentencing with Kabasha, a quote kept popping up in the back of my mind: “Imprisonment is an injury, regardless of how you justify it.”⁴⁴² Captain Jean-Luc Picard’s moral argument in *Star Trek* concretely elucidates the reverberating effects of incarceration on both victims, offenders, and their families. If imprisonment is an injury, then life imprisonment is an attempted execution. This deduction highlights the severity of what life imprisonment actually entails. The inability to see loved ones grow up and reach milestones, to fully experience nature and make memories outside of prison walls – life imprisonment is very often talked about in the abstract, negligent of the real people it harms. Kabasha’s life imprisonment has drastically affected his family, leading to pain on all sides. Acknowledging this sentence and that other individuals who have this sentence are in the Unit Literacy Group contributes to a new way of examining postcarceral performance: actively living in hope and love, making plans for a future, preparing appeals, and applying for commutations, all of which require *trying* – regardless of location in the carceral system. While the sentences may appear to be the biggest hurdle in ULG work, apathy is the most prominent obstacle.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² “Allegiance,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, March 26, 1990.

Returning to the generational divide, the initial relationships and boundaries made with young inmates depict a performative pattern in understanding the space of incarceration and how Kabasha has labored to navigate that space.

CC: Can you speak to the changes in social interaction? You mentioned you'd witnessed a stark shift from when you were first incarcerated up to now regarding youth?

KG: We're all sharing the same experience as far as you know – the imprisonment and all of the degradation and everything that comes with that. I really had to remind myself that I am an elder, and you know, that's something that happens so gradually. When I came in with 24 years old right and just as wily as somebody younger, to a degree, you know, yeah kind of temperamental... But being able to take a step back and say, "OK, well, I gotta be the adult in the room, I have to be the elder in the room and try to find another way to deal with my own frustrations and talk with them." And [I was] recognizing that's what they basically wanted. [...] They'll test you sometimes, and if you don't correct them, then they're gonna continue to think they can just get away with whatever. They come in, and they expect to be corrected. They'll see that they can get away with and they'll go, "Oh, ok! It's party time."⁴⁴³ And unfortunately, things have changed so much.

There was a time when a lot of elders believed that there was a responsibility to take the youngest underling, we call it, or another phrase we use is "each one teaching one." But that effort has been so frustrated by the policies that the Department of Corrections has come up with. They don't want to get involved the way we used to. They're [the elders] like, "ok, let 'em go ahead and use the drugs and go ahead and fight and whatever else and get his ass off the block into to RHU."⁴⁴⁴ That's the mindset a lot of elders are taking because of the frustration and asking, "well, why should I get in trouble trying to help this guy?" [...] We have brothers and sisters, and sometimes you get into it with your brothers and sisters.⁴⁴⁵ Yeah, like punch him in the chest -- you [the elder] could let him know, "Hey, don't do that again," but you could do it in an aggressive way, and we aren't allowed to do that anymore. I mean, we were never actually allowed to do it, but we were able to do it to take care of ourselves, to police ourselves, you know what I mean? To correct ourselves. Now the policies are such that even like it...takes almost nothing to find yourself facing charges or at least being placed in the RHU.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴³ This quote refers back to an earlier conversation in January where Kabasha voiced his frustration with younger incarcerated men's preference for discussions of sex, drugs, and money rather than education.

⁴⁴⁴ RHU is the Restricted Housing Unit – which is essentially solitary confinement.

⁴⁴⁵ In Kabasha's block at SCI Somerset, there is a sizable population of queer and trans individuals. His use of "brothers and sisters" reflects this population's diversity. He states elsewhere in the interview: "There's a stereotype that everyone [in prison] is the same. And they're not. And I'm one that's fascinated by talking to people and hearing their stories and learning more about them. Everybody is so diverse – they do identify as gay, transgender, or nonbinary. These are terms I didn't know; I wasn't familiar with this terminology, but I am now, and I think it prepares me to be able to work with anybody." Griffin-El, January 29, 2022.

⁴⁴⁶ Being sent to RHU goes in the inmate's file which negatively effects chances for parole, commutation, or pardons. Ibid.

Throughout this conversation, Kabasha reflects on not only the differences between younger and older incarcerated people but also how the prison system itself has shifted to discourage interpersonal navigation of conflicts. The shift from “each one, teaching one” to “why should I [...] help this guy?” because of the policies of prison, policies meant to keep prisoners “safe” further reveal the inadequacies of the carceral state in rehabilitation or recovery. These policies have drastically limited the opportunity for communal management of personal conflicts and increased violent tactics by staff in the name of safety. In *We Do This 'Til They Free Us*, Mariame Kaba contends, “Security and safety aren’t the same thing. Security is a function of the weaponized state that is using guns, weapons, fear, and other things to ‘make us secure,’ right?”⁴⁴⁷ The divide in the generations, dramatically influenced by policies, has indeed become a weapon. Apathy and lack of empathy have become a tool to further encourage complacency at the hands of the prison institution.

Kabasha continued to reflect on this divide and how the prison system constantly works to divide those inside:

Prison strips us of our visual identity. The merger of all of us in here makes it really difficult to separate the youth from the elders.⁴⁴⁸ Everybody’s just lumped in here together, and you forget, ‘ok, that’s a young person, that’s an elder.’ We’re not segregated in the sense that we’re divided [by age]. So say it’s a young person and you see something wrong is happening by staff, we gotta just stand by and let staff do whatever they are gonna do and then go through a grievance process and stuff like that. Like your natural inclination that you would have if you were out in the free world have to be set to the side. Yeah [you can’t say] ‘hey, this isn’t appropriate. Why you doin’ this?’ And now you’re involved and thrown into the mix and subject to be penalized for intervening.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

⁴⁴⁸ This sentence is a quote is from a PBS program Kabasha had just watched. He noted that he liked how it was phrased and reflects his earlier comments.

⁴⁴⁹ Griffin-El, January 29, 2022.

Earlier in this chapter, I posed the question of solidarity. Solidarity against inequity, a police state, and unjust practices are just as complicated in prisons as on the outside. The divide Kabasha speaks to is the fracturing of solidarity stemming from the prohibition of defensive action and individual difference. Using performance to interrogate the visual erasure of identity in prisons allows us (as outsiders) to witness how the very fabric of the everyday becomes twisted behind bars. Seeing a person, to mark their manner of dress, styling, figure, and age results in being able to interpret and even categorize who that person is. By erasing this ability, understanding who this person is becomes murkier. This lack of clarity can lead to fear of the unknown and a state of heightened alert of surroundings. Living in this heightened state of anxiety inevitably leads to conflict.

The stripping of visual identity partly contributes to the stripping of humanity and the increase of control. Kabasha describes:

They've never had as much control over us as they do today. They use every minor infraction as an excuse to impose these oppressive restraints on us [...]. There's pessimism, a sense of hopelessness [of the younger inmates]. The sentences they put on these young men and put them in an adult prison and tell them that they'll never get out. Making it difficult for educational programming that is really gonna result in something beneficial for them, you know? The elders are losing their patience. I tell them we can't give up on them. Even if we just work with them one-on-one, like you can't get to everybody, and we know it's best to reach the ones you really need to – where they don't feel the need to show off their ego. We need to pass on the information to them, so they know how to advocate for themselves. And it is a TASK. It's daunting because there are so many negative pressures on us all.⁴⁵⁰

This task and the combination of one-on-one mentorship and passing on of both elder wisdom and educational abilities has become far more of an inmate responsibility than a prison rehabilitation responsibility. Kabasha sees this task as an elder job because they had experienced prison before these policies were introduced, and by conveying how things used to be, these conversations open up a space to plan for how things can be.

⁴⁵⁰ Griffin-El, January 25, 2022.

Practicing empathy and engaging in forgiveness drives the essential work of postcarceral performance. Rather than following judicial logics of guilty or innocent, identifying areas for personal growth and education, mainly found through some form of artistic expression, stimulates the work of the literacy group. The first of ULG's primary goals states: "to create educational based recovery environments facilitated by trained and Certified Peer Specialists (CPS), Certified Tutors, and Trained Peer Assistants *without prisons and institutions*, where participants may feel safe exposing their challenges (emphasis my own)."⁴⁵¹ Despite occurring within the prison institution, the goals and actions of ULG momentarily yet vitally transform space into an area that is outside of the prison structure. The actual and meaningful work on rehabilitation, work completed and assisted by incarcerated men, rejects the authority of the prison as actually rehabilitating individuals. The ULG defines this notion of a recovery environment (a space) as "a physical or mental space deliberately developed for the purpose of promoting wellness."⁴⁵² Furthermore, this work stems from "the concept that everyone is in recovery from something and can benefit from recovery environments."⁴⁵³ The event is intrinsically tied with space. The space becomes a site of negotiation and reclamation. Negotiation occurs in that these incarcerated students learn not only educational practices but also use this knowledge to negotiate their status in prison and work towards life outside prison.

⁴⁵¹ Particularly their challenges with "reading, writing, comprehension, and basic arithmetic problems." K. Kabasha Griffin-El, "About," Unit Literacy Group, 2021, <https://www.unitliteracygroup.com/about>.

⁴⁵² K. Kabasha Griffin-El, *Unit Literacy Group Orientation Packet*, 2019, 3.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

5.4 Enacting Expressions of Recovery

Written in small, wide lettering, with circles dotting each “i,” D’Wan Williams-Lawrence’s opening to *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery* distinguishes the type of participants in ULG and reflects on their purpose. A line runs through “Come Join Us,” and a new title, “What We Do In Our ULG,” appears above it. Parentheses and circles sprinkle the short essay, followed by comments and edits by outside group member and editor Jodi Lincoln:

Hello, my name is D’Wan Williams-Lawrence. I was asked to explain what our goals are, or more so, what we do in our Unit Literacy Group. For some, we help further their reading and writing skills. For others, * we help show their talents (in many different ways), such as poetry or writing powerful, encouraging statements.⁴⁵⁴ In this group, we fight to help others become more educated. Some by teaching them other languages, we use this group as a time to empower our brothers. I was honored to be asked to write this piece. On what is the nature of our group that to me stands as a brotherhood in writing because we become united as one without judgment so for me, the Unit Literacy Group is more needed than we care to admit. “So what are you waiting for? Come join us in our fight to self-improve, we’re waiting for you.”⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ *Jodi has crossed out this phrase and added: “For All! Even those with low literacy levels have talents on display”

⁴⁵⁵ “What We Do in Our ULG” in *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery*. Unit Literacy Group, 2020, 14.

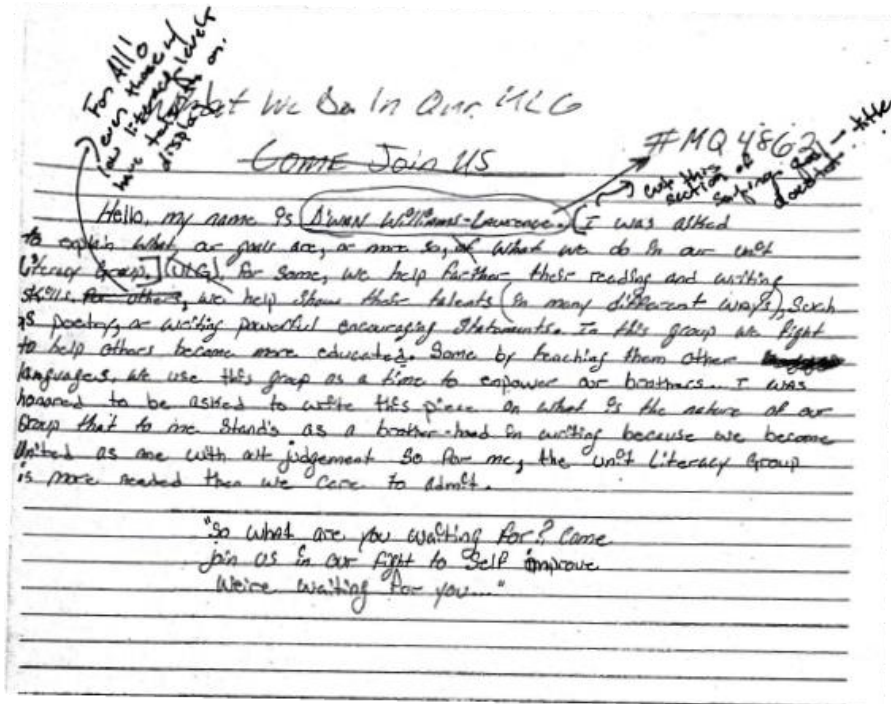


Figure 15 Image of D’Wan’s writing

Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery is a collection of short essays and poems by members of the Unit Literacy Group. Kabasha’s goal of reaching more PA prisons and building new sections of ULG serves as the inspiration for the publication of *Creative Writing*. The practice itself, this type of recovery-based writing, is common in mental health spaces. In reading this piece as performative writing, D’Wan’s words reveal the communal setting and actions of the group. From the switch of “Come Join Us” into “What We Do in *Our* ULG,” the focus on group ownership locates the practice within each student and that each student participates in the ownership of said group. The members’ roles do not remain static but shift from teacher to student to audience member depending on the lesson. The “showing of talents” contributes to an active performance that requires not only the intellectual work of gaining literacy but also the emotional work of support (and the exhibiting of said support). I admit that I do not know why the last sentence of D’Wan’s piece has quotes around it. Yet the quotes and the opening question feel evocative. I take the first portion of the essay as an individual reflection. I imagine D’Wan standing

in front of ULG members, speaking to an audience about his work with the group. Then this last part reads as though the individual, D'Wan, has taken a step back into the group and, together with his fellow members, states this question and enticement. Whether written or enacted, the piece's performativity explains ULG's work but also activates the work completed – the writer (or actor) presents as a proud, literate individual. A person who relishes in brotherhood rather than isolation and who acknowledges this community that he is a part of as truly transformative.

Focusing on the people within the prison, the daily life, and programs offered (or not) can make discussions of the geography of the prison itself seem less important. However, how space functions and in what way parts of prisons can become sites of resistance contribute to Kabasha's fundamental outlining of how ULG should function. Performance's transformative possibilities mobilize incarcerated individuals by working within a space, informed by empathy and guidance, that defies the rigidity and monotony of imprisonment. In "Event-Space: Performance Space and Spatial Performativity" in *Performance Perspectives*, Dorita Hannah examines the multiple types of space and how all of these types perform. She articulates how space "is a performative medium, and therefore an inherently active entity, which reciprocally acts on, and is activated by, its occupants who need not be physically present within it."⁴⁵⁶ This absence of occupants who nevertheless activate the space speaks to Joseph Roach's discussion of surrogation and law in *Cities of the Dead*. The space of the ULG classroom works between what is lost (freedom) and found (recovery) while defying the dehumanization and erasure of individuality in prison.

The intersections of memory, time, and space in the body of law exemplify the effects of the law on the body and corporeal performance. Joseph Roach argues that the law functions as a

⁴⁵⁶ Dorita Hannah, "Event-Space: Performance Space and Spatial Performativity," in *Performance Perspectives: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Jonathan Pitches and Sita Popat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 54.

cultural system that creates, encourages, and regulates behavior. He notes how the legal system “typically bases its legitimacy on precedents, mysteriously reconstructed performances whereby the dead [...] may pass judgment on the living.”⁴⁵⁷ Within this description, Roach evokes the legal process of court trials and crime against another as haunting the perpetrator. The concept of surrogation, or substitution, which begins as “actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric,” speaks to the performativity of ULG.⁴⁵⁸ The community stands in for the family that each member has lost due to their incarceration. The recovery work replaces the labor that occurred on the outside. The meeting space of the group becomes a memory machine for reflecting on the past to prepare for a future while living in the liminal place of the prison. All of these substitutions cannot, of course, ever replace the loss of freedom and livelihood decimated by imprisonment.

⁴⁵⁷ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 55.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

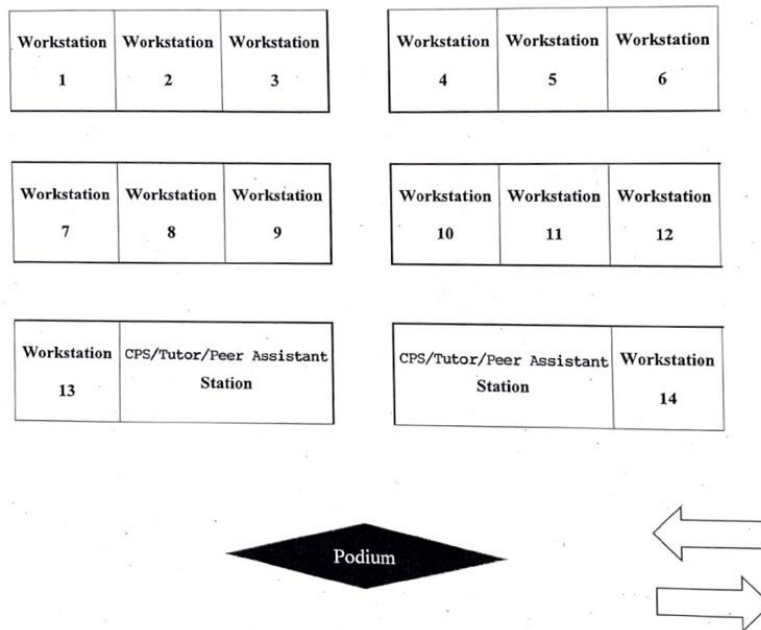


Figure 16 Model of a ULG Classroom

Figure 16 shows the typical setup of the ULG space. The format comes from the ULG meetings at SCI Greene, where the group used the multipurpose room to create their own recovery space. This setup reflects how the group uses classroom space throughout the entirety of the Tutoring Sessions and for part of the Creative Writing Sessions. While reminiscent of a conventional classroom, Kabasha uses this setup to decenter himself as the “leader” and instead create workstations with enough space for two members to work together or engage in solitary work. The podium serves as a site of performance for the reading of creative writing pieces and dramatic renditions of short stories. Currently, at SCI Somerset, the group does not have access to a podium which has shifted the setup into a half-circle when sharing work and reading affirmations. Kabasha passionately talks about his constant fine-tuning and adjusting of the ULG space to better meet the needs of the men because of the drastic demand for this type of recovery space in prison:

Not everybody’s in the same pod [in prison]. Some people wanna be disrupters, they wanna be about drugs, they wanna be about violence...but these guys *want* an education. This space is literally a safe space to actually pursue better things. There’s a stigma about trying

to get an education – we’ll hear, ‘why are you doing that? You weren’t doing that in the streets!’ because they want to keep us down.⁴⁵⁹

The act of trying – predominantly found in building new futures and pathways by first recovering from past trauma and the trauma of incarceration – reverberates in postcarceral performance. With ULG, like with production work at Clean Break or visual art shown in Let’s Get Free’s gallery, the space of shared goals of new futures bound by hope functions through self-determination and the building of a community. The outcomes of postcarceral performance, a show like *Sweatbox* or one of etta cetera’s banners or “Bloom Where You are Planted,” convey the reach of the carceral state in communities and depict how art becomes a healing practice and an act of solidarity. Those behind some of these outcomes use the process of creating it to heal and to render visible injustices. Yet, for ULG, because these men are still imprisoned, the visible outcome is not as defined to the public as in the other chapters. They are on their own individual recovery, occurring away from the public eye. Literacy and education are outcomes of the process of healing.

The Unit Literacy Group functions like an affective archive in that the literacy work draws from past experiences that led to the members’ current state, produces written reflection, and activates plans for the future. Kabasha’s prompts in ULG meetings encourage this space of reflection and dreaming to help create a throughline of one’s past, present, and future in order to show that a future exists. One prompt which appears in *Creative Writing* facilitates the comparison between then and now and asks a “what if” scenario to track recovery, “What would it be like if I went back to my old ways?”

⁴⁵⁹ Griffin-El, March 4, 2022.

Below are two pieces from ULG members:

“Relapse looks like...” (excerpt) – Ryan Jankowski

If I was to relapse and go back to my old ways my life would look like this. An explosion full of fire and then the ground explodes open with demons flying out from a fiery abyss. That’s what my life would be like because my life would become a living hell of reality. I would hurt and abuse myself and others just to get my next fix. I would lose my family who supports me and loves me even when I am at my worst. My daughter would lose her father and she would lose all respect for me. [...] We all have a choice and I’ll make mine and it might not always be the best, but it beats a relapse choice. Death would be my only outcome and I choose to live today.⁴⁶⁰

“If I went back to my old ways” – Keith Spell

I would be homeless, hopeless, and helpless. My mental health played a big role in my relapse. I’m suffering from schenifhonia [sic] and it is hard to understand. If it hasn’t been apart [sic] of your life for a while. The Voices are stressful and its [sic] hard to wake up every morning to take medication every day. It has caused me to lose my family. Also caused me to come back to Jail because I thought I was doing something right, I was [illegible] and the whole time I was in a daze.

I never really experience [sic] drugs except for a little alcohol and that made it even worse. When I was first drinking the sickness got worse, you tend to think you’re someone that you’re not and got caught up in all sorts of trouble. I’m learning slowly about my illness and feel like I have control, but it’s easy to get caught in your old ways if you don’t pay attention to the new you.⁴⁶¹

Both Ryan and Keith evoke family to reflect on how their past behaviors produced harm. They describe how they used to be and claim responsibility for situations that negatively affected loved ones. In Ryan’s piece, he uses vivid imagery to illustrate how he views part of his life prior to incarceration. He notes how the first person he would hurt with his “old ways” would be himself. In doing so, Ryan activates two of the affirmations read at the beginning of each ULG session: “I acknowledge that FORGIVENESS is an empowering part of RECOVERY” and “I am in

⁴⁶⁰ Ryan Jankowski, “Relapse Looks Like...” in *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery*, Unit Literacy Group, 2020, 29.

⁴⁶¹ Keith Spell, “If I Went Back to My Old Ways” in *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery*, Unit Literacy Group, 2020, 28.

RECOVERY, and I choose to FORGIVE myself and to heal myself.”⁴⁶² The act of recovery-based writing reveals the inner subjective experience, allowing for clear reflection by naming and explaining past behavior. The distancing effect of this – of writing in a “what if” scenario reinforces the notion that that scenario is *not* where they are now. By doing so, this work shifts away from viewing imprisonment as the worst scenario and instead positions their current status as transitory and recovery based.

Hope fuels this work by acknowledging the difficulties of the past, identifying the violence of the carceral state, and preparing/dreaming for what is to come. Kabasha witnesses how by putting words to their experiences and addressing educational gaps, ULG members shift how they interact with those around them. These affirmations, particularly the use of the phrase “I love you,” fundamentally impact the environment of the group space. One of Kabasha’s most memorable experiences of this work and how deeply needed it comes in the form of an unexpected group member:

We had guys that have what we call clout or whatever who break down in tears, and this gang member broke down. One of the things we did – I wrote the word ‘love’ on the board, and I presented those handouts with ‘I love you’ written all over it. [Then, in the next session] when I had a conversation with one of the guys, and I asked what he thought that was about and what it was for. And the guy said that he thought he was supposed to say that we love ourselves ‘cause I passed it out to everybody. And I said, ‘well, what did you do with it? What’d you guys do with it?’ and he said, ‘To tell you the truth – I balled that shit up and threw it away. Because I thought it was about me. And I don’t love myself. I hate myself.’ And...wow, that was a blow, yeah, and that he was so vulnerable with that in front of everybody in the group. So I asked the group how many of them felt that way – that you hate yourself. And about ten men in the group raised their hands. I had to fight back my tears at that moment... and the initial guy – the gangbanger, he was bawling. I said, ‘I want to remind everybody that the things that we talk about in this room, it stays in here. Let’s look at the look around right now -- we wanna keep it like this, we don’t need any supervision or everything, right? And they respected that. And we have *never* had any problems with the guys talking about stuff [outside of group].’⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Griffin-El, *Unit Literacy Group Orientation Packet*.

⁴⁶³ Griffin-El, February 7, 2022.

The function of the Unit Literacy Group and similar active recovery environments in prisons can be analyzed in a multitude of ways. Due to understaffing of prisons, the prison systems rely on prisoners to heal each other and absolve the prison from actually rehabilitating. Conversely, these groups can be interpreted as the creation of a community space of healing outside of the hierarchy of prison. This, of course, does not account for hierarchies that do occur in prisons, such as the organization of gang activity. This also does not account for those with mental or physical disabilities who may require more individualized and specialized treatment. Ultimately, all of these interpretations ultimately exist at the same time. I view the work of ULG and similar types of groups filled with more possibility and less chance of trauma or violence than the alternatives of individualized sessions or the complete absence of community.

5.5 Conclusion: Rehabilitation in (spite of) Prisons

The locking away of human beings prevents those individuals from committing those “crimes” yet does not deter or prohibit others from committing the same offense. Just as police do not exist for public safety, prisons do not exist for rehabilitation. The carceral state functions for labor exploitation and the furthering of the status quo/White social hierarchies. Thus, the rehabilitation and recovery happening at SCI Somerset are not because this prison stands out among others as under the guise of rehabilitation but because imprisoned peoples are using the time and space of forced detention to rehabilitate themselves.

The skills gained in ULG beyond literacy include emotional processing and relationship building and personal development traits that carry forward past sentencing. The writings and claims of becoming a changed person following prison, with programs like ULG, do happen in

part because of the opportunity for creative expression and the building of respectful groups – this is not the work of the prison itself but of those forced to be inside it. This point does not support the continuation of prisons in the hope that they implement more groups like this, but instead, I point to how these types of groups and this type of postcarceral performance at large could be implemented in public spaces and settings as preventative measures before imprisonment as well as recognizing the work by the people themselves; I do not pretend to know how to end the system of incarceration but based on my research with ULG and Kabasha, I note how the transformative power of safe spaces, environments of vulnerability, and supportive mentors that allow for mistakes and encourage trying, are rooted in forgiveness and creativity.

Della Pollock writes that performative writing is nervous, that “it anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving...”⁴⁶⁴ This chapter, and even this project overall, lies within the realm of nervous performative writing because no research, no theory, and no practice can ever adequately describe the reverberating violence of incarceration. Nor can a performance practice fully address or mend it. Yet marking the work of postcarceral performance, of those within and fighting against the carceral state, offers new ways of knowing. Asking “what else would we do besides imprison?” reaffirms the permanence of the past and the continuation of what has already been done before rather than moving towards the courage to ask, “how can we do it differently...or better yet, why do it at all?” Although scholarship on incarcerated writing, particularly with the literature of MLK or Malcolm X is not new, framing the writing within performativity alongside the importance of communal space and peer support offers insight into

⁴⁶⁴ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing” in *The Ends of Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 90.

the processes of self-actualization occurring in prisons today. Furthermore, as postcarceral performance broadly traverses across theatrical, visual, and literary spaces, the role of community and crafting of empathetic spaces becomes a throughline across seemingly disparate practices. The connection to carcerality is not the central link between these groups across Chapters 2-4; the development of community, empathy and hope encircles them as a connected performance mode.

6.0 Conclusion: How Saying (and Exposing) Can Make It So

I have a strong desire to reform this criminal system, I have (5) five grandkids and a large number of nieces and nephews who I will do anything in my powers to prevent being funneled into a prison! While reading content on social issues, I realized I was one of the poor and disenfranchised, who better to inform on nuances of this criminal system than one who lived it my entire life!

I firmly believe everyone is responsible for and accountable for there [sic] actions. I also understand there are systems in place designed to maintain control of resources and make it difficult for the majority to attain the liberty and happiness the founders spoke of!⁴⁶⁵

Before volunteering with Pittsburgh's public court observation program, CourtWatch, the only courtroom I had sat in was during my parents' divorce. With no prior experience in the criminal justice system, except for the whispers of a family member's short imprisonment in the 1980s, I only knew of incarceration through scholarship, performance, and my then still-early friendship with Kabasha. So much of what the White middle-class public knows about the criminal justice system, what I knew, stems from entertainment, media anecdotes, and other carefully crafted narratives built from a specific lens. Due to this lack of knowledge and the performative drive of allyship and activism, slogans have quickly become the signals between sides. From the

⁴⁶⁵ Paul McKenzie in email to author, March 6, 2022.

rise of “No Justice, No Peace” to “Defund the Police,” ‘abolitionist’ has become a new identity marker.

With this entrance into the broader public sphere, the question of “what do we do without prisons and without police?” inevitably follows. Angela Davis describes how the prison system has become “a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist.”⁴⁶⁶ Thus, now that more people question the existence of prisons post-Ferguson, the fear-informed reflex of asking for a clear alternative arises to appease fears of safety and protection. The question of institutions or alternatives to incarceration mischaracterizes the goals of abolition, which go far beyond the ending of mass incarceration: “[abolition] is an invitation to create and support a range of answers to the problem of harm in society, and, most exciting perhaps, as an opportunity to reduce and eliminate harm in the first place.”⁴⁶⁷ Davis acknowledges the difficulty of comprehending a world without prisons because “it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison.”⁴⁶⁸ Through this nexus of imagination, I see postcarceral performance working towards abolition through actual practice rather than through a bureaucratic, multi-step “how-to-end-prisons” report.

The work of postcarceral performance is centered around community engagement, anti-institutionality, artistic creation, and abolition. As I have shown, it consists of three core components: praxis, time, and space. These components create a lens from which to identify more radical, anti-carceral organizations. I developed this praxis from prison studies, applied theatre/prison theatre, and performance studies. The concept of postcarceral performance is a

⁴⁶⁶ Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York City: Seven Stories Press, 2011): 18.

⁴⁶⁷ Derecka Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Astra House, 2022): 8.

⁴⁶⁸ Davis, 19.

practice and a framework that works among incarcerated and released peoples and those in solidarity. But how else can it be applied, and to what end? To answer requires a reinterpretation of the summer of 2020 and public response to Black death.

In *Becoming Abolitionists*, Derecka Purnell ponders the scenario of George Floyd living instead of being brutally murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the calls for justice at the event. “I often wonder, ‘What if the cop who killed George Floyd had kneeled on Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds instead of nine minutes?’”⁴⁶⁹ Purnell asserts that following decades-long judicial patterns, Floyd would have “lived to be arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned for allegedly attempting to use a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill.”⁴⁷⁰ This scenario, Purnell reminds readers, highlights how “too often, the public calls for justice when Black people are killed by the police ignore the daily injustice if the victims would have lived.”⁴⁷¹ If the victims live, the performance has been seen before: a criminal label applied to the victim and *maybe* quick public fervor over the cop’s “excessive use of force.” The injustice continues, the world spins on.

Responses to Black death caught on camera and widely reported drastically diverge from violence on Black life resulting in survival. Suppose we, the public, do not see responses to violence and injustice that end in survival and instead only see and respond to death. How can public outcry, protest, and collective organizing ever truly be preventative in preventing death and enacting change? How can we truly value *life* if mass mobilizing requires mass death? The protests die out, the injustice continues, the world spins on.

The media and public response to state-sponsored violence have a short attention span. While “in the moment” protests can feel as if they are on the brink of change, abolitionists and

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

activists know that the fight does not occur over a season or a year. The hardest part of rallying for a cause is not the initial response but rather the continual response, and prisons are not the response. Becoming an abolitionist and working within and against carcerality requires mental dexterity that feels antithetical to the social systems of the U.S. and the U.K., which champion retributive justice, not transformative justice. While lamenting the unjust imprisonment of Kelley Williams-Bolar, convicted for falsifying residency to send her daughters to a better school district, calls for further charges against Kyle Rittenhouse declared not guilty for killing two protestors and injuring another, percolated past the end of his trial.⁴⁷² What does justice look like when White supremacy bypasses the court system? Does it call for more incarceration? Within this, the emotional and mental strength to continue working against injustice inevitably takes its toll, which therefore requires the building of community support and engagement. These phrases are not merely jargon but a lifeline for the cause.

I believe the reflexivity of postcarceral performance to current events allows for the practice to continually broaden to attend to “of the moment” issues without detracting from activists’ work. Two years after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor’s death, little has been done in the way of police reform, let alone prison reform. By working on the larger systemic issues which, because of their existence, lead to these deaths, organizations in postcarceral performance are primed for these events as well as continuing their work past the spotlight.

With both the framework and label of postcarceral performance, organizations and individuals that consistently and constantly cater to abolition and rehabilitation can more easily

⁴⁷² Michel Martin, “Mother Jailed for School Fraud, Flares Controversy,” *NPR*, January 28, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/01/28/133306180/Mother-Jailed-For-School-Fraud-Flares-Controversy>. Becky Sullivan, “Kyle Rittenhouse Is Acquitted of All Charges in the Trial over Killing 2 in Kenosha,” *NPR*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/19/1057288807/kyle-rittenhouse-acquitted-all-charges-verdict>.

move between day-to-day work and immediate public response. For example, because of Let's Get Free's organizational structure, their flexible yet regular events and workshops, they can continue their activist work while also assembling for an immediate cause. They have the experience and capability to organize and mobilize when the media spotlight returns to police violence or, more locally speaking, rallies and protests for the Allegheny County Jail's treatment of incarcerated people. The time, space, and praxis of postcarceral performance characterize it as a long-standing effort – hyperaware of the quick burn of national attention and the wielding of labels like “allyship” and “performativity.” In an interview with the host of Rebel Steps, Mariame Kaba criticizes the rapid and fleeting response of protests couched as movements:

Liz: As new people look for ways to join movements, it's inevitable that some will search for a quick fix. If you're new and looking to get involved, remember that it's not about just hashtags or a day of protest. It's about joining the struggle.

Kaba: That's in the air, right? On the question of allies, I've mentioned that I don't believe in allyship, and I'm super bored with the concept of performativity. I believe in strugglers, and I believe in coworkers and I believe in solidarity. I believe we need more people all the time in all of our work, in all of our movements, in all of our struggles. The question is, how do we get folks to struggle alongside us and with us. As an organizer, this is the constant thinking I am engaged in. What are points of entry for people, so that they can find a way to lend what they know how to do, their talent, their ideas to whatever it is that we're doing, while also learning in the process?"⁴⁷³

In future theory of postcarceral performance, community organizing offers a generative site of study. One examination informed by Kaba's question of points of entry and expanding on the interests of those wanting to organize may lead to the tension between hope and disappointment. It may additionally be in dialogue with Muñoz's utopias and Fleming's Black patience. To repeat Muñoz's warning, “if activist politics and knowledge fail to touch in legible and knowable ways

⁴⁷³ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021): 259-60. Apple Books.

[...] they in fact represent a certain bad faith.”⁴⁷⁴ To make visible what is “legible” and “knowable” requires those who have experienced the carceral state and those with knowledge of the community where the organizing occurs. The practice of performance, to activate this knowledge and make it clear, connects the idea of the activist politic and the way to bring said idea to fruition.⁴⁷⁵ Furthermore, postcarceral performance defies the directive of “waiting” by continuously building. It asks if the label of inaction (waiting) is true or if, instead, it’s a lack of mainstream media focus? If Black performance practices thwarted the waiting discourse, how can postcarceral performance thwart the “prisons keep us safe” discourse?

Postcarceral performance lives beyond Pittsburgh and London. For example, Storycatchers, a youth development arts company in Chicago, embodies postcarceral performance through their work in the juvenile justice system.⁴⁷⁶ The organization describes its goals through the framework of forwarding individual experiences to draw attention from the public: “We help them tell their stories through musical theatre. By moving beyond their histories, they transform their own lives, communities, and people like you are ready to listen.”⁴⁷⁷ This dissertation did not discuss the juvenile justice system in detail, in particular, due to the vast differences between both adult and juvenile incarceration but also in the public knowledge and reception of incarcerated youth. With Storycatchers, the group’s structure compares to that of Clean Break. The work itself speaks to the Unit Literacy Group through the youth “writing stories, confronting trauma, building

⁴⁷⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope in the Face of Heartbreak,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 207.

⁴⁷⁵ “Theory is cool but theory with no practice ain’t shit.” Fred Hampton, “You Can Murder a Liberator, but You Can’t Murder Liberation,” April 27, 1969. <https://abolitionnotes.org/fred-hampton-liberation>.

⁴⁷⁶ Full mission statement: “Storycatchers Theatre guides young people to transform their traumatic experiences into powerful musical theatre, developing the courage and vision to become leaders and mentors. By creating support for youth within the criminal justice system, Storycatchers prepares them to change their lives and emerge successfully from court involvement.” “Storycatchers: Youth Development Arts Organization,” Storycatchers Theatre, February 7, 2022, <https://www.storycatcherstheatre.org/>.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

job skills and setting themselves up for success.”⁴⁷⁸ They then define that success through individuals’ goals ranging from acquiring a GED to giving a speech.⁴⁷⁹

Because Storycatchers consists of adult leaders guiding incarcerated and released youth, I imagine the peer-to-peer support that ULG offers drastically differs in this setting. How might youth play and/or continue to play an active role in their healing? How can postcarceral performance as a praxis work against the school-to-prison pipeline with organizations like Storycatchers? Such broad questions, regardless of the exact structure of a youth organization, offer some potential for expanding the research begun in this project and embarking on new trajectories. The intersections between the juvenile justice system, primary schools, and the conceptualization of the child/childhood through performance could lead to more radical ways of working with incarcerated and released youth to reduce recidivism and provide a foundation to embrace an abolitionist future.

The overt discussion of abolition, whether evoking the term or the ideas within it, also offer different paths of postcarceral performance possibilities. Storycatchers embrace an abolitionist politic by publicizing the abuse of the carceral state, particularly on youth. Storycatchers states that “75%-93% of incarcerated youth have experienced severe trauma” and “research shows traumatic stress changes the structure of the brain, hard-wiring it to protect against danger. This causes youth to live in ‘survival mode’ – making it extremely hard for them to develop positive coping mechanisms. *Incarceration is not the solution.*”⁴⁸⁰ What does the solution look like, and how can performance make it so?

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Another goal listed is “or even becoming a professional Teaching Artist themselves.” Storycatchers relies on Teaching Artists to lead the different groups within the organization as a whole. “Our Impact,” Storycatchers Theatre, February 7, 2022, <https://www.storycatchertheatre.org/our-impact/>.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

One organization, the Abolitionist Law Center's CourtWatch program, highlights postcarceral performance's possibilities through its work in publicizing and clarifying the court's function. As exemplary of postcarceral performance, CourtWatch uses performative methods and tactics to fight against Pittsburgh's Allegheny County Jail and for transparency in the local courts. Its presence and labor unsettle the clear separation between the prison, the criminal justice system, and the broader public. The performance of CourtWatch is public (particularly – community) surveillance. Due to its daily observation of the courts, the organization actively mobilizes and responds to injustices witnessed during these sessions.⁴⁸¹ Dr. Autumn Redcross, the program director, reflects on the emotionally fraught labor of working under an abolitionist ontology and having to observe the “traumatic” and “awful” sessions of the court. In an interview with Redcross, whom I have worked with in some CourtWatch initiatives, she reflected on the theatrical maneuverings of the court:

One time a man came into the courtroom having just tested, and their urine was dirty, and [this judge] was like, “I don't know what to do with you. I asked you not to come here like this anymore, and you know we've been trying to help you, and now you're going to jail.” Like, you could see this was going to happen. Because he had come in off the street, so he was wearing street clothes, and he's before her, and they're having a dialogue, and she's reprimanding him. Then I distinctly remember her saying, “you're going to jail” because it stands out to me like monopoly! [After the judge said this] then, the two cops sort of descended on him, cuffed him, and took him away.

So this person came in to do their check-up and was not able to leave. To see your liberties taken from you on the spot, totally unsuspecting, is traumatic, and it's awful, but everybody in the room knew [this was going to happen]. I don't know at what point the signals were made, but they all knew, and it happened so seamlessly it's almost like a dance...just moving people along...⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹ The group is made up of hundreds of volunteers and a small staff to publicize the behavior of the Allegheny County Courts and fight for radical transparency. To streamline the process, CourtWatchers first attend observation trainings to learn how to take notes on daily hearings. These notes are later compiled, analyzed, and reported on from the Abolitionist Law Center.

⁴⁸² Autumn Redcross, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, January 13, 2022.

The logic and structure of conventional dramatic framing help dissect the mistreatment of defendants by judges and the court system itself. Acknowledging “the players of the court” and the cues given by unknowing defendants to judges who jump at the chance to say one of their favorite lines can enhance the public’s understanding of what legal enforcement actually looks like. CourtWatch, rooted in anti-institutionality, directly traces the patterns of judges’ behavior, and how said behavior goes against the judicial code. If such behavior is technically legal, publicizing these judges’ comments to spark public dialogue (and even protest) gestures towards activating community engagement that does not require death to start to make a difference.

Paul’s words about the past opened this dissertation, and his hopes for the future close it. Paul McKenzie’s “About Me” essay reveals the educational and transformational impact of the Unit Literacy Group. The ULG provides the space for addressing gaps in education and contributes to new understandings of societal structure. Paul’s desire to build a nonprofit for families involved in the criminal justice system offers one way that transformation can happen in and despite of prisons. Paul additionally talks about the importance of ownership of past actions in terms of moving forward in life and that the dismay with the prison system does not negate the need to address past mistakes. As I have argued, rehabilitation and recovery occur in prisons but not due to prison technologies. Paul’s focus on recovery and using affirmations to heal “makes you realize that things can be different and it’s always you a lot of time, and what you want for yourself and what you are willing to work on or to do to recover from things you’ve been through in your life. It’s pretty much on you and what work you’re willing to put in to get better.”⁴⁸³ Future trajectories of this project may consider the opportunity for transformation prior to incarceration.

⁴⁸³ Paul McKenzie, interviewed by Courtney Colligan, February 18, 2022.

By theorizing about performance practices and possibilities against the carceral state, I have offered a new methodology for analyzing the structural and practical work of incarcerated and released individuals fighting the prison system. Postcarceral performance as a framework allows scholars, organizers, and practitioners to re-examine and build structures that refrain from upholding arts partnerships with prisons, and instead center incarcerated people's experience to fight against detention. Kabasha ends each email and letter with the signature, "heavy on my mind," reflecting on the weight of imprisonment on him, his family, and his friends. Postcarceral performance uplifts those affected by the criminal justice system. By giving reparations, addressing the intersection of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy, and following the lead of organizations who have begun this postcarceral work, that heaviness can eventually subside.

Appendix A Excerpts from *Creative Writing: Expressions of Recovery*

Appendix A.1 “Write Off Addiction” by Brandon Stains

My name is Brandon Stains and addiction is one of my life long struggles, but my mental health is the root of it all. I used to be ashamed to say I had issues with mental health, but now I’m more open about my problems.

When medications didn’t make me feel better, I turned to drugs. I self medicated to shield my insecurities. I’ve never really discovered who I was, or who I wanted to be. I went to several places in my life like rehabs and hospitals, but nothing seemed to help. I couldn’t figure myself out.

One of my most memorable struggles with addiction was when I went to a seven day detox and said I was ready to be clean, but I wasn’t. My mom held hope for me to get better and be honest with my sobriety, but I left the facility too soon and had reservations to use again. I lost hope for having any sobriety whatsoever. The love and trust my mom had in-me made me feel guilty for lying about my sobriety and sneaking around to use. Eventually the love and trust she had in me showed the difference, because it pushed me to recover. I needed that love to guide me in the right direction for myself and for others.

Now at thirty years old in state prison, I’ve found what takes me away from my life long struggle. It is writing, and all my life it was right there, but I had no idea I would love it. I found that writing helps me, and I feel that it could help others. I get better each day, and each day I feel better about myself. I’m still learning and I want to take what I learn and inspire someone else to

try. it. Maybe it will help you, maybe you will enjoy it, and maybe you will love it. Together we could write off addiction and make a change, make a difference.

Appendix A.2 “Hope” by Ryan Jankowski

There was a time when I was struggling with my newly found sobriety. I found myself looking for work, determined to start a new life. Fortunately, I had a good friend that was willing to help me to get back on my feet. I was homeless, and he allowed me to crash on his sofa. He even helped me to get a job working for a Burger King Restaurant he managed. Although super excited about my new position, it wasn't easy. One day while working at the front counter (during a lunch rush), I started feeling really overwhelmed and struggled to keep my composure. Just as I was about to lose it (give up any hope I had), an older lady noticed my frustration. Notably, she and I hadn't met before... she didn't know me and had no idea as to the complex issues I was facing. Just the same, I had no idea how that woman was about to impact my life in such an extraordinary way. She told me, “honey, take your time. I'm in no rush.” I replied by saying, “thank you. I'm new at this. Thank you for your patience.” In the warmest voice, she told me not to give up, and that she knew I could handle it.

About thirty minutes later I went on my much needed lunch break. As I went to sit down, I noticed that the older lady was still there, and she sat with me. She asked, “are you all right darling?” That was all it took to get me to drop all barriers...to open up, and share with her. I explained my entire situation (all about my bouts with sobriety, being homeless, etc.). After sharing much more than I intended, she told me who she was. I had no idea that I was pouring my heart out to the owner of the store I was working at. She began by telling me not to give up on

myself. I enjoy your customer service.” She went on to compliment me multiple times. Two weeks later, when I arrived to start my work shift, the owner was there, and surprised me with a promotion. She promoted me to the position of District Manager of twelve stores she owned. She said, “you are over-qualified to be making burgers and taking orders. I would love it if you would manage my stores.” In that moment (during a time when I almost gave up), she became my hope. She offered the new beginning I longed for.

Appendix A.3 “Choices” by Keith Spell

Before I was incarcerated, I made a choice to commit a crime. Not knowing the outcome, I did not think it through. It cost me 25 years of my life. Looking back, I made another choice not to blame others for my mistakes. I face the truth head on, accepting responsibility for my choices. I know I can change my behaviors and I’m determined not to repeat the mistakes of my past.

Now I can talk freely about my crime, and can honestly say that I’ve learned from my mistakes. Even though I’m still paying for the same mistakes I made all those years ago, I’m a better person. I now have no desire to rob, cheat, or steal. I look at myself as being an example for people who say they can’t change, because it took me 25 years, but I have changed.

Appendix A.4 “Relapse” by William Walker

What if I fell back
Back to where I once was
Back to how things were
Where things were just because

A time where all you could see
If you could see at all
Was a hope so dim
There was almost none at all

If I were to go back
What would I think of myself
And the many regrets
I may put back on the shelf

Just to take them back down
Just a couple of times
Maybe once? Maybe twice?
For what? What the hell?

It's hard to imagine
I must be sick of it all
When the looks of it say
I must have time to fall

Appendix A.5 “A Visit from My Mother” by Kabasha Griffin-El

Trauma is real, and the lasting effects of trauma can be so deeply ingrained within a person's psyche, that although they may have otherwise moved on with a productive, healthy life, a single event, scent, sound, taste, feeling, or even a sighting of a certain person, has the power to trigger flashbacks that disrupt what would otherwise be beautiful moments. I recently had that experience, where memories of past trauma were triggered by the sudden appearance of my biological mother. She visited with me yesterday, March 8, 2020. That was the first time that I had seen her in seventeen years, and I had no idea that she was coming. It felt weird. I recognized her as my mom, but I didn't know her. I was polite and loving, but I had neither seen nor talked with her for seventeen years. My own mother abandoned me to the hellish experiences of prison for

seventeen years without a single letter, card, or offer of a penny. Unexpectedly, those thoughts flooded my mind involuntarily, and were a lot to process.

We spotted each other immediately upon my entrance into the visiting room. With a huge smile spreading across her face, she walked over to greet me as I approached the officer's desk to process in. We hugged and kissed. She was so happy to see me, even kissing me on the mouth. As we sat, I had to tell her, "mom stop, they're gonna think it's incest." She laughed, then looked perplexed. I was just taking everything in. It was shocking to see how life had aged her. Years of drug addiction, alcoholism, divorce, and the stress of my crimes and imprisonment certainly played a role in that. She didn't look like the woman I once knew to be my mom, the mom that once wore tight miniskirts, high heels, gold chains, bangles, and rings; the one all of my male friends had crushes on. On this day, she dressed more modestly than I had ever seen her dress, wearing loose fitting black slacks, a black long-sleeved shirt under a silky leopard print blouse, and matching black flats with leopard print on the toes. She wore a very short wavy hairstyle, dyed a blondish, golden color. It looked really nice on her. My mom always kept her hair nicely styled. I remember that styling hair was one of her many talents, that she was the best cook in the family, that she could draw, paint, sew and that she had always been very creative. She could take something that others would find worthless, or even viewed as trash, and turn it into a money-making venture. I knew my mother to be a beautiful hustler.

We held hands throughout the visit, and I watched as she went to the vending machines to buy me a turkey sandwich, cheese curls and a Mountain Dew. I noticed there was a stutter in her step, as if there were a pain or a balance issue! I didn't ask what it was, but it affected me. It was a fleeting moment, and I'm unable to describe the feeling. I was too deep in thought and my mind was all over the place... unrestricted by time. I was in the past, present and future all at once,

taking everything in, trying to be present as my mind kept drifting. I recalled how my father had cheated on my mother several times and how trust issues were the topic of some of their fights. The two of them argued and fought like gladiators. They would actually draw blood from one another. She wasn't a "battered" woman. She was a brawler, often initiating the fights that would result in chairs and fish aquariums being broken, releasing fifty-five gallons of water, gravel and gasping, flopping fish to the floor for me to clean up. "I should 've killed you when you f*@ked my sister motherf*@ker!"

She said that during one of their fights, just before she broke free from his attempt to restrain her, and her-teeth locked on the meaty part between the thumb and forefinger of one of his unfortunate hands. He cried out with a screaming roar, followed by two loud smacking sounds... punches. I had to get ice for my mother's face. My mind just kept flashing back to memories like that.

I didn't remember her being so short. Standing 5'7" in flats, she came up to my shoulders, and I'm 6'2". I didn't recall my mom speaking with, so much slang. She reminded me that I was her firstborn, at the age of sixteen. Then I recalled that she never completed high school. She shared some of the things she had experienced through the years, and she apologized for her absence from my life. We had a good talk, but still more needs to be said and discussed. I'm still processing it all, and it still feels weird.

Oddly, while some part of me was feeling protective over my mother, I was feeling numb at the same time. One would think that after seventeen years, it would have been an emotional reunion for me, but it wasn't. I'm uncertain as to why. I'm wondering if it were due to the time that I've served in the Marine Corps, and the service-connected PTSD. I live with as a result of those years, or if it's the past twenty-five years that I've been imprisoned, surrounded by hardened

men, concrete and steel. Perhaps it was due to the flashbacks I kept having as the two of us tried to cram years of conversation into a few visiting hours. I just know that I felt off, and although sincere in my interactions, and in my expressions of forgiveness, I seemed to be simply acting out of a sense of duty to my mom. I felt numb emotionally. Even as tears flowed from her eyes, they didn't move me. I'm not proud of that, yet I found myself stuck, just watching them roll down her face. Eventually, I wiped them away, but even that somehow felt like my duty as her son. About five years ago the mother of a childhood girlfriend visited with me. I was so excited, and every expressive part of my body revealed how overjoyed I was to see that woman, that I had respected, and crushed on since my early teens. She later shared that I had overwhelmed her with my loving affections. I wasn't able to express that form of joy with my own mother. That felt odd... wrong.

There's a lot to talk about. A lot to heal. My mother kicked me out of the house at the age of fifteen. I haven't been back since. She used to beat me and my brother Jerome like we were slaves. We had to strip butt naked and hold on to a chair, railing, or bedpost, as thick leather belts (and even an extension cord in Jerome's case), tore into our flesh, leaving swollen and bleeding marks covering our butt, legs, back and flailing arms. Our mother, the woman sitting there with me for the first time in seventeen years did, that to us. She brought up the fact that she was wrong for "SPANKING" and "WHOPPING" us. I didn't allow it to show, but her word choice pissed me off. In the moment, it seemed to minimize the horrible child abuse that was inflicted upon me and my brother, by both her and our father. We weren't "spanked" or "whopped." We were "BEATEN," brutally by our parents, especially our mother. It's easier to forgive when someone acknowledges the truth. So we'll have to revisit that in a future conversation, because I sincerely choose to let it all go. I was gentle in my approach at rebuking her word choice, by simply saying, "you know that all of that is considered to be child abuse today?" She agreed, and went on to share

how abusive my grandparents were to her and her siblings. She continued with, “mom was young, and I didn’t know how to properly discipline y’all, you know, how to give y’all time outs or make y’all stand in a corner. I didn’t know how to hug y’all and love y’all. I didn’t know how, you know. I did what was done to us, you know. I’m sorry. Mom is sorry.” I appreciated her vulnerability, and the sincerity of her apology. I love my mother, and I forgive her. Yet, although I’m able to help others through their recovery in my work as a certified Peer Specialist, and Wellness Recovery Action Plan Facilitator, I also acknowledge that I am still in recovery from the childhood traumas I’ve experienced. Now, at the age of forty-eight, I realize that recovery is an ongoing choice... a process, and that everyone recovers at their own pace, including me and my mother.

Overall, I’m grateful for the visit, and I’m happy to be so fortunate, lucky and blessed to have my mother back in my life. I sense a change in her that makes me hopeful. For many years, my arms have been open and waiting to embrace my mom. Now she’s here. During our brief time together, she agreed to seek out counseling, and even asked if she and I would be able to participate in counseling together. We need that, and it sounds like a very good idea to share with the Department of Corrections, a program that offers counseling for parents and their imprisoned children. We’ll see. For now, I’m still processing everything, and I’m hopeful that together, my mother and I will help each other to heal old wounds; to recover from the trauma of our past; and to establish a healthy, loving relationship moving forward. What a day.

- AFTERTHOUGHT -

I’ve just shared an essay/story of one of my very personal experiences with trauma. Writing about it, reading the words and speaking them aloud, I heard myself. That sent me deeper into thought, remembering the victims of my crimes, and how they are surely affected by what I’ve done...the trauma I’ve caused them.

Appendix A.6 “Solitary Confinement Must Be Abolished” by Kabasha Griffin-El

I imagine that it must be difficult for those that haven't actually experienced it, to understand the ills of solitary confinement. I've endured it, so I know that it's a cold, cruel, inhumane, and torturous methodology that must be abolished. It directly assaults the very being of men and women, often creating mental illness in those victimized by the callous — if not sadistic — practice. It had that horrible effect upon my younger brother, Jerome Griffin. The outrageous experience of witnessing what has become of my brother as a direct result of solitary confinement, compels me to use my words to expose the terrible consequences of that dehumanizing practice, as it's used deep within the dark, hopeless hideaways of Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections (PDOC).

It took several months of diplomacy — making my request to visit with my brother known to a Psychologist, Counselors, Lieutenants, Captains, a Major, and a Deputy Superintendent. I found myself super excited, anxious, and even a bit worried once authorization was granted. I didn't know what to expect next. I wondered how my brother would respond to me, if he would be angry for my absence from his life. I just wanted things to go well, so I did my best to prepare for the big day. Soon it was painfully apparent that there was no way to prepare for our time together. No more than a person could prepare to drown. Once I entered that room, I was in too deep. I choked, and gasped on every sight, on every scent, and nearly every word beyond his initial, “hi brother... hi brother.”

You see, on the morning of March 20, 2014, at approximately 9am, I experienced... endured... and survived one of the most difficult emotional bombardments of my life. Until that time, I hadn't seen my younger brother Jerome, for approximately twenty-three years. At this point, I'm three months shy of the nineteenth year of my own imprisonment. So, although

“warned” by prison personnel, that is might be a very difficult experience — seeing my brother in his present state of mind — I thought that there was nothing that would be too much for me to handle, but it nearly was...too much for me to handle.

As I entered the room, smiling on the opposite side, a frail, hairy man stood wearing a bright orange jump suit with a thick, brown leather belt wrapping his waist. A larger metal loop attached to the front was somehow connected to the handcuffs that securely clutched his wrist, locking his hands in front of him, right at his lower stomach. A customized cage separated us, splitting the room horizontally, evenly cutting across a table of sorts that sat off to the left side of the room. A single dirty beige plastic chair sat on each side of the dimly lit...depressing hole in the wall. There was a small cutout in the cage (likely used by Attorneys to pass legal documents through during legal visits). “Hi brother! Hi brother!” Those were his first words to me — the first time that I had heard his voice in at least twenty-three years. Immediately, I knew something was wrong...his words, although beautiful, sounded as if they were flowing from the lips of a young child. But this was a ‘grown man,’ speaking through extremely dry, flaky painful looking scaly lips. Politely, I returned his greeting, but I didn’t recognize him...standing there with his would be afro, that was nothing more than mounds of foul smelling, filthy matted hair. His face too was full of wiry patches of hair, unkept, and merely sprouting from his face like wild weeds. The huge smile upon his face revealed at least three missing upper teeth, dead center of his mouth. His bottom teeth were obviously rotting away. The rotting ones slightly darker than the other orangish, yellowish-brown, darkly stained teeth that survived whatever happened through the years.

I recall the fleeting that that perhaps I was in the wrong room... “this brotha couldn’t be my brother.” But he was. As our conversation continued, I quickly realized that my brother wasn’t all there, but he wasn’t all gone either. he remembered much from our childhood (the names of

neighbors, family members and childhood friends). It was apparent that he had consumed and digested much from books, letters and stories that others had shared with him through the years. Like a mental alchemist, he mixed each of those experiences with his imagination, creating his very own version of reality. He spoke of his Chinese wife and child — a wife and child he never had. He spoke of his expensive clothing, houses, and cars — clothing, houses and cars he never had. He spoke of his days in the Marine Corps, which was another impossibility, since I was the one that served in the Marine Corps, and he (now at age forty-one) had been in some form of lock up since the age of thirteen. The terrible truth is that for the pass [sic] twenty-two years, Jerome has been subjected to the agonizing cruelties of solitary confinement — kept locked in a prison cell for at least twenty-three hours each day.

Seeing my brother in his present state of mind... I wanted to run out of that room. I wanted to scream and yell, “WHAT HAVE Y’ALL DONE TO MY BROTHER?” I wanted to destroy something. I wanted to tear down that cage between us, grab my brother and run out of that hellish place. Yet, I knew that wasn’t possible. I resisted the urge to correct his fantasies. I didn’t dare tell him that he was never married, that he had no children, and that he never owned a house or a car. I fought back my tears; choked on my emotions, and nearly gagged on the stench of his body. Outwardly I remained calm, strenuously hiding my outrage...my pain, until he started muttering, trying to say something that simply made no sense. That happened frequently. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he cried out, “Oh my god, Jesus f — ing Christ.” It happened a few times as if he had Tourette’s syndrome. The storm of emotions that I fought so desperately to suppress, swell in my chest, rose up and before I could catch myself, escaped my lips as a whimper.

Rationally, I was fully aware of the appalling truth that what I was experience (the joyous moments, pain, anguish, outrage), all of it was due to grace. No one had to allow my brother and

I to visit with one another. My request could have been denied. Fortunately for us, on that day we were graciously granted two hours to express our loving concern for one another. I spoke with my brother, hopeful that he could fully understand as I opened my heart saying, “I love you brother. I’m so sorry that I wasn’t here to support you earlier.” “It’s all right. It’s all right. I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s about me and you. I’m happy. I’m just happy.” Those words rushed out of his mouth as if they were prepared in advance and waiting on the tip of his tongue. We were locked in each other’s eyes at the time, and nearly throughout the entire visit. He watched my every move, just as I watched his. Before we parted — just as I had done several times during the visit — I reached through that small cutout in the cage. “Let me touch you brother.” Once more he smiled at my request, leap [sic] to his feet, and did he best to shove his bound hands my direction. Reaching further in, I grabbed his hands, and held them.

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