

# Abolition Dramaturgies

by

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## **Abstract**

Abolition dramaturgies combine abolitionist scholarship with theatre theory to consider theatre a world building arena that dreams, rehearses, and manifests a world that doesn't rely on carcerality to address harm. This dissertation considers and articulates specific practices within the theatrical arena that can rehearse anti-carceral values and manifest an abolitionist present and future. Examining both abolition dramaturgies and carceral theatrics through scholarship and performance, this study is interdisciplinary. The writing includes theoretical dialogue between theatre and abolition studies, performance analysis of theatre and filmed adaptations of theatre, and reflective autobiographical writing about the context in which I completed this doctorate. The thesis engages with theatre scholars and artists like d'bi young anitafrika, Yvette Nolan, Jill Dolan, Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonin Artaud to consider liberation a primary function and practice of the theatre. Engaging with abolitionist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Mariame Kaba, and Robyn Maynard and scholars working between theatre and abolition like Nicholas Fesette, this dissertation considers abolitionist practices and values that are inherently theatrical, practices like do-overs, choral solidarity, and the manipulation of capitalist clock-time. Accompanying the paired theoretical frameworks of abolition and dramaturgy, this dissertation analyzes nine works of theatre (or filmed adaptations of theatre) to examine ways abolitionist practices are manifested in live performance. The dissertation ends with a piece of creative writing that reflects upon the ways that abolition dramaturgies manifested in my quotidian life as I wrote.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **World building**

The theatre keeps imagining itself anew. Every time we return to the rehearsal room or settle into our seats, we imagine a difference, however small, however subtle.

– Daniel Sack<sup>1</sup>

Theatre is a site for world building. Through dramaturgy and story construction, embodiment and gesture, speech and song, and scenography and design, theatre makers assemble alternative worlds inside actual worlds. These worlds resemble and differ from our world. The limits between these worlds are not fixed and impermeable; they are undeniably in relation with each other. They influence each other. They are entangled. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both the city of Athens and the surrounding woods are worlds inspired by reality and materialized, slightly differently each time, through theatricality on stage. Although the trees in these stage-woods look like real trees, they do not have actual roots. They are not watered, and they do not grow. But the audience believes in some way, they do. In this way, theatrical worlds are dreamed up and materialized through theatre scripts and on theatre stages. Theatre is a site for animating worlds within worlds, worlds that are boundaried, but are continually made and unmade, fluid and porous, generated and destroyed. Emanating from dreams, the boundaries between worlds are permeable, malleable, and transformative. From within the woods in *Dream*, characters can directly address their audience sitting in the theatre. Actual actors create fictional characters through their own real lived experience. The laughter

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Sack, "A Note on the Website," in *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage*, ed. by Daniel Sack. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), xx.

that emanates from the audience undoubtedly influences the actors. Theatrical works are co-created dream worlds.

These world building practices of the theatre conjure material worlds. Text is written, actors are cast, props are constructed. Trees are painted brown and fake fabric leaves cast actual shadows on actor bodies playing Helena, Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander. Material elements of the dreamed world enact and effect the action on stage. Beyond the material world, theatre conjures detailed social worlds too. Relationships are made manifest, values and beliefs are practiced. Desires are acted upon and reacted against. Sometimes the social worlds resemble actual worlds and sometimes, the fictional social worlds generatively and critically oppose the values and beliefs of the actual social world that is watching. Leaning into the nested quality of worlds within worlds, theatrical works have the potential to press the buttons of the world in which it is being performed. Through this nested world building practice, theatre has the potential to raise questions that challenge the contexts in which the performance is being performed. In other words, theatre has the capacity to build new worlds inside worlds with a potentially critical but productive kind of proximity to the world in which the performance takes place.

Just as these alternate-reality theatrical worlds are created, they also vanish. They are ephemeral. Theatrical world building necessitates a creative act but because of its ephemeral existence, it also presents the opportunity for ongoing rehearsals in destruction. The world on stage is collectively conjured for a purpose and then destroyed again with relative lack of preciousness. At curtain call, the invisible walls of this stage-world disappear, and we recognize the manufactured construction, and we all return to our lives. At the end of the theatre's run of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these trees in the stage-forest are uprooted, brought back to the

theatre's prop shop, and another vision of another world takes their place. Although theatrical creation certainly leaves a trace, ephemerality and destruction is just as central to the theatrical process. In other words, theatre relies upon both creation and destruction in its world building pursuit.

Theatrical world building depends upon a collective that negotiates a vision about how the theatrical world is organized, arriving at a set of agreed upon material objects and relational gestures to conjure that world. Different players in the theatrical process negotiate the dimensions of these social and material worlds. Directors negotiate with a playwright around their desires for the story. Actors negotiate with directors about the desires of their characters. Beyond the internal world building process that happens in theatrical creation, there are even more players involved in the reception of the world that is built. Theatre must be witnessed to be theatre. For the world to be "built" there must be both artists and a spectatorial gaze. There is a necessarily collaborative spirit behind theatrical world building. In this way, theatrical world building is intensely relational and embodied. Peopled. Occurring between the unpredictable but considered actions of the players on or behind or looking at the stage, worlds are conjured in the space between artists and audience, story is bounced back and forth.

At the end of *Dream*, Puck speaks directly to his audience to remind us that we are responsible for collectively dreaming up the world on stage. The theatrical world was not given to us for passive consumption, but as audience we are active participants in co-creating the world on stage. Puck says, "If we shadows have offended, Think but this, and all is mended – That you have but slumbered here While these visions did appear. And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream, Gentles, do not reprehend. If you pardon, we will mend."<sup>2</sup> If we are active

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<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Russ McDonald, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 88.

players in the theatrical world building process of “imagining itself anew”<sup>3</sup> what are our demands and desires for these imagined world(s)? If the theatre is an arena for relational destruction and creation with material and social practices inside the world building process, what world can we dream of building together?

When I think about theatrical dreams, I’m not thinking about what happens when we are asleep but rather, the process by which new worlds are conjured in our imagination. I look to scholars like historian and Black studies scholar Robin D. G Kelley’s influential work *Freedom Dreams*, where he speaks to “the idea that we could possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imagination... the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, the imagined and conjured world for Kelley is one rooted in liberation and freedom. For Kelley, dreaming allows us to access the map to this freedom-dream-destination. “Without new visions” or dreams, Kelley says “we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.”<sup>5</sup> For Kelley, freedom dreams in and of themselves are transformative. Cultural and literary studies scholar Kevin Quashie writes about Kelley’s introduction in *Freedom Dreams*, saying that for Kelley, “the act of imagining is the practice and willingness to dream, speculate, or wonder, and it helps us to move beyond the limits of reality.”<sup>6</sup> Dreams are thought experiments that actively manifest new realities. The imagination is a

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<sup>3</sup> Sack. “A Note on the Website” in *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage*, xx.

<sup>4</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 41-2.

powerful tool for transforming the material and when paired by theatrical expression, that transformation is further collectivized and peopled.

As theatre takes a kind of dream and materializes it in embodied collective, it is a site for calling one's new dream world into being. In a playwright's note to her play *Coups and Calypsos*, poet, playwright, novelist, and lawyer M. Nourbese Philip talks about her experience in making theatre as literally materializing her dream. She says she particularly loves "the witnessing of the literal and immediate embodiment of your words, your dream, in the way in which you dreamed it, that brings a heady and incomparable joy."<sup>7</sup> Disability justice scholar and artist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha articulates this collective liberatory joy in theatrical world building through what she calls "prefigurative politics," or the concrete manifestation of Disabled, QTBIPOC freedom dreams in the theatre through the act of living as if the free and accessible future were already happening. In their book *Care Work*, they recount attending a theatrical performance by California-based disability arts collective Sins Invalid where the geography and temporality of the space was fully rearranged for the duration of the show through caring for an audience with diverse access needs. The start times were flexible. The space had extremely modular seating and was responsive to the needs of the audience. There were different kinds of interpreters and sensory offerings were easily available. Piepzna-Samarasinha's theatre freedom dream is about creating a space to enact a prefigurative free and accessible world for specifically Disabled and QTBIPOC people. For Piepzna-Samarasinha, their "favourite performance spaces are spaces that become temporary, two-hour communities that are autonomous zones that feel like freedom. Being in them, we can smell and taste and feel things we have always wanted but rarely witnessed - both in what we see on stage and how we interact

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<sup>7</sup> M. Nourbese Philip, *Coups and Calypsos*, (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2001), 12.

and participate as an audience that serves as a community of witnesses.”<sup>8</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha’s liberatory theatre dream makes people feel safe, seen, and celebrated in the performance space. Theatre dreams, as articulated by Piepzna-Samarasinha, are relational arenas to invite collective dreaming of freer worlds and to rehearse materializing them.

In this dissertation, theatre is theorized as another generative site of materializing dream worlds towards freedom, more specifically abolitionist worlds that do not rely on police and prisons to address harm. The imagined and real dream world I am conjuring in this dissertation is an abolitionist one, one where the violence of prison is understood as a harmful and ineffective response to harm-doing. The abolitionist dream has space for the messy complexities of a collective existence, where time is a tool for creation rather than a weapon to be wielded. The abolitionist dream believes that true freedom is only possible when everyone is free. Abolition and theatre are good companions because they are both sites of world building, places where new worlds are dreamt, rehearsed, enacted, and made manifest. Theatre dreams are way finders on these maps to abolitionist worlds that do and will exist within our own.

### **Introduction to the Introduction**

In his article “Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World,” in *Theatre Journal* in 2022, American abolitionist scholar and theatre maker Nicholas Fesette uses the phrase “abolition dramaturgies” to describe “divisions of space and time—indexing theatricality but not necessarily the theatre—in which abolition can be envisioned, practiced, experimented, innovated, sounded, felt, spread, and collectivized.”<sup>9</sup> Abolition

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<sup>8</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018,) 150.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World.” *Theatre Journal* 74, no. 2 (2022): 174.

dramaturgies combine theatre theory and abolitionist scholarship to consider theatre as a world building arena that dreams, rehearses, and manifests a world that does not rely on carcerality to address harm. Abolition dramaturgies consider dramaturgies as theatrical practices that can do work in the abolitionist context, rehearsing anti-carceral values to manifest abolitionist futures.

Building upon Fesette's phrase, this dissertation looks closely at case studies from theatre and performance to add to a toolkit of abolition dramaturgies. The thesis engages with theatre scholars and artists like d'bi young anitafrika, Yvette Nolan, Jill Dolan, Augusto Boal, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonin Artaud who consider liberation a primary function and practice of theatre. Engaging with abolitionist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Mariame Kaba, and Robyn Maynard and thinkers between theatre and abolition like Nicholas Fesette, this dissertation considers abolitionist practices and values that are inherently theatrical, practices like do-overs, choral solidarity, and the end of capitalist clock-time. In this dissertation I analyze nine works of theatre (or filmed adaptations of theatre) to examine the ways that these abolitionist practices are manifested in live performance. Then, I reflect upon my own context of writing, noticing ways that abolition dramaturgies manifested in my everyday life as an abolitionist theatre-maker living in a prison town.

I begin by articulating and adding to a toolkit of abolition dramaturgies, investigating how theatre can be another strategy "that questions the place of the prison in our future."<sup>10</sup> In this dissertation, I am mainly interested in the specific world building potential of theatre as an abolitionist space. I am interested in dramaturgical techniques from within the frame that participate in the world building project of abolition through practicing and manifesting alternatives to carceral thought. This dissertation, then, organizes these findings to focus on four

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<sup>10</sup> Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 104.

different theatrical compositional practices or dramaturgies: the theatrical frame, time, rehearsals, and the chorus. Ultimately, this dissertation articulates how these theatrical practices behave as a site of abolition, or what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls an “abolition geography.”<sup>11</sup>

The next section of this introduction adapts a traditional literature review to focus both on the scholarship and the quotidian context of the four-year doctorate, mirroring my autobiographical Afterword. Then, I bring forward a set of definitions for keywords inside *abolition* and *dramaturgy*. Next, I move towards a description of scope, an articulation of methodology, and a chapter outline. Four themed chapters follow. The first chapter is an articulation of the theatrical frame as an oppositional gaze-machine to the panopticon. The second themed chapter explores dramaturgies of carceral time compared to two types of theatrical time - time of extended duration and syncopated time. The rehearsal as a transformative justice exercise is the topic for the third themed chapter. The last is an exploration of the many kinds of choruses present in both carceral theatrics (the jury, the parole board, the lockstep) and abolitionist practice (incarcerated people, abolitionist organizers). The dissertation ends with a coda, a piece of reflective creative writing that reflects upon my ongoing abolitionist allyship supporting the Prison4Women Memorial Collective in Kingston.

### **Quotidian “Literature” Review**

What populates this subheading is a remixed literature review that acknowledges the persistent incompleteness of a traditional literature review when the writer is working between fields. While this dissertation robustly contends with the vast networks of scholarship between abolition and theatrical dramaturgy, this “literature” review acknowledges the unexpected

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<sup>11</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano. (London: Verso, 2023).

discoveries that accompanied me while writing. This section depicts my magpie-style methodology, a practice that does not shy away from finding something surprising and returning it to my nest without a clear and immediate understanding of what it is for. Together with the Afterword, this section bookmarks the dissertation with reference to the very vibrant context in which I study. I stumbled over many of these findings before they became useful to me. Along with some contextual wandering, in this section I will highlight several key theorists and texts that are touchstones for me and for this dissertation.

When I applied for this PhD, I planned on making a site-specific play. I wanted to make a play based on a story from the mid-1950s told to me by my late grandfather Al Horner, who remembered playing a baseball game in the yard of Kingston Penitentiary (KP) against incarcerated men inside. When I was a kid, my semi-professional back catcher-grandfather used to tell a story about an inmate at the plate making a playful joke about hitting the ball over the wall. “If I crack it over the fence, I’m going to get it.” The way my grandfather told it, on the next pitch the ball easily cleared the wall and sunk to the bottom of Lake Ontario. In his imagination, the jubilant homerun-ball still sits on the lake floor, covered in moss. He joked about me going swimming to go get it. When I applied for this PhD, I imagined a participatory play that invited audience-players inside the walls at KP to play a game of baseball, and to consider their own complicity in, proximity with, and participation in Kingston’s carceral history through site-specific participatory dramaturgy. I wanted to connect Kingstonians with the history of this space in a way that imbued a sense of responsibility, not a sense of fun and entertainment.<sup>12</sup> I, like other prison abolitionists in Kingston, had a bad taste in my mouth about the prisons being used as charitable tourist attraction or concert venue and wanted to dream up

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<sup>12</sup> Lin Mussel, “A prison is no place for a party,” *The Conversation*, September 3 2019. [theconversation.com/a-prison-is-no-place-for-a-party-120320](https://theconversation.com/a-prison-is-no-place-for-a-party-120320)

something more provocative. I imagined this project as a continuation of my master's research that explored the relationships between site-specific dramaturgies and staging historiography.<sup>13</sup> In that thesis, I was interested in the ways that site-specific theatre stages historiography, through activating the space as witness and using theatricality as frame through which to see the impossibilities and inaccuracies of our trying to re-watch the past. Through activating materiality of the site as witness, I built upon work by historian David Dean and theatre-maker Peter Hinton, arguing that site-specific theatre stages productive complexities between “accuracy and authenticity.”<sup>14</sup> Through pairing the imprecise art of historiography with the precisely situated practice of site-specificity, my master’s thesis was interested in the ways that theatre, as a past-conjurer, could bring a more affective, complex, and counter-hegemonic version of the past that acknowledges its existence and its biases in the present.

In my first year of PhD coursework, I took Dr. Lisa Guenther’s class “Abolition and Decolonization” and my gaze shifted from the past to the present and to the future. This class primarily studied the present realities of carcerality and coloniality in both an international and local context. Rather than just representing the horror of the carceral past and present, the class dreamed maps forwards. This class opened my eyes to the absolute crisis that is prison and policing in Canada and the possibility and practice of abolishing that carceral reality. My context shifted from the past to the present as Lisa encouraged me to think beyond the representative qualities of theatre towards the more transformational qualities of theatre. Yes, theatre could affectively hold complex representations of the past, but what does theatre offer the present and

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<sup>13</sup> Mariah Horner, “Performing the Past in Situ” (Master’s Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2017). [dx.doi.org/10.20381/ruor-21085](https://dx.doi.org/10.20381/ruor-21085)

<sup>14</sup> David Dean, “Negotiating Accuracy and Authenticity in an Aboriginal King Lear,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017): 255–273.

the future? More specifically, what does theatre offer the abolitionist present and the future? How can theatrical practices and techniques, or dramaturgies, conjure a liberatory future?

When I softened my focus to dually see theatre and abolition, the connections were obvious and fruitful. Many thinkers in my citational universe were already writing between abolition and theatre. Two theatrical legends, Antonin Artaud and Oscar Wilde were both incarcerated before, during, and after their prolific careers in the theatre. Plays about prisons sit on theatre history syllabi. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, Athol Fugard's *The Island*, and Manuel Puig's *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman* are all set in and around prison. There is a long history of practicing applied theatre in prisons internationally and here in so-called Canada. In Victoria, British Columbia for example, William Head on Stage (WHoS) has been producing theatre for 37 years and is the "only theatre company run by incarcerated artists in all of Canada, that invites the public into the institution to experience their shows."<sup>15</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, the abolitionist scholar and author of *On Property*, was a frequent contributor to *Canadian Theatre Review*. So too is one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter Toronto and author of the children's book *Abolition is Love*, Syrus Marcus Ware. In Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* the second chapter is called "Cast of Characters." Another, "The Beauty of the Chorus." "The Chorus Opens the Way." Frantz Fanon, psychologist, critical theorist, and Black freedom-dreamer wrote two (largely unproduced) plays about his work in psychology and critical race theory. One of the foundational elements of Michel Foucault's critical writing on the prison, *Discipline and Punish*, is the specificity around the spectacle of violence. Both the spectacle of public execution and the panoptic "gaze" of surveillance seemed linked to theatrical questions of

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<sup>15</sup> "About," William Head on Stage (W.H.o.S.), accessed June 19 2024, [whonstage.weebly.com/about.html](http://whonstage.weebly.com/about.html)

the dramaturgies of spectacle and the practices of watching and seeing. I found the word dramaturgy in Foucault's essay about prison records, "On the Lives of Infamous Men." Early on in her career, Ruth Wilson Gilmore went to Harvard for Theatre and Performance, referring to herself as a "drama school doctoral program dropout."<sup>16</sup> She puts her practice of abolition geography in conversation with theatre studies when she writes,

In a way, the obsessions that drove me into and then rapidly away from drama were those most beautifully summarized in a few thoughts of Marx: by mixing our labor with the earth, we change the external world and thereby change our own nature. That's what drama is; that's what geography is: making history, making worlds.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the guiding path lit by these intersecting connections, certain key texts and thinkers in my citational universe provided core foundation for this study.

I was first inspired to use the term "rehearsal" in this context by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard and their book *Rehearsals for Living*. Simpson and Maynard present the symbiotic and generative relationship between the concept of rehearsal and the abolitionist and decolonial world building project of surviving in and taking down Canadian white supremacy and colonialism. In this book, Simpson, an Anishinaabe Kwe musician, activist, and scholar, and Maynard, a Black scholar and activist based in so-called Toronto, write to each other about the impossibility, uncertainty and instability of living life relationally in the present inside a violent colonial state. Their book is structured as a series of long letters between the two women, written and published during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing

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<sup>16</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "What Is to Be Done?" in *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2023), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Gilmore, "What Is to Be Done?" 28.

accompanying crises of colonial capitalism and white supremacy around the world.<sup>18</sup> Through reflecting about their scholarship, their lives, and their dreams, they write about the ways that they are both rehearsing and thus summoning a new, more liberatory world, despite the colonial and racist project that is so-called Canada. They write about the ways they are challenged and stopped in their process. They write about their failures and their families and their triumphs. Their rehearsal-writing is diegetic, letters back and forth about politics, world building, and resilience. They actively made note of their positionalities and how those positionalities rub up against and support one other and other people in the world. They read and rewrite the script. They engage in dialogue. They respond to what's around them. They write about how who they are informs the choices they make. They respond to the harsh reality of the colonial pursuit of living here and now.

*Rehearsals for Living* greatly influenced this dissertation and the inclusion of “rehearsal” as an abolition dramaturgy. In the forward to Simpson and Maynard’s book, Ruth Wilson Gilmore says that “abolition is life in rehearsal because freedom is a place...Abolition is presence, and also process. Therefore, by moving our attention from place to place it’s possible to sketch out the shape and vitality of an internationalist movement in process of becoming itself.”<sup>19</sup> As written about by Simpson and Maynard and practiced every day in the theatre, rehearsal is a space for the process of becoming. As Gilmore astutely puts it, life is “a constantly unfolding drama, whose lines and characters and spaces remain thrillingly unfixed, underlying ‘life in rehearsal.’”<sup>20</sup> *Rehearsals for Living* is a set of notes from a rehearsal hall “[t]o help

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<sup>18</sup> Arundhati Roy, “The pandemic is a portal,” *Financial Times: Life & Arts*, April 3 2020, [ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca](https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca)

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Foreword,” in *Rehearsals for Living* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard, (Toronto: Penguin Random House: 2022), 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Gilmore, “Foreword,” 3-4.

transform the source of this dread into a place from which we can, instead, plot, conspire, dream, and attend to life, *otherwise*.”<sup>21</sup> As a practice of the theatre, rehearsals manifests new worlds; theatre as an umbrella space includes rehearsals as a site to make plans and practice new worlds.

Inspired by another professor, social historian Dr Steven Maynard, I also frequently read with and against Michel Foucault in this dissertation. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses plenty of theatrical language and theatrical metaphors to write about his thoughts on the pervasive power of institutions before the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the first section of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes extensively about the ways that spectacle was a key mechanism in pre-Enlightenment modes of punishment. Before the number of institutional prisons boomed globally, Foucault writes about how punishment made use of the spectacular as a way for the states to control their subjects. Specifically, he writes about how the gruesome public execution was designed to prevent citizens from breaking the rules. In his analysis, Foucault attends to the ways that this “performance” of spectacular punishment was failing, in part due to the way that theatrical affective empathy works. Where the intent was for the people to see themselves in the person who was tortured or executed, making them so afraid to become victim to the same fate that they would be determined to behave, instead, the performance inadvertently created a kind of relational empathy. As the executed suffers, the people look on in pity (not “fear” though, as goes Aristotle’s original definition of catharsis) and begin to hate the executioner. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault outlines the ways that although punishment shifted from the executioner to the institution, the gaze was still an active player. When the state wanted to seem less complicit of violence, punishment had to take another form, being administered by and inside institutions, rendering it less spectacular and more private, but still

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<sup>21</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living* (Toronto: Haymarket Books, 2022), 8.

controlling and disciplinary. Although Foucault isn't arguing that modern prisons are more humane per se, he says with the end of the public execution comes "The disappearance of the spectacle and the elimination of pain."<sup>22</sup> After the Enlightenment, the spectacle of pain is no longer a crime prevention method. Instead, the penal institution brings a kind of private punishment of the soul rather than a public punishment of the body. Whereas the spectacle ruled pre-Enlightenment discipline and punishment, the institutional gaze rules discipline and punishment in his 20<sup>th</sup> century reality.

Foucault writes about how the normalizing and faceless gaze of institutional surveillance and control means that carceral machines basically runs themselves. To make this point, he draws upon 18<sup>th</sup> century architect and "social reformist" Jeremy Bentham's design of the panopticon, an institutional space with a surveillant and controlling gaze built into the design to reinforce the boundaries between who is in power and who is subject to it. Bentham's panopticon design features an imposing tower in the centre of a round space, meaning that in the panopticon, all people inside are subject to the faceless gaze of those who are in power in the middle tower. Although Foucault employs the panopticon as a carceral example, Bentham's design principles inform other institutions of control in Foucault's study, even reverberating into architectural design today. He uses the panopticon as a metaphor to argue that institutional surveillance is working so pervasively in the prisons, no one even needs to staff the surveillance tower. The threat of the faceless gaze is normalizing enough. Compared to carceral control in eras before, between pre- and post-Enlightenment, no longer are there crystal clear and distinct actors (the executed), audience members (the public), and playwrights (the executioner/the King). Penal subjects are their own audience members, and the playwrights don't intervene, let alone take life

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 11.

directly through the body. Through the process of individualizing punishment through panoptic gaze and surveillance, incarcerated people are both audience and actor. They are not sure there could be eyes watching them, so they must watch themselves. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault says, “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”<sup>23</sup> Where Foucault’s carceral gaze disenfranchises his penal subjects, this dissertation considers how abolition dramaturgies can enfranchise subjects inside (and outside) the carceral frame to be subjects of communication. How can we apply theatrical practices and tactics (dramaturgies) to these questions of carcerality, and more importantly, abolition? The individualization of the gaze through panoptic punishment and Foucault’s surveillance means the carceral theatre needs no active audience. No one is watching the show. But what if we are? What if we want to rehearse something else?

What I found in Foucault was the notion that questions about the power and mechanics of spectacle and gaze are theatrical questions. Foucault’s ideas are useful in the dissertation about dramaturgy because his theorizations of discipline and punishment and power are presented as verbs and not nouns. He looks at the ways institutions are mechanisms and vehicles of power. Foucault’s power is not held but wielded, a strategy expressed by institutions to produce a range of effects. There is a “doing” involved because, for Foucault, power is not possessed but rather expressed. It is relational, it operates and exists between and through people. This theorization of power is inherently dramatic. Foucault writes about tactics the way a dramaturg or director in the room talks about tactics. If I can consider theatrical tactics and techniques as abolitionist, can theatre be capable of participating in rehearsing or conjuring the abolitionist present and future?

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

Another figure in my citational universe is Nicolas Bourriaud. “Art is a state of encounter,” says French performance artist and scholar Bourriaud in his book *Relational Aesthetics*.<sup>24</sup> Here, Bourriaud is talking specifically about “relational art” or the subset of visual art popular in the 1990s that relied upon a spectators’ active engagement with the art piece to create the art piece, works made by artists like Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović. This dissertation extends Bourriaud’s analysis of relational visual/performance art towards the theatrical arena.<sup>25</sup> Both relational art and theatre extend an explicit invitation for the spectator to act in relation to the art. Whether that be interpretative action or physical action, theatre as an artform is an intensely relational practice. For the audience of “relational art,” there is an implicit invitation to participate in the imagination and interpretation of the work. Imagine a forest on the edge of Athens. Add a square to this quilt. See this chorus of women, listen to them sing together. Play this card game. Talk with a stranger. Reflect on the time you made something together. Reflect upon a conflict.

Because live theatre occurs in the shared here and now between artists and spectators, there is a potential for political intervention. Bourriaud articulates the political potential of this shared here and now when he says that where “Artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations . . . the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public, and on the invention of models of sociability.”<sup>26</sup> For Bourriaud, these ephemeral moments of sociability arise to engender “dialogue, discussion, and that form of inter-human negotiation.”<sup>27</sup> It is this sphere of relation, dialogue, discussion, and inter-human

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<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002), 18.

<sup>25</sup> This use of “relationality” in proximity to theatre in this dissertation is inspired by my work with Dr. Jenn Stephenson as my co-author of *PLAY: Dramaturgies of Participation*. Many Indigenous theatre-makers have always insisted on relationality as a fundamental truth of theatre.

<sup>26</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 41.

negotiation that makes theatre an appropriate arena to rehearse and manifest abolition, another world building endeavor that is at its core relational.

Beyond these key texts, connections between theatre and abolition have unfolded meaningfully in my life in an intimate way, too. The first professional site-specific play that I ever co-created as a theatre maker in Kingston was called *The Lockup*, set in the former prison cells in the basement of Kingston City Hall.<sup>28</sup> The play, written by Devon Jackson and performed in the former holding cells, staged a sympathetic take on six actual incarcerated Kingstonians from the end of the nineteenth century. Ten years later I sat in the Cultural Studies lecture theatre at Queen's to listen to poet and scholar El Jones (a Queen's Cultural Studies PhD a few cohorts above me) cite Shakespeare's *King Lear* when talking about Kingston's P4W Memorial Collective working together to construct a garden in memorial for their friends who were lost in another of Kingston's carceral institutions, the Prison for Women here in Kingston. Jones writes,

In Kingston, at the site of the former Prison for Women, the women who were incarcerated in the prison have been fighting to build a healing garden. What good can come from punishment? Out of this place, where women died, where women suffered, where women were stripped and degraded and isolated, the women who came out want only a space where life can grow and be nurtured, fragile, tended by their own hands. "Nothing will come of nothing," King Lear says, but those who have been incarcerated so consistently make something from nothing. Creative meals from the noodle packs. Makeup from the coloured pencils in program. Love and solidarity out of abuse and hatred. Friendship from oppression. Sisterhood from captivity. The Strong Woman Song,

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<sup>28</sup> "The Lock-Up," Cellar Door Project, accessed June 19 2024, [cellardoorprojecttheatre.weebly.com/the-lockup.html](http://cellardoorprojecttheatre.weebly.com/the-lockup.html)

written or gifted within those walls. Any good that comes - any good - they have forged themselves, despite.<sup>29</sup>

I first heard the Strong Woman Song<sup>30</sup> sung by Fran Chaisson, a survivor of the P4W, two years ago on the day the city of Kingston removed the statue of Sir John A MacDonal. In the second year of my PhD, in June 2021, accompanied by other Indigenous elders, Chaisson taught us this song as we danced and held hands, and Sir John A fell.

These conversations and connections in my citational and quotidian universe nudged me along in a meaningful direction as a scholar. Throughout theatre history and theatre geography, I found many cases where theatre's potential for transformation has been used in favour of colonization or racism, or more generally, to reinforce the hegemonic discourse of the moment. This dissertation instead examines theatrical techniques used in favour of liberation, whether inside the frame or reflected abstractedly in quotidian life.

Theatre cannot be in stasis; it must be representative of some kind of living and breathing transformation. Something always "happens" in the theatre. Because theatre is both a conceptual exercise (collectively, we must co-create a world within a world) and a material one (we build a set to represent that world), I argue in this dissertation that it is a generative space for the material and conceptual work that must be done to usher in an abolitionist present and future. How can we consider the world without carceral punishment? How can we materialize that to be so? This dual material and conceptual playground that is present in the theatrical world-building arena presents a stage to explore abolitionist futures and presents.

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<sup>29</sup> El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies* (Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2022), 191.

<sup>30</sup> The Strong Woman Song is "credited to the Anishinabe kwewag and Zhoganosh kwewag who were in solitary confinement in the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario during the 1970's." Dr. Nancy Stevens said "It was these women who had this song come to them. My understanding, from one of the women I sing with and who went to P4W to work with the women there at that time, that this song emerged as a way of staying alive, of supporting each other in that hell hole. Many women in P4W lost their lives because of the horrendous conditions there. We sing this song to honour them, and all women." [ojibwe.net/songs/traditional/strong-womens-song/](http://ojibwe.net/songs/traditional/strong-womens-song/)

## Keywords

This thesis considers how dramaturgy, the study and practice of play-making tactics and their imagined outcomes, participates in rehearsing and conjuring abolitionist presents and futures. This section of the introduction establishes basic definitions for the two major keywords of my dissertation, abolition and dramaturgy. I start by defining dramaturgy. Before I investigate a set of dramaturgies or dramaturgical techniques that do the work of abolition (the theatrical frame, time, rehearsal, the chorus), I must first think through how theatre scholars (Elinor Fuchs, David Ball, Mark Fortier, Ric Knowles,) and artists (Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, d’bi.young anitafrika, Yvette Nolan) have articulated theatres’ ability to *do anything*. How does dramaturgy work? How and to what liberatory ends can dramaturgy work towards? To define such a tentacled process and concept, I use verbs to organize a list of dramaturgical actions. Then I offer a similar treatment of abolition. Through Black feminists, Indigenous activists, and abolitionist scholars, I define abolition as a field of practice (Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba) also through verbs or sets of verbs. In tandem with this list of dramaturgical actions, I consider these two fields of practice, dramaturgy and abolition, together. What can they offer each other? How can theatrical rehearsals be mutually beneficial to abolitionist world building? Investigating the vital creative imaginations of artists and scholars, incarcerated people, and people in my quotidian universe, how can I articulate the function and implementation of an abolition dramaturgy? What are the tools in the toolkit? If abolition and dramaturgy are both world building practices, what practices are activated to use theatre as a play space to discover abolition in our bodies, minds, and relations?

In this act of writing between abolition and dramaturgy, this dissertation aims to sit in the swirl of a few citational universes, acknowledging different values and valuations without trying

to collapse them. As I examine my own messy field notes throughout my doctoral studies, I look to Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson's book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* as a methodological guide. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson offers alternative listening and research practices that articulate decolonizing the settler-colonial practice of listening as consumptive gesture. He cautions against research and study that swallows and spits out. Robinson's book offers strategies to slow the ravenous appetite of extractive hungry listening - stopping settlers and white scholars at gated chapters where they are not welcome, closing a door to hold space for Indigenous readers. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson offers other spaces to settler scholars to "work it out amongst themselves," and plays with affect and form through a series of instructive event scores.<sup>31</sup> As a guest to these citational universes I am intentionally quiet, looking at these books piled up like an altar I've been building for four years. Instead of consuming the sources entirely, I'm listening closely to how they sound together. I'm curious about what they are saying in a chorus, although I can't always make out every word. Some sounds aren't for me. Some sounds I've been trained to ignore. Sometimes the keys clash. If I listen like a guest at the table instead of a consumer at the table, I am quiet and polite, noticing but not escalating conflict. I can listen with the cracks, the silences, the gaps, the prayer. If I listen like a respected guest at a table, I recognize that dissent and disagreement is possible and necessary, above politeness. I try to hold nuance and conflict. My ideas in this chapter are sometimes dissonant and tense. On the one hand, on the other hand. I write this exegesis as a humble guest to this literature, you read this as a knowledgeable guest to my messy discoveries. I believe that to be a good guest, one must be curious, without making assumptions or conclusions

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<sup>31</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, (University of Minnesota Press: 2020), 239.

but I also believe that to be a good guest, one cannot show up empty handed. One must listen and contribute.

## **Dramaturgy**

Dramaturgy is the art and technique of dramatic composition. Dramaturgy is a guide to making work and dramaturgies are tactics and techniques to achieve something specific in the theatre. Dramaturgy is both an analytic tool for understanding how theatre works and a methodological guide for using specific techniques to specific ends. In other words, as a dramaturg, I can both analyze and I can create. Dr. Natalie Rewa, a professor who taught me in my undergrad studies used to articulate the dramaturgical question as, “*how*” does theatre mean? What choices in the theatre lead to what desired affects in the audience? In what ways can form and content inform and influence one another to best tell a story? If I choose to start the show with a monologue, how does this tether my audience to a main character? If I employ a play-within-a-play structure or tell the story backwards, what am I suggesting about truth and authenticity? What does this character’s past tell us about how they may or may not act in the future? How warm is this room? How do I keep an audience safe or challenge their assumptions? How can I be sure to get consent from audiences? Who is included? What mechanisms can I use to invite their refusals and make those refusals generative or meaningful? These are all dramaturgical questions. Dramaturgy considers the mechanics of theatrical world building, assembling tools that are best for the worlds we are attempting to build in rehearsal halls and on stages.

Dramaturgies are practices of dramaturgy. They have purpose and orientation. There are feminist<sup>32</sup> and queer dramaturgies<sup>33</sup> that achieve feminist and queer ends in the theatre. Lindsay Lachance reflects on the experiential and layered practice of land-based dramaturgy through the practice of birchbark biting.<sup>34</sup> Yvette Nolan articulates different kinds of Indigenous dramaturgies (cleansing poison, healing, etc.) in her book *Medicine Shows*. Some dramaturgies that Nolan writes about are ceremonial in their manifestation and outcome. A core text of this dissertation, Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, is in search of utopian performatives, or utopian dramaturgies. She is in search of dramaturgical tactics that rehearse and manifest utopia. Each chapter of Dolan's book articulates a different one of her utopian dramaturgies. She sees utopian performatives in the power of re-writing one's story through autobiographical performance. She writes about the capacity for empathy building through multi-vocal solo performances and finds a new hopeful world manifested in the performing public of a poetry jam. Dramaturgy as a field of practice holds many tools that are used to build many kinds of worlds. Dramaturgy is specific to context and desire. This dissertation is assembling a toolkit of abolition dramaturgies, that is, a set of techniques that can be used inside the theatrical frame to contribute to the "project and a practice around creating the conditions that would allow for

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<sup>32</sup> See Kim Solga, *Theatre & Feminism*, (New York: Palgrave, 2016); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988); LaDonna L Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018); Sue-Ellen Case, *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1996); Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, eds. *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, (New York: Basingstoke, 2016.)

<sup>34</sup> Lindsay Lachance, "Tiny Sparks Everywhere: Birch Bark Biting as Land-Based Dramaturgies," *Canadian Theatre Review* 186 (2021): 54–58.

the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance and the creation of new institutions that actually work to keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive.”<sup>35</sup>

As articulated in the citational universe that populates this next section, dramaturgy is not concerned with practices for building flat and static literature-worlds but rather with practices for building worlds that are becoming. Worlds that are three dimensional. In this way, dramaturgy’s tools work on moving targets. Dramaturgy doesn’t refer exclusively to the script or the final product or the process of making but rather, dramaturgy is expansive enough to refer to practices and techniques practiced in many moments in the theatrical area. Dramaturgy studies the script but also the multitude of imagined affects or “producible interpretation(s)”<sup>36</sup> embedded by the creators as the script is made manifest as performance. Dramaturgy also has the scope to imagine eventual productions that don’t yet exist, and the ways new tactics and practices and contexts can manipulate the meaning of the material. Dramaturgies are sprawling and dynamic. Dramaturgies *happen* in and with collectives of people with ever changing and complex positionalities.

In an interview with theatre maker Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen, Dylan Robinson articulates why the theatrical imagination is useful to him both as a storyteller and a scholar of story. For Robinson, “theatre is particularly suited to representing story through the combination of the embodied, the visual, the aural.”<sup>37</sup> The uniquely embodied quality of theatre as a lived, visible, and audible art form can make it specifically suited to manifesting story and ultimately transformation. As opposed to other art forms that are less obsessed with dynamic and constant transformation (sculpture, for example), theatre is familiar and well-versed with change.

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<sup>35</sup> Mariame Kaba and Jeremy Scahill, “A People’s History of Prisons in the United States,” in *We Do This ‘til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 72.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume. *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays, 1675-1707* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> Dylan Robinson, “Acts of Defiance in Indigenous Theatre: A Conversation with Lisa C. Ravensbergen,” in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, eds. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 185.

Dramaturgy is as much about tending to the paths not taken in stories to the paths taken.

Dramaturgy considers the multiplicities of interpretation, the messiness of phenomenology, and Marshall McLuhan's famous assertion that "the medium is the message."<sup>38</sup> How we tell a story tells a story. Dramaturgy in practice resists normalization and assumption. Dramaturgy always wonders why and if there is another way.

Dramaturgy is both descriptive and prescriptive. It's both an analysis of work that exists and a blueprint for making. In attending to dramaturgy in this thesis, I consider case studies that may not be entirely abolitionist but are exhibiting some practices or dramaturgies that point towards liberatory ends. I consider case studies that exhibit carceral dramaturgies to recognize them and imagine ways to abolish them. For example, in this dissertation I discuss Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, a problematic and ableist play from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century about a revolution in a post-French Revolution asylum. Even though the piece ultimately fails in liberating everyone, in this case (Mad and Disabled people and women), there are dramaturgical strategies present that invites a transformational abolitionist revolution on both sides of a carceral frame. To take another example, some choruses that are examined in chapter four are abolitionist, like a choreographed drag number. Others are carceral, like the Greek chorus that sits in judgement like a parole board. Dramaturgy, as a practice, is a meaningful field of study because it encourages collection and collage. As a dramaturg, I consider myself a methodological magpie that collects a variety of tools from a variety of contexts. As a dramaturg, I use dramaturgies in expected and unexpected ways, considering their original context and other ones. In their work *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin articulate how they understand the function of

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<sup>38</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

aesthetics. “In choosing the term ‘aesthetics,’” they say, “we sought to signal our interest in how the structural, stylistic and generic choices made by artists enable different kinds of social and political engagements.”<sup>39</sup> This is what I am doing with dramaturgy in this dissertation. I focus my energy around the structural, stylistic, and generic choices made by artists in the theatre to engage with abolition.

It is difficult to define dramaturgy without acknowledging a variety of dramaturgical contexts and dramaturgical desires. This next section examines dramaturgy from a variety of different perspectives both historical and contemporary, categorizing them in tandem with abolitionist desires. The voices chosen in this section are chosen intentionally and will appear again throughout the thesis. Each section of this sprawling definition of dramaturgy focuses on one (potentially) abolitionist dramaturgical verb: represent, awaken, rehearse, transform, and desire. Dramaturgy is capable of abolition through the ways dramaturgical techniques can activate these liberatory actions. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list of dramaturgical action but rather, a glimpse into the outcomes of dramaturgy that have the potential for abolitionist transformation and, in some cases, abolitionist liberation.

### *Represent*

Writing in the 5th century BCE in Greece, philosopher Aristotle’s theatre is a space for the audience to see themselves with some distance. It is precisely the space between life and imitation that makes dramaturgy useful to Aristotle. Aristotelian dramaturgy features a strict set of dramaturgical rules around character, action, speech, plot and spectacle, with the aim of establishing a space that was meant to use imitation as a tool for a specific kind of moral

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<sup>39</sup> Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, “The Body is a Resonant Chamber,” in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, eds. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 8.

education. With an aim of inciting and purging “pity and fear,”<sup>40</sup> Aristotelian dramaturgy invited audiences to see a surrogate of themselves in an actor, learning about good and evil through the way the plot unfolds and how fate behaves. The intention of Aristotelian dramaturgy is, through this representative imitation, for spectators to both learn moral lessons and purge their own immoral thoughts and feelings. Through the process of witnessing an “imitation” of a human behaviour, spectators learn how to behave. In *Poetics*, Aristotle says

however small their capacity for it, the reason of the delight in seeing the [imitation] is that one is at the same time learning - gathering the meaning of things, e.g., that the man there is so-and-so; for if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution of colouring or some similar cause.<sup>41</sup>

Through imitation and proper representation, simply put, Aristotle positions drama as a place to witness a representation of action and its outcome and learn specific lessons.

The capacity for Aristotelian dramaturgy to represent life to productive ends lends itself towards the act of world building through imitation. For Aristotle, “the poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, what is possible as being probable or necessary.”<sup>42</sup> It is the poet’s responsibility to imitate something believable, like a world that doesn’t rely on carceral violence to address harm, and that world may come to be so. However, this representation is not abolitionist if it continues to represent carceral and racial capitalist worlds. As articulated by Saidiya Hartman in her work *Scenes of Subjection*, desire and misrecognition are performative reinforcements of white supremacy and anti-Black

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<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, “Poetics,” in *Theatre, Theory, Theatre*, ed. Daniel Gerould, (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2000), 49.

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle. “Poetics,” 47.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, “Poetics,” 52.

violence. When I think about abolition dramaturgies, Hartman stops me in my tracks when she pointedly asks, “What does the exposure of the violated body yield?”<sup>43</sup>

### *Awaken*

Fast forward to the twentieth century to another key figure in the theorization of the function of dramaturgy, German theatre maker and scholar Bertolt Brecht. In his development of Epic Theatre, Brecht articulated theatre as a space not for learning about the moral doctrine but rather for rousing interest in changing the world. Making work about class trouble, poverty, and political turmoil in the early twentieth century, Brecht’s dramaturgical choices were not made with consumptive consideration or pitiful and fearful reflection in mind. His theatre was not a site of “sordid intoxication”<sup>44</sup> and representation. Brecht’s work should awaken and challenge the spectator, “arous[ing] his capacity for action [and] [forcing] him to take decisions.”<sup>45</sup> Brecht imagined his theatre enlivening spectators to act outside the theatre, after the performance is over. To achieve this, his theatre should arouse a kind of detachment or alienation, so spectators are confronted with the story, inspired to act with reason rather than feeling. Brechtian dramaturgy (some examples being projected stage directions and scene titles, the use of music and song, and clear metatheatricity) reinforced the constructed quality of fictional worlds of the theatre in hopes spectators would feel capable of manufacturing new, more just worlds beyond the theatre. For Brecht, dramaturgical choices should emphasize the fact that transformation happening in the theatrical arena was a metaphor for the transformation capable beyond the theatre. He says of the purpose of his Epic theatre that “the present-day world can only be described to present day people if it is described as capable of transformation. People of the

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<sup>43</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1997), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bertolt Brecht. *Brecht On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1978), 38

<sup>45</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 39.

present-day value questions on account of their answers. They are interested in events and situations in face of which they can do something.”<sup>46</sup> His Epic Theatre depicts what he calls the learning play, that is “essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed).”<sup>47</sup>

A near contemporary of Brecht, French theatre maker and agitator Antonin Artaud wrote about his dramaturgy awakening spectators too. Manifesting in the real world and operating as a “function in the proper sense of the world,” like veins and arteries pumping blood or the “apparently chaotic evolution of dream images in the mind,”<sup>48</sup> Artaud’s dramaturgy was visceral and affecting. Writing about a decade before Brecht, in the first of two manifestos about his Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud’s dramaturgy calls for theatre makers to stop “harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive,” and rather “rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought.”<sup>49</sup> Like Robinson and Ravensbergen’s articulation above about the visual, aural, and physical qualities of theatre, Artaud calls for the creation of “word, gesture and expressive metaphysics, in order to rescue theatre from its human, psychological prostration.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly interested in theatre’s capacity for social change, Artaud writes in his second manifesto about the “themes and subjects corresponding to the agitation and unrest of our times.”<sup>51</sup> Like Brecht, his dramaturgy has a primary aim of awakening spectators.

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<sup>46</sup> Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre*, 274.

<sup>47</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Antonin Artaud. “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” in *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated by Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2010), 65.

<sup>49</sup> Artaud. “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” 63.

<sup>50</sup> Artaud. “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” 63.

<sup>51</sup> Antonin Artaud. “The Theatre of Cruelty: Second Manifesto,” in *The Theatre and Its Double*, translated by Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2010), 88.

## *Rehearse*

Brazilian theatre artist and thinker Augusto Boal writes that his dramaturgical practice functions as a “rehearsal for the revolution.”<sup>52</sup> For Boal, theatre does not function as Aristotle’s cathartic or moralizing doctrine but rather should act as an arena to practice how oppressed people can and will revolt. For Boal, theatre and its dramaturgical tools should be handed over to the disenfranchised, the “oppressed,” so that they may rehearse their own seizing back of power. *Theatre of the Oppressed* famously moves through Boal’s understanding of the political potential of theatre as a liberatory medium. Boal, like many of the other liberatory practitioners in this survey, is interested in theatre’s capacity for transformation but he is specifically putting the dramaturgical tools in the hands of the oppressed in rehearsal. “Theatre is change,” Boal says, “not simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being.”<sup>53</sup>

In his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal counters Aristotelian theatrical theory for political reasons. He argues that Aristotelian dramaturgy further serves the will of the state in policing citizens through its moralizing plot structure and inherently punitive plots and in this way, he names the Aristotelian emphasis on catharsis as a repressive and normalizing function of classical drama. Boal also critiques medieval drama and under the same framework as non-liberatory, as this work is even more concretely interested in teaching virtue. In his critique of Shakespearean dramaturgy, he rails against the obsession of the individual. For Boal, Shakespeare’s works serve “as documentary evidence of the coming of the individualized man in the theatre.”<sup>54</sup> Boal finds good company in Brecht and Artaud, and proposes, like Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and Brechtian Epic Theatre, a new paradigm of theatre, the Poetics of the

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<sup>52</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 122.

<sup>53</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 28

<sup>54</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 63.

Oppressed which “focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for chance - in short, trains himself for real action.”<sup>55</sup> Representation and transformation are still at play but this time, the dramaturgical tools are wielded by the people, handed over as a tool of liberation.

### *Transform*

Dramaturgy is both a rehearsal for and a site of transformation. Decolonial and Black dramaturgies participate in liberatory movements in the way they assert spaces of Indigeneity and Blackness through theatrical choices and outcomes. Contemporary Toronto-based theatre-maker d’bi.young anitafrika describes herself as an “African Jamaican multidisciplinary performance artist, Dub poet, monodramatist, playwright, director, dramaturge, educator and emerging scholar, who has lived for the past twenty-five years in Canada and all over the world.”<sup>56</sup> As a theatre maker, she is interested in transformational dramaturgy, primarily engaged in an intersectional investigation of humanity that is heavily influenced by her family and personal history with Dub poetry. Her dramaturgy looks forward and backwards, and she understands her work as “giving credit for the past and setting the stage for the future.”<sup>57</sup> In an article for *Canadian Theatre Review*, d’bi.young articulates her dramaturgical practice in a way that I think is distinctly abolitionist. She first connects her liberatory dramaturgical practices to a genealogy of Black women around her, placing an emphasis on community and collectivity with both human and non-human kin. She writes about the liberatory tempo and rhythm of dub poetry and her own dramaturgical emphasis on relationality and accountability to both what we see and

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<sup>55</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> d’bi.young anitafrika, “Artist Statement,” *d’bi young anitafrika* [dbiyounganitafrika.com/artist-statement](http://dbiyounganitafrika.com/artist-statement). Accessed November 2021.

<sup>57</sup> anitafrika, “Artist Statement”

what we witness., she articulates her “sorplusi methodology” that speaks to the components of dub poetry “representing self-knowledge, orality, rhythm, political content and context, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity”<sup>58</sup> Her dramaturgical practice is cyclical and non-linear, including both autobiography and spectacular myth, dissolving the imagined and colonial boundaries between real and fictional, the personal and political. In a generation above d’bi.young’s, ahdri mandiel’s play *who knew grannie: a dub aria*, mandiel’s dramaturgical structure is compared to sankofa bird, a “crow-like bird of West African myth that flies forward while looking back and taking an egg (the future) off it’s back; it teaches that we must go back to our roots in order to advance.”<sup>59</sup> d’bi.young and mandiel write with the past and the future, they write for their ancestors and their contemporaries to usher in a transformed world.

Some Indigenous dramaturgs and theatre makers also theorize the transformational functions of their work. In her survey of Indigenous dramaturgies, *Medicine Shows*, Yvette Nolan traces a variety of transformational functions of Indigenous dramaturgy: exposing poison (her example is Kevin Loring’s *Where the Blood Mixes*), survivance and resilience narratives (she writes about Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell’s *Book of Jessica*), remembrance (Marie Clements’ *The Accidental and Unnatural Woman*, Keith Barker’s *The Hours That Remain*), ceremony (Margo Kane’s *Moonlodge*), and making community (Yvette Nolan’s *The Unplugging*).<sup>60</sup> As written about by Lindsay Lachance, Jill Carter, Monique Mojica, Kim Senklip Harvey in various contexts, dramaturgy as ceremony, led by Indigenous artists is transformational in the way it artistically represents relationality as (re)created liberatory praxis.

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<sup>58</sup> d’bi.young anitafrika, “r/evolution begins within,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 150, (Spring 2012): 27. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.150.26>.

<sup>59</sup> Ric Knowles, “To Be Dub, Female and Black: Towards a Woman-Centred Afro-Caribbean Diasporic Performance Aesthetic in Toronto,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 33, no. 1, (Spring 2012): 90, [doi.org/10.3138/tric.33.1.78](https://doi.org/10.3138/tric.33.1.78).

<sup>60</sup> Yvette Nolan, *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*, (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2015).

Mark Fortier looks to materialism to investigate collective transformative dramaturgies citing the fact that “Marx declares that the point is not merely to interpret the world but to change it. Materialist analysis of theatre is concerned not only with positioning theatre because of its place in history but also with seeing how theatre can affect the world.”<sup>61</sup> In Elinor Fuchs’ how-to-do-dramaturgy guide, “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet,” she implicates the reader and says: “Don’t forget to ask what changes in you, the imaginer of worlds. Ask, what has this world demanded of me?”<sup>62</sup> Echoing Fuchs, abolitionist dramaturgies also ask, what changes in me, the imaginer of abolitionist worlds?

### *Desire*

Aristotle, Elinor Fuchs, and David Ball all insist on the intimate relationship between dramaturgy and desire. Theatrical characters are motivated by desires and halted by obstacles to those desires. Sometimes, the action is not even as interesting as the reason behind it, as Ball insists that “what a character does is half the revelation. Why the character does it is the other half.”<sup>63</sup> Desire is an instigator of change, a key element of dramaturgy. Desire is the first inkling that stasis is about to be disrupted. “Put another way,” dramaturg David Ball says, “if you want nothing, you say nothing.”<sup>64</sup> Beyond the characters, drama unfolds because of an audience’s desire to watch what happens next. Aristotle says that human beings are attracted to drama in the first place because imitation is appealing to humans, our interest in drama is connected to our desire to learn and pleasure in the representations of the unknown. As dramaturg David Ball says, “dramatic tension requires that the audience desire to find out what is coming up.”<sup>65</sup> What begins

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<sup>61</sup> Mark Fortier, *Theatre/Theory: An Introduction* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London: Routledge, 2002), 164.

<sup>62</sup> Elinor Fuchs, “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play.” *Theater* 34, no. 2, (May 2004): 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ball, *Backwards and Forwards*, 63.

<sup>64</sup> Ball, *Backwards and Forwards*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> David Ball, *Backwards and Forwards: a Technical Manual for Reading Plays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), 59.

as desire, becomes an action and results in a disruption. In his book *Backwards and Forwards*, he says that “a play is a series of actions. A play is not about action, nor does it describe action. Is a fire about flames? No, a fire is flames. A play is action.”<sup>66</sup> This focus on desire and action leaves room for emergence and cause and effect, making dramaturgy a site of (potentially abolitionist) transformation. The dramaturgy of desire allows for a closer look at the productive journey between thought and action that incites transformation. Desire dramaturgy charts a kind of collective responsibility of characters within and outside of a fiction, an expectation that what we want to come to be, will come to be. In drama, characters are motivated by desire. Action is motivated by desire. Abolitionist world building also starts with the desire for a new world. In her book *Carceral Capitalism*, abolitionist Jackie Wang says that “I know that as a poet, it is not my job to win you over with a persuasive argument, but to impart to you a vibrational experience that is capable of awakening your desire for another world.”<sup>67</sup>

Through dramatic action and dramaturgical choices, theatre can make these abolitionist desires public, rehearsed, performed, and made manifest. These desires are also multiple and layered. They can be both internal to the action in the play (the characters’ desires) or external to the fiction (the playwright’s desires in writing the show, the producers’ desires in mounting the production, the audience’s desires in the room as they watch). In Robinson and Martin’s *Arts of Engagement*, Ravensbergen says “theatre consciously incites action - by making audiences feel their own feelings in public, with a room full of strangers.”<sup>68</sup> These desires, lived, are gifts from the theatre that are meant to be experienced collectively, in public. Desire is a core element of abolition dramaturgies.

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<sup>66</sup> Ball, *Backwards and Forwards*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2018), 319.

<sup>68</sup> Robinson, “Acts of Defiance in Indigenous Theatre,” 191.

These dramaturgical desires, when handled with decolonial and abolitionist attention, can be liberating. But manifesting desire through dramaturgy is also risky when not done with care and awareness of positionality. Desire, as a force that functions strongly inside and outside the theatrical frame, can be wielded by different people for different reasons and has different ramifications in both fictional and real worlds. The stakes are not the same and for this reason, desire in abolition dramaturgy can be messy and harmful. When talking about their attempt to work in actual ceremony in the theatre in *The Book of Jessica*, it's clear the settlers on the project, namely Linda Griffiths and Paul Thompson, had desires that were not compatible with ceremony. They were not aware of their positionality and were not careful with decolonizing the theatre, as an actual room beyond the fiction, as a safe space for the expression of decolonial and liberation through desire. When recounting the violence inside the rehearsal room during the process, Griffiths described her experience: "the 'subject' was never in the room, never a part of the process, until *Jessica*. Then the old half-digested, theatrical gods met Maria [Campbell] and her Native spirits, and all hell broke loose."<sup>69</sup> When Griffiths was asked to rehearse a movement sequence that dramatized sexual violence experienced by Campbell, the desire to "make a good show" clashed with the desire to tell an international story and ultimately, caused harm. The dramaturgical desire to "tell a story" harmed the desire to be in good relations and the women couldn't talk to each other for years. Campbell felt exploited and angry. The collective desire of the artists behind making the show colonized and terrorized the desire of a decolonial show. The desires within and outside of the frame were in intense conflict with each other. The desire needs to be decolonial and abolitionist in nature. Abolitionist dramaturgies attend to the process of materializing desire in community.

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<sup>69</sup> Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell, *The Book of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2000), 14.

## Abolition

Abolitionist movements call for the closure of prisons, the dismantling of police and the (re)creation of new patterns and systems of harm-reduction beyond carceral violence and logic. The word abolition has historical ties to the move to abolish slavery around the world and as I evoke it in the context of the abolition of police and prisons today, the word connects the contemporary carceral reality in North America to the abolition of slaves in the mid-nineteenth century. In other words, there is an undeniable connection between the racial capitalist intentions of the transatlantic slave trade and the contemporary carceral system. In North America and Canada, the carceral system is a legacy of both slavery and colonization.

Abolition wants us to question the pervasive and untrue notion that police and prisons protect the public. As abolitionist Mariame Kaba insists in her extensive writing on abolition over reform, “when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a Black man’s neck until he dies, that’s the logical result of policing in America.”<sup>70</sup> Abolition acknowledges the inherent racial violence that permeates carceral systems, both here in Canada and on a global scale. On the inside cover of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s collection of essays *Abolition Geography*, abolition is defined as “figuring out how to work with people to make something rather than figuring out to how to erase something. Abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life.”<sup>71</sup> Abolition acknowledges that harm is a part of social life but insists that incarceration is both an inappropriate and ineffective response to it.

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<sup>70</sup> Mariame Kaba, “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police,” *The New York Times*, June 12 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html#:~:text=Everywhere%2C%20they%20have%20suppressed%20marginalized,he%20sees%20as%20his%20job.](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html#:~:text=Everywhere%2C%20they%20have%20suppressed%20marginalized,he%20sees%20as%20his%20job.)

<sup>71</sup> Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays towards Liberation*, inside front cover.

This project considers the theatre as a possible arena for undoing our illogical obsession with carceral violence, and dramaturgy a possible toolkit for that undoing. Specifically, in the so-called Canadian context, abolition's necessity is in part due to the way that racial capitalism and anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and ableist violence manifests in carceral institution. As Michel Foucault argues, we can understand much about a society from the way harm and punishment is doled out. As he writes in *Discipline and Punish*, panoptic punishment reveals a society that seeks to categorize and control as a means of punishment. Spectacular punishment reveals a society that relies upon fear to deter harm. Contemporary carceral punishment reveals a society that is governed by racial capitalism that addresses harm by committing more harm. Punishment in so-called Canada reveals a deeply racist project that is committed to the destruction of Black, Indigenous people. As Robyn Maynard argues in her book *Policing Black Lives*, the social amnesia around the ways that racism is manifested in Canada is perverse and pervasive. Abolition depends upon an awareness of the ways that the prison is a site of intense racism and white supremacy in Canada. In so-called Canada, Indigenous women represent almost fifty per cent of all women in federal custody.

Abolition is not just the closure of prisons and the end of policing but rather a radical restructuring of relations and strategies for handling harm and conflict. When I evoke abolition here, I am speaking not just about the end of police, prisons, and carceral violence, but the radical transformation of a racial capitalist mindset that insists upon punitive justice as a necessary part of living collectively. Scholar Dylan Rodriguez defines the expansiveness of abolition:

Now and long before, abolition is and was a practice, an analytical method, a present-tense visioning, an infrastructure in the making, a creative project, a performance, a

counterwar, an ideological struggle, a pedagogy and curriculum, an alleged impossibility that is furtively present, pulsing, produced in the persistent insurgencies of human being that undermine the totalizing logics of empire, chattel, occupation, heteropatriarchy, racial-colonial genocide, and Civilization as a juridical-narrative epoch.<sup>72</sup>

Abolition is as much about a conceptual shift as a physical knocking down of prisons and police buildings. Abolition is creative visioning that takes places in past, present and future. Abolition is about prisons and detention centres, but it is also about schools and social work. In the book *Until We Are Free*, abolitionist and scholar Syrus Marcus Ware writes

For me, true abolition would only come through a revolutionary process where everything would change...Abolition is, yes, the closing and ending of our reliance on the prison-industrial complex as a way of handling our conflict, but it's also an entirely new way of being and relating to each other in the world.<sup>73</sup>

In his book *On Property*, scholar Rinaldo Walcott writes

We do not just want to abolish the police and the courts; we want to abolish everything. We want freedom and we know and understand, in a way that our own history has taught us, that abolition is the only route towards it. Our present demand for abolition has a much longer history.<sup>74</sup>

The scope and practices of abolition are wide, the tactics are depending on the nuance of the desire. World building desire is also central to abolition. To usher in an abolitionist world, there

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<sup>72</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132, no. 6, (April 2019): 1578.

<sup>73</sup> Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson, and Syrus Marcus Ware, eds. *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 33.

<sup>74</sup> Rinaldo Walcott. *On Property*, (Windsor: Biblioasis, 2021), 14.

must be a desire to be in good relations as a principle, with both intimate and public relations, strangers and friends. In her book *Abolitionist Intimacies*, El Jones writes

Perhaps abolition is also the uncovering of our autonomous desires, which have been muffled by capitalism, racism, patriarchy, etc. Perhaps it is as simple as returning to the most basic of needs: food, shelter, companionship. Perhaps in reshaping our wanting, we reshape the world. There is a place for desire in an abolitionist world, at least when desire is pleasure and love and freedom.<sup>75</sup>

Bringing abolition together with dramaturgy, this next section mirrors the structure for crafting a verb-ed definition of dramaturgy, focusing on specific abolitionist verbs and gestures that propose some possible connections between abolition and dramaturgy. These verbs, recognize, destroy, recreate, gather, and rehearse are touchstones for scholarship on abolition in both a local and national scope but are not an exhaustive list of abolitionist gestures.

### *Recognize, Destroy, Recreate*

In his book *Our History Is the Future*, scholar and journalist Nick Estes lays out a three-step process for decolonization: recognition, destruction, (re)creation. In the context of his work, recognition of land theft is not an end in itself but a series of “stepping stones to a larger goal;” he goes on to say, “[r]ecognition, whether cultural or political, was pointless if it didn’t entail the destruction of the colonial system and, above all, the restoration of treaty lands and Indigenous modes of governance.”<sup>76</sup> This three step process of recognition (of land theft), destruction (of colonial systems) and (re)creation of Indigenous and decolonial ways of being, knowing, and doing, helps me to think about both abolition as such and an abolition dramaturgy. The

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<sup>75</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 197.

<sup>76</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2019), 224.

recognition and representation of carceral violence through dramaturgy only goes so far when it comes to abolition. Although abolition necessitates destruction, it is also inherently creative and reparative. How can we use dramaturgy to both destroy and (re)create?

Abolition asks us to consider the fact that because prisons were made, they can be unmade. In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis insists on the possibility of abolition in our lifetime by comparing the abolition of prisons to the abolition of the death penalty: “This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families.”<sup>77</sup> Davis argues that as a way to govern ourselves, we have been making and unmaking institutions throughout history. Prisons are no exception.

Building on this core insight that abolition is not only destructive, but also inherently creative, Dylan Rodriguez says, “In this sense, abolition is not merely a practice of negation — a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations — but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice.”<sup>78</sup> Because harm will still inevitably appear in relational contexts, abolition has to create an imperative to abolish carcerality as it is and replace it with other ways to be together. Abolition insists on both the destruction of prisons and the (re)creation of some other, anti-carceral, way of being together. In *Rehearsals for Living*, Robyn Maynard writes

Abolition is imagination work, anti-colonial struggle is imagination work, conjure work, science fiction in real time. It is daring to see that the world now did not need to be as it

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<sup>77</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 10

<sup>78</sup> Rodriguez, “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being,” 1576.

was, does not need to be as it is, and certainly, most importantly, need not - and will not - remain this way.<sup>79</sup>

Abolition asks us to consider the ways that contemporary institutions control certain populations through the process of making live and letting die, abolish them and make way for life-giving alternatives for addressing harm. “The most difficult and urgent challenge today,” says Angela Davis, “is that of creatively exploring new tenants of justice, where the prison is no longer the major anchor.”<sup>80</sup> Abolition does not assume the disappearance of harm, but rather challenges us to think of an alternative to prison as a site for dealing with harm. We can do better than this, we can imagine a better alternative. Abolition acknowledges that prisons aren’t only inhumane and cruel, they are ineffective in dealing with the root cause of harm and instead create more harm in their wake. In this context, (re)creation refers both to the process of actively creating new networks in the present that are abolitionist but also abolitionist worlds that are already being conjured. Especially as a settler scholar and white femme, it’s important for me to acknowledge these abolitionist worlds are already actively made every day.

### *Gather*

In an article for *Poetry Foundation* that examines Audre Lorde’s poetry work as guide, Mariame Kaba says there is a functional magic in hearing voices speaking out for justice over the din of a bustling city. Gathering as a collective to recite poetry can’t end state violence but it can lift our spirits so that we might live another day to fight for more justice. Now more than ever we need words to

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<sup>79</sup> Simpson and Maynard, *Rehearsals for Living*, 176

<sup>80</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 21

help us think through that which cannot be thought. Poetry can help lift the ceiling from our brains so that we can imagine liberation.<sup>81</sup>

Here, Kaba suggests that simply by inviting collective imagination into a gathered experience, poetry can energize the liberatory movement through relational encounters. Although Kaba is writing about poetry, I think theatre is an even more exaggerated play space for liberation because of its manifestation in materiality and the inherently collective experience. In Mark Fortier's dramaturgical survey *theory/theatre*, he argues that through that gathering "as a public space, theatre functions as what the anthropologist Victor Turner calls the liminoid, a place set apart for the process of social or personal transformation, or what Foucault calls heterotopia, a quasi-public space which functions to reflect, expose, invert, support or compensate for the outside world."<sup>82</sup> Theatre, as a public space for gathering, invites a kind of collective imagination and ultimately, transformation.

Prisons are both about punishing some people and ensuring the rights of others. In contrast, abolition insists upon a kind of hopeful abundance mindset. We can keep each other safe without subjecting others to violence. My ability to thrive does not depend on another's punishment or pain. Prisons harm everyone, not just people interned inside. If harm is done (which is inevitable) there are better ways to keep everyone safe and cared for than incarceration. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Davis asks the question, "Why do prisons tend to make people think that their own rights and liberties are more secure than they would be if prisons did not exist?"<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Mariame Kaba, "Imagining Freedom," Poetry Foundation, April 2016, [poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/88726/imagining-freedom](http://poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/88726/imagining-freedom)

<sup>82</sup> Fortier, *Theatre/Theory*, 168.

<sup>83</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 14

## *Rehearse*

Abolition insists that because the state is complicit in racial violence and carceral capitalism, *we* must do the work together to keep each other safe. This project proposes theatre as a play space for us to both rehearse and manifest the ways that we keep each other safe. I am not claiming that the dramaturgical realm is the only or even best realm to practice these ways, but rather I am adding it to the toolkit of abolition geographies. I understand, like Naomi Murakawa in the foreword to Mariame Kaba's *We Do This 'til We Free Us*, that "abolition is becoming. It is beautiful. And it is what we do 'til we free us."<sup>84</sup> I consider the work that can be done through abolition dramaturgies one of these practices to do *in the meantime*. "Til we free us." Abolition depends on community accountability, acknowledging that alternatives for care and safety are plentiful, already abundant outside/inside of the carceral landscape.

Kaba illustrates the need for rehearsals within abolition because "granted, our vision is incomplete. There is no road map for justice, because under this system we have never seen it. But the current system has been thoroughly mapped, and it has already failed."<sup>85</sup> The desire for temporal reimagining is also present in abolition dramaturgy. In abolitionist pursuit, Kaba reminds us "history is instructive, not because it offers us a blueprint for how to act in the present, but because it can help us ask better questions for the future."<sup>86</sup>

If abolition, like theatre, is an action, a process, and a practice, what tactics and techniques can be used to harness dramaturgy's potential for social and political engagement? How can theatre be a part of a "project and a practice around creating the conditions that would allow for the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance and the creation of new

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<sup>84</sup> Naomi Murakawa, "Foreword" in *We Do This til We Free Us* by Mariame Kaba, xx.

<sup>85</sup> Mariame Kaba with Kelly Hayes, "The Sentencing of Larry Nassar Was Not 'Transformative Justice.' Here's Why," in *We Do This til We Free Us*, 61.

<sup>86</sup> Kaba, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police," in *We Do This til We Free Us*, 15.

institutions that actually work to keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive”<sup>87</sup>? If abolition isn’t merely the end of police and prisons but rather “seeks (as it performs) a radical reconfiguration of justice, subjectivity, and social formation that does not depend on the existence of either the carceral state (a statecraft that institutionalized various forms of targeted human capture) or carceral power as such (a totality of state-sanctioned and extra-state relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance),”<sup>88</sup> how can theatre participate in that reconfiguration? Abolition requires a restructuring of how we act in relation to one another, and theatre is skilled in relational encounters. If abolition requires more enmeshed practices of relation, what kinds of relational encounters are made visible through theatre? What are the relational encounters that surround me as I write? From where do I write about this pair of world building practices? And with whom?

## **Time & Place**

I write this dissertation in Katarokwi-Kingston (“a place where there is clay” or “a place where there is limestone”<sup>89</sup>), living as an uninvited guest, a settler specifically, upon the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Anishinabek Nation, and the Huron Wendat nation. Land co-opted and stolen during the 1783 Crawford purchase, Katarokwi is “subject to the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, a covenant between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Three Fires Confederacy (Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomie), and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources in and around the Great Lakes.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kaba, “A People’s History of Prisons in the United States,” in *We Do This ‘til We Free Us*, 72.

<sup>88</sup> Rodriguez, “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being,” 1576.

<sup>89</sup> “Acknowledging\*,” Agnes Etherington Art Centre, accessed July 3 2024, [agnes.queensu.ca](https://agnes.queensu.ca)

<sup>90</sup> “Acknowledging\*,” Agnes Etherington Art Centre,

The lake is my favourite part of Katarokwi. Many of my favourite memories before and during the PhD involve the lake. Losing a baseball cap to the lake on a trip on the Wolfe Island Ferry. Swimming in cold water to honour the death of one of my mentors, Queen's professor and feminist agitator, Kim Renders. Skating to a rehearsal of Erin Shields' *If We Were Birds*. Thinking about my grandfather's story of the homerun from the Kingston Pen. I am grateful to the ways that this land and its inhabitants here in Kingston have greatly informed the scope of this project. I am also horrified by the ways that carcerality has damaged Katarokwi. The traces of the prisons and the labour of those contained inside dot the map of the city of Kingston. The recently renovated Queen's Richardson Stadium was originally dug out by prisoners at Kingston Penitentiary, and I wonder how much of the limestone in my neighbourhood, Portsmouth Harbour, was chiseled out by prison labour.

#### *Local Carceral Context: Kingston*

Within four city blocks along Lake Ontario, fifteen minutes away from where I write this dissertation, there are three decommissioned carceral sites that sit empty, crumbling: the Prison for Women, the Kingston Penitentiary, and Rockwood Asylum. Sitting between Kingston's largest family park and the postsecondary educational enterprise that is Queen's University, two of these massive stone carceral institutions sit boarded up and empty, facing the lake. The third, the Kingston Penitentiary, is empty apart from the occasional movie set and the ongoing public-facing commercial tours that the St. Lawrence Parks Commission runs. Both the Prison for Women and the Rockwood Asylum closed in 2000 and the Kingston Penitentiary closed in 2013. The Prison for Women was closed in 2000 after the Arbour Report<sup>91</sup> shed light on the horrific

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<sup>91</sup> Louise Arbour. *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston*. (Toronto: The Commission of Inquiry, 1996).

conditions inside that lead seven women, many of them Indigenous, to commit suicide within a very short period. Rockwood Asylum has sat empty for nearly twenty years, after more than 1000 years of incarcerating the so-called ‘criminally insane’ before a few years of housing adults with disabilities.<sup>92</sup>

As of 2024, both empty facilities, the Prison for Women and Rockwood Asylum, have been the site of public plans for major redevelopment. Quietly in 2021, Kingston invested in plans for deep dock vaguely situated “between Portsmouth Olympic Harbour and Providence Care Hospital.”<sup>93</sup> The grounds of Rockwood Asylum. This move foreshadowed plans for major construction on the grounds of the asylum, making room for a cruise ship dock for Kingston’s thriving tourist sector. In a classic gentrifying swoop in favour of arts and tourism, city-sponsored boardwalks and graffiti now dot the shore as the city prepares for this renovation on these intentionally unnamed institutional grounds. In 2022, it was announced that developers would turn the Prison for Women building and site into a retirement residence and commercial space called Union Park.<sup>94</sup> To my knowledge, major construction hasn’t obviously begun on either project.

Since its closure in 2013, Kingston Penitentiary has hosted tours for the public fundraising for the United Way,<sup>95</sup> countless film crews,<sup>96</sup> and a large-scale concert called

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<sup>92</sup> “Rockwood Asylum: 1878,” Museum of Health Care Kingston, accessed July 3 2024, [museumofhealthcare.ca/explore/exhibitions/rockwood-asylum.html](https://museumofhealthcare.ca/explore/exhibitions/rockwood-asylum.html)

<sup>93</sup> Kimberley Johnson, “Large cruise ships coming to Kingston, Ont,” *CTV News Ottawa*, October 12 2021 [ottawa.ctvnews.ca/large-cruise-ships-coming-to-kingston-ont-1.5620626](https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/large-cruise-ships-coming-to-kingston-ont-1.5620626)

<sup>94</sup> A group of survivors of the Prison for Women and their allies, the Prison for Women Memorial Collective, continue their work to establish a memorial garden on the grounds to honour their friends whose lives were lost inside. [p4wmemorialcollective.com/](https://p4wmemorialcollective.com/)

<sup>95</sup> Tori Stafford, “Two Years of Kingston Penitentiary tours generate over \$1.5 million for United Way,” *Kingstonist*, July 11 2018 [kingstonist.com/news/two-years-of-kingston-penitentiary-tours-generate-over-1-5-million-for-united-way/](https://kingstonist.com/news/two-years-of-kingston-penitentiary-tours-generate-over-1-5-million-for-united-way/)

<sup>96</sup> Abbey McCauley, “From Limestone Penitentiary Walls to Cinema Screens,” *Visit Kingston*, accessed July 3 2024, [visitkingston.ca/from-limestone-penitentiary-walls-to-cinema-screens/](https://visitkingston.ca/from-limestone-penitentiary-walls-to-cinema-screens/)

“Rockin’ the Big House.”<sup>97</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic, other smaller artists and organizations have shown interest in animating the mattress factory inside the Kingston Penitentiary.<sup>98</sup> This tourism and entertainment programming has been met with local frustration and critique. Local abolitionist scholars Lisa Guenther, Lin Mussell, and Justin Piche write “as abolitionist killjoys, we seek to disrupt and transform the good feelings produced when charitable organizations team up with carceral institutions to repackage sites of confinement and punishment into fun zones of entertainment ‘for a good cause.’”<sup>99</sup> In their work to contextualize and complicate the “Rockin’ the Big House” show, these abolitionist killjoys assert that “the prison is no place for a party.”

As an artist myself who is specifically interested in site and space, this question of how to animate these rotting sites of carcerality loomed over my shoulder as I wrote this dissertation. What do we do with these spaces that remain material traces of horrific memories? Is there a way artmaking can be involved in the future of these sites without further exploiting and excluding incarcerated voices? How can abolition dramaturgies rehearse alternative treatments for the decarcerated prison beasts that dot our local landscape? What should be done with these empty vessels of carceral violence, that have been left to rot in memory and material along the shores of Lake Ontario? How can abolition dramaturgies act as a script or event for these spaces?

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<sup>97</sup> “Rockin’ the Big House and Kingston Pen Tours raise \$727, 325 for Youth Initiatives,” United Way: Kingston Frontenac, Lennox and Addington, November 27 2019 [unitedwaykfla.ca/rockin-the-big-house-and-kingston-pen-tours-raise-727325-for-youth-initiatives/](https://unitedwaykfla.ca/rockin-the-big-house-and-kingston-pen-tours-raise-727325-for-youth-initiatives/)

<sup>98</sup> “KPP brings concert series to the Kingston Penitentiary,” Kingston Live! accessed July 3 2024, [kingstonlive.ca/kpp-brings-concert-series-to-the-kingston-penitentiary](https://kingstonlive.ca/kpp-brings-concert-series-to-the-kingston-penitentiary)

<sup>99</sup> Lin Mussell, Justin Piché, Kevin Walby, and Lisa Guenther, “A Prison Is No Place for a Party: Neoliberalism, Charitable Fundraising, Carceral Enjoyments and Abolitionist Killjoys,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 25 vol. 1 (2022): 56–81. [doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2021.2018655](https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2021.2018655).

*Canadian Theatrical Context: Stages of Transformation*

I am eager to contribute to conversations about the relationships between theatre and abolition happening in my immediate vicinity as a theatre professional in so-called Canada. In 2022, abolitionist theatre makers Nikki Shaffeeullah and Mpoe Mogale spurred the National Arts Centre's *Stages of Transformation*, "a multi-year project of research, rumination, creative exploration and conversation, bringing together theatre artists, arts workers, and creative communities from across so-called Canada. It takes up the imperatives of abolition movements and transformative justice frameworks and investigates their applications to our work in the theatre sector."<sup>100</sup> *Stages of Transformation* is a series of essays and interviews, audio talks, panel discussions, visual art responses, and a network of artists and producers in so-called Canada who are interested in manifesting abolitionist values inside their theatre-making practices. Beyond Shaffeeullah and Mogale, *Stages of Transformation* is comprised of a "Creative Cohort" of BIPOC artists representing arts organizations that are actively exploring the ways that abolition "can impact theatre-making in process, content, form and dissemination."<sup>101</sup> *Stages of Transformation* is long-term collaborative project funded by the National Arts Centre, demarcating the importance of these conversations in the Canadian context.

Artists and scholars featured in the "Transform," "Listen," "Discuss," and "Envision" sections of the *Stages of Transformation* project articulate ways that abolition can manifest in the relational spaces of making theatre. These thinkers talk and think about abolition manifested in theatrical producing through matrilineal production teams, collaborations with previously incarcerated women, grant writing and budgeting that opposes the charitable industrial complex.

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<sup>100</sup> "About" *Stages of Transformation*, accessed June 2024 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation](https://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation)

<sup>101</sup> "Create," *Stages of Transformation*, accessed June 2024 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/create](https://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/create)

*Stages of Transformation* considers the ways that we can produce theatre within the principles of abolition. In a podcast episode called “Conflict is a Door,”<sup>102</sup> in the Listen section of the project, Shaffeeullah and Mogale interview Cahoots Theatre’s Artistic Director Tanisha Taitt about the abolitionist concept of “conflict transformation” for theatre artists and how this can be a generative space for the messy parts of working together to make theatre. On another episode of the podcast, Shaffeeullah and Mogale talk abolition in the context of governance models<sup>103</sup> with Indigenous playwright, director, dramaturg, and scholar Yvette Nolan. Can we restructure “boards” to focus less on institutional oversight and more on organizational support? Shaffeeullah and Mogale describe abolitionist archival practices in the body or “embodied documentation”<sup>104</sup> with artist and activist Raven Davis. In a video interview, Shaffeeullah hosted Cole Alvis and Kim Senklip Harvey on in a panel called “Storytelling the Justice System,” who talk through and “reflect on the ways in which art can shape, uphold, and subvert narratives about the justice system, and the ways in which performance can help imagine alternative understandings of harm, accountability, and repair.”<sup>105</sup> Playwrights Omari Newton and Makambe K. Simamba reflect with scholar Taiwo Afolabi on theatrical works about policing in Canada.<sup>106</sup> *Stages of Transformation* examines abolition in Canadian theatre making not through dramaturgy specifically but rather, through the material elements of making theatre. Beyond making theatre that tells the story of abolition, *Stages of Transformation* examines the carceral

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<sup>102</sup> Tanisha Taitt, Nikki Shaffeeullah and Mpoé Mogal, “Episode 1: Conflict is a Door” *Stages of Transformation*, accessed June 2024 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen](https://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen)

<sup>103</sup> Yvette Nolan, Nikki Shaffeeullah and Mpoé Mogal, “Episode 2: Governance Models” *Stages of Transformation*, accessed June 2024 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen](https://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen)

<sup>104</sup> Raven Davis, Santiago Guzmán and Miki Wolf, “Episode 8: Embodied Documentation” *Stages of Transformation*, accessed June 2024 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen](https://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/listen)

<sup>105</sup> Audrey Dwyer, Cole Alvis, and Kim Senklip Harvey, “Storytelling the Justice System,” *Stages of Transformation*, September 27 2024 [youtu.be/k6Ho6eG0P\\_0](https://youtu.be/k6Ho6eG0P_0)

<sup>106</sup> Omari Newton, Makambe K. Simamba, and Taiwo Afolabi, “Theatrical Interrogations: Cops in the Spotlight,” *Stages of Transformation*, September 27 2024 [youtu.be/jDNZo4Mi59Y](https://youtu.be/jDNZo4Mi59Y)

mechanics of theatre-making in so-called Canada and proposes alternatives. How can we write contracts that better support the diverse needs of our participants? How can we ensure the theatre is a welcoming place for incarcerated people? How can theatre companies deal with conflict without firing people or calling the police?

If I were to submit this dissertation to the *Stages of Transformation*, perhaps I would do so under the subheading of “Staging.” If *Stages of Transformation* aims to transform our process of making theatre as abolitionist, this dissertation examines ways that story structure and dramaturgy can also participate in that project. Where *Stages of Transformation* examines the material elements of practicing abolition in the theatre, this dissertation elaborates on the dramaturgical elements of practicing abolition in the theatre. It's clear that my communities, both my professional colleagues in the theatre and the community I share here in Kingston, have thoughts and offers around surviving the carceral context and ultimately abolishing it.

### *Theatre in Prisons*

Zooming out slightly to more international contexts, there is another intersecting field I want to name: theatre in prisons. As a subgenre of applied theatre, or theatre that is used beyond the theatre to achieve some therapeutic or community-building needs, prison theatre is a well-established practice both internationally and here in Canada.<sup>107</sup> People have used theatre inside as a therapeutic tool of expression or a transformational role-playing exercise. Theatre in prison can be used to give voice to people inside, have them learn more about themselves, and process grief.

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<sup>107</sup> William Head on Stage (WHos) in Victoria, BC is the Canada's only theatre company that is run by incarcerated artists. In operation for more than thirty-five years, the company invites audiences inside the institution to watch their plays and short films. [whonstage.weebly.com/about.html](http://whonstage.weebly.com/about.html)

Some of the existing scholarship around theatre and prisons is focused around the inherent and productive juxtaposition of the two words together. In his edited collection *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, prison theatre maker and scholar Michael Balfour elaborates on this fundamental tension between theatre and prison. He says:

In the context of prison, this humanizing process will never be a fundamental priority. It exists in contradiction to the administrative task of the institution. Prison is in the business of containment, observation, punishment, categorisation, restriction, separation, and on occasion rehabilitation... So prison theatre, theatre in prisons, is a term in eternal contradiction with itself.<sup>108</sup>

For Balfour, prison and theatre have two oppositional functions (containment vs freedom) and part of the task of prison theatre makers is to walk this fine line between the institutional control of the prison and the creative expression of the theatre. In her book *theatre & prison*, Caoimhe McAvinchey seeks to untangle the (il)logical connection between theatre and prison in her research and by addressing the complexities of the genre. First, she “consider[s] how theatre and performance can help us investigate and understand the political, social, and economic consequences of the use of prison in the twenty-first century.”<sup>109</sup> For McAvinchey, theatre is an uncoverer. A tool for investigation. She argues in her book that there is an “urgent political, economic, social and cultural need for a critical re-engagement with the idea of prison and that theatre, although not itself immune from using prison as cultural shorthand, provides us with unique opportunities for this re-engagement.”<sup>110</sup> For Balfour and McAvinchey, the purpose of the intersection between theatre and prison is to either offer people healing tools inside or to

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<sup>108</sup> Michael Balfour. *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2004), 2-3.

<sup>109</sup> Caoimhe McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

<sup>110</sup> McAvinchey, *Theatre & Prison*, 7.

illustrate to outside people the “ugliness” of prison. While not downplaying the important healing work that happens through applied theatre in prisons, I am wary of theatre as a tool to merely shed light upon injustice.

### *Abolition Dramaturgies*

This PhD dissertation begins with the assumption that we are aware of the problems with prison. We know. We recognize. No more recognition or uncovering needed. We know the violence of solitary confinement. We have heard the rallying cries of incarcerated people on hunger strikes to protest mistreatment. We see the ways that carceral system reinforces racism and oppression. Whereas many scholars working in theatre and prison position theatre as a useful lens through which to see the prison more clearly, my research assumes we have already seen the reality of prison in all its ugly features and instead, we move to wield theatrical practices towards abolition. Where many scholars have investigated the challenges and opportunities of theatre and prison, I am interested in the challenges and opportunities of dramaturgy and specifically prison abolition, inspired by American scholars like Nicholas Fesette and other contributors to the newly published *Into Abolitionist Theatre: A Guidebook for Liberatory Theatre-making*. My research is in conversation with these scholars who are dreaming up ways that theatre can be a site and dramaturgy be a set of tools to rehearse and enact abolition rather than a re-examination of the prison. Rather than using theatre to understand the realities of prison, this dissertation uses dramaturgy to rehearse and manifest an abolitionist present. In his article where he coins the phrase “abolition dramaturgy,” Nicholas Fesette writes:

Cultural forms like theatre carry the potential to contribute to the struggle for abolition in a number of ways: to provide spaces of healing and care for artists and audiences; to envision alternate worlds; to help raise public consciousness; to disrupt the status quo and

entrenched ways of thinking; and in the end, in the words of Toni Cade Bambara, “to make revolution irresistible.”<sup>111</sup>

The way I see it, this dissertation primarily examines two of these ways to contribute to abolition: envisioning alternate worlds and disrupting entrenched ways of thinking. Although I cannot undermine the incredible importance of the ways that theatre can provide spaces of healing and care for incarcerated people, this dissertation examines abolition in the theatre inside the frame.

In his article “Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World,” Fesette carves out abolition dramaturgy through his analysis of three plays, *American Son* by Christopher Demos-Brown, *Pass Over* by Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu, and *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks. He poses the following questions of theatre and abolition:

How does theatre and performance studies engage with this debate? How has it failed in its engagement? How does performance respond to the abolitionist demands behind radical political movements like #defundthepolice? What can performance contribute to the contemporary abolitionist movement? How do we loosen ways of thinking about theatre and performance that ultimately reproduce the very things we think we are fighting against?<sup>112</sup>

Fesette’s article continues to build upon these questions, straddling both the conceptual and the material project of abolition. His work interrogates the potentials of theatre and abolition in two different arenas. First, he asks readers to consider how theatre and performance studies can be implicated in the carceral context. In carving out his abolitionist dramaturgies, he considers the

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<sup>111</sup> Nicholas Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World.” *Theatre Journal* 74, no. 2 (2022): 175.

<sup>112</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 174.

ways that “[t]he site of performance has (once again) been revealed to imbricate ableism, racism, labor exploitation, environmental destruction, and other forms of oppression.”<sup>113</sup> In other words, he examines how theatre participates in carcerality? In this line of thinking, he considers how theatre and performance studies (have and do) participate in the very institutions abolition seeks to destroy. Then, he positions dramaturgy towards liberatory aims and considers how dramaturgy can potentially exist as a space where “abolition can be envisioned, practiced, experimented, innovated, sounded, felt, spread, and collectivized.”<sup>114</sup>

As an example of how theatre participates in carcerality, Fesette examines what he refers to as “politics of reformance,” or a dramaturgical “structure of repetition in which some change, or difference, is proposed and/or implemented without transforming the foundational structure.”<sup>115</sup> Through his dramaturgical analysis of *American Son* by Christopher Demos-Brown, he examines ways that dramaturgy can settle for reform rather than fighting for abolition, ultimately “frustrat[ing] their own aims.”<sup>116</sup> When reformist takes on carcerality are performed, they refuse the transformational practice that abolition demands. Because of the narrative focus on the behaviour of the protagonist and the general emphasis on investigating questions of his character for a white audience, Fesette concludes that *American Son* is guilty of participating in “a politics of reformance,” a notion that aims to “theorize the interdependency of performance and liberal reform; that is, how the theories and practices of performance can undergird calls for reform and vice versa”<sup>117</sup> As a reformist strategy not an abolitionist one, Fesette adds, “[t]his type of performance produces consent, instead of staging dissent.”<sup>118</sup> After his examination of *American*

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<sup>113</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 174.

<sup>114</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 174.

<sup>115</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 175.

<sup>116</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 177.

<sup>117</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 181.

<sup>118</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 181.

*Son*, Fesette looks to two other plays, *Pass Over* by Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu and *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks, one of which I will return to later in the dissertation to illustrate the temporal potential of abolition dramaturgies. When I first found Fesette's writing, I immediately felt in good company. Interested in offering theatre's tools to the abolitionist struggle, our projects are linked. Like me, his citational universe is vast and sprawling. He quotes Black musician and abolitionist Noname in the subheadings of his article to acknowledge the undeniable wisdom Black feminists have offered abolition movements. In the same way I acknowledge my actual, messy work as an abolitionist ally here in the actual world in Kingston as an element of this study, he writes between the material imperatives of abolition (defunding the police, etc) and the dramaturgical ones.

## **Methodology**

Although this thesis is primarily a dramaturgical study, it represents an interdisciplinary piece of theory and scholarship. Combining theory from abolitionist literature, theatre theory, cultural studies, critical theory, Disability studies, and Black scholarship, my lenses are multiple. I consider my methodology like the practice of a magpie, collecting theories and practices and testing them out at home in the theatre-nest. My objects of study in this dissertation are the practices of the theatrical machine. The worlds they are building are abolitionist nature. Through analysis of a set of text-based, performed, and archived case studies my practice is varied. I rely on metaphor. I challenge myself to make both connections and contradictions without collapsing concepts. When it comes to scope, all but one of my core case studies intersect with the land of so-called Canada in some way (some were made here, others were performed here) and the time period varies according to the theory and play discussed. It's important to note the site-specific intentions of this dissertation. Although there is vast scholarship and artistry that speaks to

abolitionist dramaturgies elsewhere in the world, namely in oppressive states or in places deeply connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, a predecessor of the contemporary racial carceral and capitalist system, this dissertation is mainly concerned with carcerality, and abolition dramaturgies more specifically, in Canada. Although most of my core case studies are contemporary, throughout the dissertation there are many moments where I refer to case studies that are decades, even centuries from their first performances (a production of *Waiting for Godot*, Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* directed for film by Peter Brook, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example.) Although some of the case studies that I am analyzing come to me as films, they are selected because of their proximity to theatre and dramaturgy. *Marat/Sade*, *Lilies*, and *What Fools These Mortals Be* are filmed adaptations of theatrical work.

The purpose of this vast zig zagging time span is to illustrate the fact that abolition dramaturgies are not new. As discussed in the keyword section of this introduction, the assembling of a new, more liberated world through the theatre happens in both the present and the past.

I rely primarily upon dramaturgical and performance analysis. Through my own experience, conversations with artists, and engaging with archival materials, I consider dramaturgical choices made and their implications. Each chapter bites off a specific abolition dramaturgy and considers it between theatre theory and abolitionist thought. These thoughts are run through two or three different case studies as a sieve.

My other guiding methodology is what I will simply refer to as "metaphor." What is the purpose of metaphor, to both dramaturgy and abolition, and to abolition dramaturgy more specifically? Why should I place abolition, with all its life and death imperatives, inside the low stakes frame of the theatre? How is metaphor a useful figure in this dissertation? Theatre, at its

core, is a deeply representational practice that depends upon a certain kind of material imitation. Theatre describes something with something else in a very particular way. While a painting of a fruit bowl “describes” a fruit bowl with paint, pigment and shade, actors in a production of *Dream* “describe” with bodies and time and space. As an essentially mimetic genre, metaphor is always at play within the theatre. Metaphor is powerful in the theatre. My citational universe thinks about metaphor. Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht consider theatre a space to do something, in the same way one who could do something about life. Theatre has a function beyond mere entertainment and that is relayed to the spectator through metaphor. Foucault too uses metaphor when he writes about the panopticon, using it as an image for social surveillance.

Another formal inspiration for writing with metaphor is scientist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer and her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. In the book, she weaves together science and biology with Indigenous epistemology to reveal the many ways that her ancestors and other Indigenous people were doing science and storytelling the entire time. In one chapter, she writes about how the partner plants aster and goldenrod thrive best, both biologically and narratively, together. Then, she writes about goldenrod and aster as a metaphor for other forms of cohabitation and relationality when it comes to thriving. She writes about resilience and spring through the metaphor presented to us by the maple trees. She writes about hard work that maple trees undertake to make sap, and the hard work of humans that turn that sap into sugar. She writes about Indigenous epistemologies around picking and growing sweetgrass, namely that sweetgrass must be amply harvested to thrive. The more you pick, the more that grows. This is another metaphor. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer uses each strand of a braid of sweetgrass to represent her three intersecting and influential epistemologies: “Indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinaabe Kwe scientist trying to bring them together

in service of what matters most.”<sup>119</sup> The sweetgrass braid itself is a metaphor for a nuanced gift that is given with deep perspective and great consideration. Of her book she says, “It is an intertwining of science, spirit, and story - old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other.”<sup>120</sup> Through metaphor as a methodology, this dissertation aims to intertwine the dramaturgical desire for world building with the abolitionist desire for an anti-carceral world.

## **Chapter Summary**

This dissertation assembles and adds to a toolkit of abolition dramaturgies, tactics and techniques of dramatic performance that, through metaphor, parallel abolitionist practices. Each chapter focuses on a relatively simple dramaturgical principle: the theatrical frame, theatrical time, the rehearsal, and the chorus. Each chapter relies on both abolitionist and dramaturgical literature, providing both descriptive analysis of case studies and prescriptive generational of dramaturgical principles. The abolition dramaturgies articulated in this dissertation are the permeability of the frame, the anti-carceral syncopation or elongation of theatrical time, rehearsal practices that both rewind the past and imagine alternate futures, and the abolitionist/carceral choruses.

### *The Theatrical Frame*

In this first chapter, I analyze how the dramaturgical conventions of the theatrical frame generate both aesthetic and political meaning (Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht, Josette Féral) if thought about through an abolitionist lens. Then, I model Michel Foucault’s practice of metaphor

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<sup>119</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2014), x.

<sup>120</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, x.

with Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to theorize how the theatrical frame complicates Foucault's articulation of the uneven disciplinary gaze of the penitentiary. Here I consider how the theatrical frame resists the logic of penitentiary discipline, which Foucault describes as "visible but unverifiable."<sup>121</sup> If "[t]he panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheral ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen,"<sup>122</sup> this chapter considers the ways that theatre associates the see/being seen dyad in a way that resists the carceral reality that Foucault is theorizing. Further, this chapter considers the theatre as a space to rehearse the permeability of the frame, abolishing the separation between inside and outside. I focus on two specific theatrical frames, the play-within-a-play and the musical, arguing that each framing device offers us a critical and affective lens that examines the cruelty of carceral punishment and imagine other ways forward by manipulating with the frame. Through an analysis of the framing in the 1996 filmed version of Michel-Marc Bouchard's *Lilies*, I argue that metatheatricality invites a critique of the separability of carceral frames, inviting an audience to manipulate. Then, through analysis of Kim Senklip Harvey's *Break Horizons*, I argue that the dramaturgy of musicals and nonlocality generate an enmeshed space that holds both affective extremes of carceral violence, intense suffering and unimaginable resilience. As abolition dramaturgy, the theatrical frame and the shape it takes has the potential to think through the dissociated gaze that Foucault articulates as central to punishing in the penitentiary society.

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<sup>121</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

<sup>122</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

## *Theatrical Time*

This second chapter is concerned with dramaturgies of carceral and capital time and considers ways that theatrical time, namely syncopation and duration, counters time as weapon used for violence and control. This chapter considers time as a central figure in both carcerality (a durational punishment) and theatre (a durational art form), with prisons and theatres as containers wielding time for oppositional purposes, one as a decompositional tool (prisons) and the other as a compositional tool (theatre). Namely this chapter considers how time is used as a tool of destruction within the carceral context whereas time is used as creative in the theatrical context. In this chapter, I start from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's notion that if we consider "bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold - extracted and extracted again time from the territories of selves."<sup>123</sup> I consider the many ways that time is used violently within the frame - the dead time of waiting in solitary confinement, the perpetual black hole of "life" in prison to articulate how carceral time is wielded for violence. If time is one of the primary weapons of the prison industrial complex to extract and render dead, this chapter theorizes the ways that theatrical time can be used for liberatory, abolitionist means instead. Time is gifted, slowed down, frozen, paused, and started again. To illustrate the liberatory uses of time as a compositional tool within the theatrical frame, I consider two different case studies. The first, a 72-hour durational participatory performance called *Invisible* by Francophone dance company Lilith + Cie. In this analysis, I observe and articulate the ways that *Invisible* uses durational time and participatory invitations to create a sense of intimacy in the room and in turn, "Make the intelligence of the collective visible." Then,

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<sup>123</sup> Gilmore. "Abolition Geography and the Problems of Innocence." in *Abolition Geography*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, 474.

I investigate Rebecca Schneider's "syncopated time" through The Circle Project's *What Fools These Mortals Be*, a film that features a series of filmed tableaux that tell the story of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* performed by formerly incarcerated women, frozen but slightly moving. Trembling with undeniable vibrant life.

### *Rehearsals*

The next chapter positions the process-driven space of "rehearsal," as a kind of transformative justice exercise that replaces the finality of carceral punishment as a response to harm. In this chapter, I consider the ways that rehearsals have the capacity to both rewind the past and imagine new futures. This chapter theorizes rehearsal practice as a space to both analyze the past and imagine alternative futures. Influenced by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard's book *Rehearsals for Living*, this chapter considers the very real way that abolition futures are rehearsed into existence in everyday moments of resilience and survival. Thinking alongside Maynard, a radical Black feminist scholar, and Simpson, an Anishinaabe Kwe scholar, I consider the ways that the theatrical concept of rehearsal is central to abolitionist practice. To counter a discussion of the bourgeois theatre's intended function of rehearsals (perfection, symmetry) I consider Augusto Boal's interpretation of theatre as a potential manifestation of the future, or "a rehearsal for a revolution," and consider the ways that theatre can be understood as a rehearsal hall for relation, conflict management, and responding to harm. First, I look to *The Book of Jessica* by Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths as a memoir and a model for the ways that rehearsal can be the work, making room for conflict and failure and perhaps no show at all. Second, I look at Richard Lam's *The Candlemaker's Game*, a participatory table-top role-playing game about personal conflict, as an example of the ways that rehearsal can look like transformative justice.

## *The Chorus*

This chapter considers the many kinds of choruses that are present in both the realities of incarceration and the abolitionist alternatives. I consider the different kinds of communities, collectives, and series inside of carcerality and abolition. I perform a zig-zagging genealogy of the choruses present in both abolition and carcerality, looking at the chorus as both a normalizing presence (like the jury, the “law abiding public”) and as a liberatory, revolutionary body (like the abolitionist activists actively protesting police and prisons.) This chapter starts with a look at the history and function of theatrical chorus in various periods of theatre history, primarily from the perspective of the Greek chorus and theorizes the ways the choruses enact control and surveillance. I then turn to Saidiya Hartman’s writings on the historical chorus of “wayward women” in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and the individualized voices in Michel Foucault’s chorus in “Lives of Infamous Men.” Considering my genealogy of the chorus, I understand the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* as a representative of the normative voice of the community, like the chorus in ancient Greece, while “Lives of Infamous Men” carries with the pleasures and dangers of a different sort of chorus, much closer to Hartman’s wayward lives and beautiful experiments. In this chapter, I consider two case studies, the first Erin Shields’ play *If We Were Birds*, an adaptation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* that features a chorus of women who represent victims of sexual violence in war. The second case study I consider is new Canadian musical, *Prison Dancer* by Romeo Candido and Carmen Leilana de Jesus, based loosely on the viral YouTube dancers “the Dancing Inmates,” a group of incarcerated people who turned marching into dancing in a prison in Cebu, Philippines. I think about *Prison Dancer* alongside a discussion about lockstep and consider the ways that the chorus can be both normalizing and liberatory as a carceral theatricality and abolition dramaturgy. Finally, I end this chapter with a

discussion on a less connected chorus, an asynchronous collective in Kate McIntosh's *Worktable*, a show where participants are invited to dismantle an object and put together an object that someone else dismantled.

### *Afterword*

At the end of my dissertation, there is a coda. An additional chapter that contextualizes my PhD dissertation with a reflection on some of my work with the P4W Memorial Collective here in Kingston during their work to get a memorial garden on the land of the former P4W. This coda is an additional creative reflection where I consider how each chapter of my dissertation (theatrical frames, time, chorus, rehearsals) is manifested in the quotidian dramaturgy of working in proximity with people advocating for and with experience inside. With a deep commitment to cultural studies and attending to the function and manifestation of drama in the real world, this coda references the many ways my quotidian experiences have been a co-author in this journey.

The Afterword concludes my dissertation because I want to articulate the slippery and porous boundaries between theatrical worlds and actual worlds. Although abolition dramaturgies are at work inside fictional worlds, their effect seeps out into the actual world. And vice versa. I wrote about abolition dramaturgies as abolition dramaturgies wrote me.

## **Chapter 2: The Theatrical Frame**

### **Prologue: Peter Weiss' *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade***

The cold metal doors of the theatre clang open and performer-inmates at Charenton Asylum approach their stage, controlled by nuns and guards and contained by chains and cuffs. A harsh chord sounds on an organ and punctures the relative silence until a guard uses a key to unlock a set of iron doors for the director of the asylum, his wife, and his daughter who enter the asylum-theatre. Various performer-inmates interact with the director and his family. The performers offer the two women flowers.

On one side of this depiction of a 19<sup>th</sup> century asylum-theatre, performers (along with the director of the asylum, Monsieur Coulmier and his family) wait to begin their show. On the other side, an audience waits for the show to begin. In this depiction<sup>1</sup> of Peter Weiss' 1963 play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (or *Marat/Sade*), the audience of the asylum-theatre is separated from the performers not only by a proscenium arch delineating an imaginary fourth wall but by a set of actual iron bars. This audience, comprised of the post-revolutionary French bourgeoisie, sits on one side of the bars, formally separated from the performer-inmates on the other side of the bars. Besides the three audience members who sit along the edges of the stage in the asylum-theatre performance space, performers and audience

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis is based on Peter Brook's 1967 film adaptation of the play *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* by Peter Weiss, uploaded to YouTube by Fidelis Scardanelli and named "Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles" Accessed on April 23 2024 [.youtube.com/watch?v=k6V2SIPL59A&ab\\_channel=FidelisScardanelli](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6V2SIPL59A&ab_channel=FidelisScardanelli)

are clearly separate from one another. Actor and audience. Free and unfree. They are distinct and separate collectives, watching one other closely. Their separation is entirely the point.

While the audience settles in their seats, some of the performer-inmates, dressed in white and cream, move slowly around the stage. Some feature a confrontational gaze behind a relative stillness. Other performers are agitated, animated. Although the audience in the asylum-theatre is relatively hidden in the darkness behind the bars, we know that they are there. Watching. While their gaze is implied, the audience at the asylum-theatre is hidden while the containment of the prisoners is enforced. The performer-inmates are in bright stage light while the audience is in darkness. The audience and performers both watch each other.

The audience in the asylum-theatre is welcomed by Monsieur Coulmier, who emerges from his seat on stage right. He is proud of this artistic rehabilitative exercise. Coulmier speaks directly to the camera, to both the asylum-theatre audience and to me, the viewer of the film, through the iron bars that delineate the metatheatrical fourth wall that separates a) who is free from who is not free in Charenton Asylum b) who is performing and who is audiencing c) and then, who is an actual audience (me) and who is a fictional audience. As Coulmier looks directly down the barrel of the camera and addresses both his audience and the viewers of the film, lines are blurred between the “reality” of Charenton as prison and the fictive world onstage inside the play. Although the lines that divide performer from audience from viewer remain intact at this point, Coulmier articulates how the reality of the asylum easily transforms to become the set of a fictional play. Coulmier looks at his audience(s) and says, “We ask your kindly indulgence for a cast never on stage before coming to Charenton.... I agree with our author, Monsieur de Sade, that his play set in our modern bath house won’t be marred by all these instruments for mental

and physical hygiene. Quite on the contrary, they set the scene...”<sup>2</sup> The layers between the historical events inside the play and the fictional events inside the real Charenton Asylum blur and blend and become indistinguishable while the boundary between performer/audience and free person/prisoner viewer remains (unsteadily) intact. At the beginning of Peter Brook’s 1967 film adaptation of the play *Marat/Sade*, the variety of divisions that separate audience from performers and free people from prisoners seem powerful and impermeable. They are easy to understand. They are determinate. They are material and they are also conceptual. Through film techniques in this version of *Marat/Sade*, this divide is reinforced through camera angles and directorial choices. The camera watches the action on stage through the bars, obscuring the viewers view with iron bars as both a symbol of carceral reinforcement and (what seems to be) an impermeable but powerful theatrical frame that acts as a metaphor for an impermeable and powerful carceral frame.

Set in the reverberations of the French revolution in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade* is a musical and play-within-a-play written by a fictionalized Marquis de Sade and performed by the inmates at Charenton Asylum for a bourgeoisie audience. The play-within-a-play inside *Marat/Sade* is meant to be a rehabilitative program for the performer-inmates at Charenton, a political commentary written by the also incarcerated de Sade about the assassination of Jean Paul Marat. A major figure during the French Revolution, a radical journalist, and a politician who denounced moderate politics in favour of something more revolutionary, the play-within-a-play depicts Marat’s eventual murder in his bathtub by Charlotte Corday in 1793. Semi-fictionalized in the play, the Marquis de Sade was a controversial writer from the same period, who was imprisoned in Charenton Asylum for crimes related to sex,

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<sup>2</sup> Fidelis Scardinelli, “Marat/Sade 1967 + subtitles,” *YouTube*, October 18 2012 [youtu.be/RJc4I6pivqg](https://youtu.be/RJc4I6pivqg)

pornography, and sodomy. Throughout the play, inmate-performers re-enact scenes featuring Marat, Corday, their contemporaries, and an ensemble of revolutionaries. Interspersed throughout these fictionalized re-enactments, playwright de Sade enters the frame to have lengthy discussions about politics with Marat. The play eventually stages an abolitionist gesture where the performer-inmates, as revolutionaries, overtake bourgeoisie audience and crash through the iron bars.

Weiss' play *Marat/Sade* takes inspiration from Bertolt Brecht, explicitly playing with the theatrical frame as a metaphor for representing and ultimately resisting hegemonic power and control. In other words, Weiss took inspiration from Brecht who used manipulations of the theatrical frame to both show the harsh realities of the world and inspire audiences to actively change it. Brecht's interest in hyper-theatricality (or what he also called "alienation") challenged hegemony because his theatre was "essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)."<sup>3</sup> By staging a revolution that transgresses the theatrical frame, *Marat/Sade* draws and erases the border frame to liberatory ends.

Through Weiss' metatheatrical playwriting, the play-within-a-play as theatrical frame allows for an embodied and abolitionist unraveling of hegemonic discourse through the metaphor of the frame. "None of us knew a revolutionary more passionate than Marat,"<sup>4</sup> says the first performer-inmate who speaks directly through the bars to all watching, donning the classic French bicorn hat and a confrontational grin. With a foot on each side of the theatrical frame, directly addressing both audiences but still firmly in the world of the other performer-inmates himself, this narrator then says, "Marat the good or bad? The choice is hard."<sup>5</sup> Who is he talking to?

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<sup>3</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, 79.

<sup>4</sup> "Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles"

<sup>5</sup> "Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles"

Marat the character or the real man? Or the man who portrays him? Invited by this narrator, we enter a liminal space of revisionist history, spectated by an audience on the other side of the bars and by me, sitting directly behind them in a space that is even more disconnected from the space of the asylum/theatre by the medium of film.

In its construction as a play-within-a-play, some elements of the play seem “truer” than others, and their effects leak into the world of the fictional prison. Actors speak moving monologues that insist upon rage and then their rage is punished by the guards as an inmate outburst. The story seems to be both documentary and historical fiction and given the presence of (at least) two audiences and (at least) three worlds, *Marat/Sade* conjures a slippery metatheatrical fourth wall that with enough manipulation, collapses. Through this manipulation of the frame by staging a metatheatrical play-within-a-play, a kind of power is given to the inmates at Charenton over the French bourgeoisie in the audience, which ultimately incites a theatrical revolution that turns into a real one. As audience members on the other side of the actual frame, we are implicated in the responsibility of watching, of bearing witness. The characters in the play inside *Marat/Sade* plead through the bars with the audience and through the camera lens at us. This thickened and slippery theatrical frame is a dramaturgical device used to activate the audience in an awareness of what is or isn’t “real” or “contained” behind the fourth wall, acting as a metaphorical space with the potential for actual effects.

It’s important to note that *Marat/Sade* is controversial due to its obscene ableism and intense violence against women.<sup>6</sup> Mad characters are depicted cruelly and cartoonishly and the representation of Charlotte Corday is misogynistic. For that reason, it’s not abolitionist in its entirety. For the purposes of this chapter, I open with *Marat/Sade* because it clearly features the

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Beggs, “Revisiting *Marat/Sade*: Philosophy in the Asylum, Asylum in the Theatre.” *Modern Drama* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 60-79.

im/permeability of the boundary that is the theatrical frame, presenting a case for how it can be manipulated in ways that are abolitionist. In this chapter, I argue that dramaturgical manipulations of the theatrical frame stage abolitionist rehearsal through crashing through carceral notions of finite separation. In other words, we can practice abolishing the theatrical frame to learn more about abolishing carceral ones. Although both theatre and prison feature a core principle of division and separation (the fourth wall and the walls of the prison), theatre allows for the dramaturgical manipulation, erasure, and eventual abolition of that frame for generative ends. In essence, theatre's frame is a productive boundary whereas carceral frames are destructive borders.

*Marat/Sade* is a play-within-a-play where we, the audience, watch another audience watch a "production." The revolutionary events that take place in this fictional production leak into the "actual world" of the play in a way that resembles a kind of freedom-seeking break from a coercive institution. Inmates at the asylum stage a "revolution" inside their play that leaks into the real world of the audience watching their play and instills a revolutionary spirit in me as the contemporary watcher. In *Marat/Sade*, as fictional worlds collapse and the thick fourth wall boundary of the theatre is found to be porous, slippery, and permeable, inmates at Charenton manipulate the theatrical frame to access actual revolution through fictional revolt.

As the physical frame disintegrates in *Marat/Sade*, so does the conceptual one. The performer-inmates seize the stage and express their own frustrations rather than the frustrations of the historical characters in the play, and the divide delineated by the iron bars weakens. With both a rehearsal and an appetite for anarchy behind the fourth wall, the performer-inmates, like the revolutionaries they are portraying inside the frame of the play, assert their freedom. The theatrical frame as boundary is still visible but quaking as the actor-inmates sing, "Down with all

of the ruling class. Throw all the generals out on their arse. Long live the revolution.”<sup>7</sup> The asylum audience wonders what revolution they are talking about. The performer-inmate-revolutionaries sing, “Who keeps us prisoner? Who locks us in?...we want our freedom. Freedom. Freedom. Freedom.”<sup>8</sup> The Narrator remarks on this flimsy frame and says: “Please calmly watch these barbarous displays which could not happen nowadays.”<sup>9</sup> A performer-inmate breaks free and captures Coulmier’s wife while another performer-inmate repeats the phrase, “Prisons don’t help, chains don’t help,” as he’s being restrained by the guards. “I escape, through all the walls, through all the slime and the splintered bones. You’ll see it all one day. I’m not through yet. I have plans,”<sup>10</sup> he says as de Sade restrains him. The actor-inmate playing Marat shouts through the bars, “We talk about freedom but who is this freedom for?”<sup>11</sup> Another performer-inmate, La Roux shouts through the bars at both the audience within the play and the film audience, “Look what’s happening! Join together! Cast down your enemies, disarm them!”<sup>12</sup> Framed as a “play” for both the elite bourgeoisie in Charenton and for us, also watching through the bars, the slippery theatrical frame in *Marat/Sade* serves as a metaphor for a carceral frame that can be abolished at Charenton. The play’s manipulation of the theatrical frame illustrates a seemingly impermeable theatrical frame that can be ruptured, a containment that can be broken. A division that is unnecessary. In this way, the permeability and productivity of the theatrical frame becomes a site of abolitionist dramaturgy.

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<sup>7</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

<sup>8</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

<sup>9</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

<sup>10</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

<sup>11</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

<sup>12</sup> “Marat/Sade (1967) + subtitles”

## **The Abolitionist Potential of the Theatrical Frame**

This chapter argues that the malleable boundary of the theatrical frame can be a useful space to acknowledge and abolish carceral theatrics and rehearse abolitionist dramaturgies. This chapter examines dramaturgical tactics that manipulate and rupture the theatrical frame as a metaphor for and rehearsal of the abolitionist destruction of carceral containment. By acknowledging the changeable purpose and the flimsy theatrical frame, we can consider how and why complete carceral separation is violent and unnecessary and how theatre's productive boundaries can act as a site of a more enmeshed relationship. By using frame dramaturgies to manipulate the theatrical division between art and audience, we can rehearse the abolition of the finite walls and borders that carceral separation depends upon. Through dramaturgies of the theatrical frame, we make a boundary and then erase it. Make another one. Erase it. We can experiment with proximity and distance. We can drop the veil and reveal it was all a dream. We can drop the veil and reveal it's a world we hope to manifest.

Theatrical world building or theatricality, by definition, must include some element of distance from reality. Theatre must be housed inside a frame to tell us that it's theatre and not life. Often, this is a physical boundary, like a raised stage or a proscenium arch, but in addition to this spatial and geographical framing, there is a conventional and conceptual one as well. The thickness or thinness of this frame, the more or less overt its existence, achieves different dramaturgical effects.

Thicker frames can remind us of the transformative capacity of the world. Through manipulating the theatrical frame as thick and constructed, hyper-theatricality can remind watchers that theatrical worlds (and carceral ones) are made and unmade. They can be constructed and deconstructed. For example, Bertolt Brecht's use of the saviour messenger from

above or “deus ex machina” emphasizes the theatrical frame to spur real world transformation. Deus ex machina is the plot device that presents an immediate solve for a seemingly impossible problem, meant to parody Brecht’s audience’s obsession with happy endings and leaving them so frustrated that they must go do something about the injustices represented on stage. When the main character of Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* is about to be hung for his crimes and all his problems are solved by a messenger that comes out of nowhere, Brecht is reminding his audience, through the ridiculousness of this theatrical choice, that theatre is in fact, not life. No one will save us; we must save us. Brecht’s theatre urges social transformation through the assertion of the theatrical frame; it does not engineer the suspension of disbelief. We are entertained not to relax but in pursuit of doing something in the world. No deus ex machina is coming, the audience must make change. Brecht says of Epic Theatre,

One thing has become quite plain: the present day world can only be described to present day people if it is described as capable of transformation. People of the present-day value questions on account of their answers. They are interested in events and situations in face of which they can do something.<sup>13</sup>

Brecht’s manipulation of the theatrical frame to thicken it is meant to inspire social change. On the other hand, thinner frames are sometimes extremely viscerally affective; autobiographical shows or theatre of the real are especially moving due to the vulnerability of their perceived “realness.” Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project’s *The Laramie Project*, about the homophobic murder of Matthew Shephard is especially devastating due the fact that it’s a true story that is meant to resemble the communities where the show is performed. Audiences of *The Laramie Project* consider the show’s major assertion, “not in our town,” in proximity to

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<sup>13</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, 274.

themselves and their own small towns. Thinning and thickening the theatrical frame has different political and affective ends. By making the theatrical frame porous and thin, dramaturgy also forces spectators to reckon with our role as “watchers,” drawing our attention to witnessing and the responsibilities that come with that act. These responsibilities, if examined through a relational decolonial lens, include action.

Dramaturgical frames like plays-within-plays, musicals, reverse chronology, nightmares, or confessionals, delineate worlds within worlds without necessarily asserting impermeable boundaries. Jenn Stephenson offers a taxonomy of the frame when she refers to nested theatrical worlds as worldA, worldB, and worldC<sup>14</sup> and so on. According to this language, the actual physical world of the theatre (the auditorium, the other audience members, etc.) is worldA. The second world (worldB) is the fictional world of the play itself, Elsinore in *Hamlet* or Charenton Asylum in *Marat/Sade*. worldC (and so on) refers to nested realities inside the fiction of the play, like the play put on by touring players who arrive at Elsinore to implicate Hamlet’s uncle in killing his father, or Marquis de Sade’s play that is performed by the actor-inmates in *Marat/Sade*. These worlds overlap and they are enmeshed. In this theatre, I am always Mariah the actor and Charlotte Corday the character at once. Characters in worldB are inhabited by actors in worldA. If a fire burned down the theatre in worldA, try as they might to keep the fictional worlds intact, the characters in worldB would undeniably be affected.

The carceral system itself is defined by (seemingly) non-porous frames, contained boxes that keep the inside in and the outside out. In her essay, “On Difference Without Separability,” scholar Denise Ferreira da Silva argues that this practice of “separability”<sup>15</sup> is fundamental to the

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Stephenson, “Uplifted to the View: A Phenomenology of Shakespearean Metatheatre,” (*PhD diss.*, University of Toronto, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability,” *Catalogue of the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo*, ‘*Incerteza Viva*,’ eds. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças, (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo): 57-65.

World As We Know It. She argues that with Modern European philosophy came a notion of “cultural difference’s capacity to produce an unbridgeable ethical divide,”<sup>16</sup> or an understanding that difference was a danger that needed to be met with separation. In her article about da Silva’s world building philosophy, Lisa Guenther elaborates that from this Modern European sense of social order, “concepts such as sovereignty and justice function as political devices to maintain and/or correct the orderly composition of the world, which separates the self-determining Subjects of Europe and European descent from the affectable others or no-bodies of the rest of the globe.”<sup>17</sup>In this World As We Know It, carcerality and justice are tools used to keep order and that order depends upon the notion that individuals are completely separate entities.

Individuals that are subjects in the eyes of the Modern state are in charge of themselves, and other individuals, what Guenther refers to as “no-bodies” are “beyond the pale of ethical concern; they are the others one need not care about, who are not just excluded from access to “equality” or “human rights” but directly equated with the danger against which the state and the self-determining Subject must protect itself.”<sup>18</sup> Because of this bordered separation, some people are imprisoned in order for other people to be free. Boundaries between freedom and unfreedom are fixed and necessary and freedom cannot be achieved without the unfreedom of others. In the carceral context, separability asserts an undeniable, impermeable, and always necessary separation.

da Silva advocates for an abolition of this fixed, separated understanding of objects and subjects and instead advocates for “imagination’s power to create with unclear and confused, or

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<sup>16</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 57.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Guenther, “Abolish the World as We Know It: Notes for a Praxis of Phenomenology Beyond Critique,” *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 5 no.2 (February 2023): 32.

<sup>18</sup> Guenther, “Abolish the World,” 32.

uncertain impressions...”<sup>19</sup> Abandoning the divides and separation implicit in the World as We Know It, da Silva advocates for a kind of enmeshed and entangled knowing. In her essay she advocates “A figuring of The World nourished by the imagination would inspire us to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize – against humanity’s cultural (non-white/non-European) and physical (more-than-human) ‘Others.’”<sup>20</sup> In other words, da Silva is yearning for this new world that imagines difference without separation as a kind of entanglement. da Silva advocates for principles of non-locality, or the quantum physics theory that insists on an overlapped existence where “quantum particles can “know” the states of other quantum particles, even at great distances, and correlate their behaviors with each other instantaneously.”<sup>21</sup> Da Silva argues that:

When nonlocality guides our imaging of the universe, difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable estrangement, but the expression of an elementary entanglement. That is, when the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant.<sup>22</sup>

With this line of thinking, even our bodies are not completely bordered. We are made up of atoms that have also made-up other things. Although my biology is made up of my own biological materials, my body also houses microplastics, weather, and traces of other animals and plants. My skin is not an impermeable boundary. The entanglement and porousness of non-

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<sup>19</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 58.

<sup>20</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 58.

<sup>21</sup> Alexis Shasta, “nonlocality” *Quantum Physics Lady: Encyclopedia of Quantum Physics and Consciousness*, accessed June 2024 [quantumphysicslady.org/glossary/quantum-nonlocality/#:~:text=The%20principle%20of%20nonlocality%20in,%2Dat%2Da%2Ddistance.](https://quantumphysicslady.org/glossary/quantum-nonlocality/#:~:text=The%20principle%20of%20nonlocality%20in,%2Dat%2Da%2Ddistance.)

<sup>22</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 65.

locality runs counter to separation in a way that is abolitionist. In listening to da Silva and thinking about difference without separability we are not erasing harm or the need for complete separation in the face of harm, but instead thinking about another kind of productive and less violent boundary that privileges our entanglement when it comes to the way forward.

Theatrical frames are ontological boundaries because they create distinguishing levels of beingness and relative fictionality. Frames delineate. But in the theatre, these separations are in many ways, dramaturgically malleable and productive. This first chapter articulates the theatrical frame as a metaphor for carceral frames, arguing that dramaturgical manipulations of the frame can act as a rehearsal for abolishing the carceral one. Where the upcoming chapter on time is about manipulating time to more liberatory ends, this chapter is about dramaturgical manipulations of the theatrical space, or frame, to introduce an awareness and rehearsal of ourselves as witnesses and participants to the possibility – and even the actuality – of other worlds. By materializing elements of da Silva’s critiques of separability through manipulations of the theatrical frame, dramaturgy becomes a site of abolition. This chapter uses the permeability of the theatrical frame as a metaphor for the abolition of carceral frames.

If we can understand ourselves as implicated and enmeshed witnesses who experience the possible construction and deconstruction of the separation that constructs carceral landscapes and carceral theatrics (both theatrics that represent carceral subjects, spaces, and logics and theatrics that naturalize and reinforce these carceral subjects, spaces, and logics), we can practice ways to abolish the carceral context and create life-supporting boundaries for abolitionist worlds. The manipulations and permeability of theatrical frames can help us to rehearse the abolition of frames in the carceral context. Abolition is wearing holes through the walls until they crumble. For example, by making prison frames porous, we can be in ongoing relation with loved ones

and strangers inside prisons, or sustain what El Jones, poet and scholar, calls “abolitionist intimacies.” We can make prison frames impermanent for advocating for the end of the “collateral punishment”<sup>23</sup> that follows formerly incarcerated people when they are released from prisons. We can be different without being separate, we must acknowledge our enmeshed and entangled relations.

In this chapter I argue that dramaturgical manipulations of theatrical frames allow for a rehearsal of the abolitionist destruction of carceral frames. First, I analyze how dramaturgical conventions of the theatrical frame generate both aesthetic and political meaning. I address how the frame works as an aesthetic device (Viktor Shklovsky, Josette Féral, and Patrice Pavis) to unpack how theatricality is itself a frame to be built and destroyed. I examine the ways the boundary between theatre and life is cleaved, carved out, and held. I ask, is that containment or separation complete? I consider a variety of dramaturgical approaches to activating political implications of the frame (Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal) and I think through the ways that scholars (Foucault and da Silva) consider the borders of the carceral frame and the normalizing gaze that is cast from one side to the other.

To uncover abolitionist orientations of the frame, I focus on two case studies that directly acknowledge the interconnectedness and dependency between worlds on either side of the theatrical boundary. In each section, I examine how framing devices offer us a critical and affective lens to examine the cruelty of carceral frames and ultimately to rehearse reaching through the frame to enact abolitionist futures. Through an analysis of the framing in the 1996 film adaptation of Michel-Marc Bouchard’s play *Lilies*, set in a prison in so-called Canada, I

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<sup>23</sup> Cameron Cimble and Ames Grawet, “Collateral Consequences and the Enduring Nature of Punishment,” *Brennan Center for Justice*, June 21 2021, [brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/collateral-consequences-and-enduring-nature-punishment](https://brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/collateral-consequences-and-enduring-nature-punishment)

argue that the play's metatheatricality challenges the permanence and opacity of the main character Simon's carceral frame, in a way "freeing" him through manipulations of the frame. Then, through analysis of Kim Senklip Harvey's "rocking Indigenous justice ceremony" musical *Break Horizons*, I argue alongside Harvey and Corey Payette that the dramaturgy of musicals generates a dual ambivalent space that holds both affective extremes of carceral violence—intense suffering and unimaginable resilience—which hails us as witnesses to action on both sides of the frame, as if they are not separate. As a tool for abolition dramaturgy, frames have the potential to manifest a messy ambiguity, holding seemingly incompatible values to render them both in play: right and wrong, just and unjust, horror and strength, suffering and resilience, past and present, free and contained. By using dramaturgies of the frame to make productive boundaries of different shapes and sizes and then dissolve those boundaries to rebuild new ones, we practice the abolition of carceral separation. The theatrical frame is not finite, it is ephemeral. Where prisons are divided and separated from the world with a stone wall, dramaturgies of the theatrical frame make visible malleable boundaries as a productive site of relation.

### **Theatricality as Frame**

Play, like theatricality, requires a frame to assert its doubleness and difference. Play is of life, but not exactly. Play has different stakes, different rules, and different values. These boundaries are both physical, like a soccer field or a rehearsal hall, and conceptual, like the awareness of engaging in a playoff game or learning your character's lines as words you will say but did not generate yourself. Game and theatre theorists refer this boundary as the "magic circle."<sup>24</sup> I like magic circle as it resists images of containment and instead privileges productive and collective

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<sup>24</sup> Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "Chapter 9: The Magic Circle," *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, (Cambridge: MIT Press), 2004.

boundaries for “magic” generation. Circles are not lines. In a way, this productive boundary asserts the magic, making it possible for it to exist.

Moving from play to theatre more specifically, French Canadian theatre and performance scholar Josette Féral defines theatricality by its dependency on this productive frame. She accurately notes the frame’s elusiveness as a physical and conceptual frame of theatricality. Is theatricality mainly delineated by space or intention? Does it only exist in a physical theatre, strictly speaking? How do we draw the magic circle or frame around the theatre? “Lexically speaking, theatricality is both poorly defined and etymologically unclear,”<sup>25</sup> she says. In her article, “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” Féral describes the ways in which theatre is different from other genres of spectacle, like dance, performance art, and multi-media art. Ultimately unsatisfied with a definition that centers text-based practices, Féral notices the moment when text loses some of its importance in defining theatre against other genres of live art. Does theatricality strictly live inside the theatre building or on a theatre text? “Should we speak of [theatre] in the singular or in the plural? Is theatricality a property that belongs uniquely to the theater, or can it also be found in the quotidian?”<sup>26</sup> She first focuses on the ways that theatricality is created through spatial delineation. She describes a scenario:

You enter a theater. The play has not yet begun. In front of you is a stage; the curtain is open; the actors are absent. The set, in plain view, seems to await the beginning of the play. Is theatricality at work here?...Because a semiotization of space has already occurred, the spectator perceives the theatricality of the stage, and of the space surrounding him.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Josette Féral, “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” *SubStance* 31, no. 98–99 (2002): 95.

<sup>26</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 94.

<sup>27</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 95-6.

In this example, the space of the stage activates a sense of theatricality, not the text or the theatre or the border between art and audience for that matter. Semiotically speaking, we have come to associate certain spatial gestures and images with the theatre. A red curtain. The heaviness of the air before the overture begins. This understanding of theatricality has less to do with the actors acting or the audience audiencing but rather, and more with the clues and affordances in place to inaugurate the space as a theatrical one. “In this instance,” Féral says, “space is the vehicle of theatricality. The subject perceives certain relations within that space; he perceives the spectacular nature of the stage. Space seems fundamental to theatricality, for the passage from the literary to the theatrical is first and foremost completed through a spatial realization of the text.”<sup>28</sup> Féral identifies spatial delineation and order as primary characteristics in the establishment of drama. But are these boundaries permanent? Universal? Irrefutable? Féral is getting at the more subtle manifestations of theatricality.

Féral broadens beyond physical space and starts to consider the conceptual and social spaces of the theatre. Much like establishing personal boundaries, consent is required in asserting a theatrical frame. Beyond geographical delineation, we need a certain level of agreement to build a world in the theatre. Féral considers the need for an asserted intentionality to present theatricality. Theatricality seems to “stem from the spectator’s awareness of a theatrical intention addressed to him.”<sup>29</sup> This intentional gaze, activated by a giver and falling upon a receiver, is a much more generous definition of theatricality than one that relies on text-based or physical boundaries. It invokes a scene where the frame is drawn because someone is doing something and someone else is watching. “More than a property with analyzable characteristics,” Féral

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<sup>28</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 96.

<sup>29</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 96.

says, “theatricality seems to be a process that has to do with a ‘gaze’ that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge.”<sup>30</sup>

It is Féral who first pointed me towards the word “frame”<sup>31</sup> to define how theatre works *with*, not against, what is beyond it. Much like a prison requires both a physical and conceptual inside and outside, the frame requires theatre and not-theatre to assert itself. The difference is that both worlds in the theatre are intentionally in view where in the carceral context, the prison world is intentionally hidden. “Therefore,” says Féral, “we may conclude that theatricality consists as much in situating the object or the other in a ‘framed theatrical space,’ as it does in transforming a simple event into signs in such a way that it becomes a spectacle.”<sup>32</sup> When it comes to the inside, Féral says that theatricality can be stirred by either the actor or the spectator through a “process that recognizes subjects in process; it is a process of looking at or being looked at.”<sup>33</sup> Once this gaze has activated theatricality, suddenly there is a space, a container, or what Féral calls a “cleft,” that delineates theatre from life. This cleft is a split, a difference. An entirely traversable division. Féral says that the theatrical “act created a cleft in the quotidian that becomes the space of the other, the space in which the other has a place. Without such a cleft, the quotidian remains intact, precluding the possibility of theatricality, much less of theatre itself.”<sup>34</sup> Once this cleft has been created, once both the spectator and the spectated have hopefully agreed upon a sense of theatricality, Féral argues that “It clears a passage, allowing both the performing subject as well as the spectator to pass from ‘here’ to ‘elsewhere.’”<sup>35</sup> This passage between here and elsewhere is precisely the site of abolition. In this sense, for the frame to be established,

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<sup>30</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 97.

<sup>31</sup> Féral lays out the ways in which a variety of theorists have alluded to the frame. Féral says that Irving Goffman says “frame,” where Donald Winnicott talks about transitional space and Viktor Turner says the “liminoid.”

<sup>32</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 98.

<sup>33</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 98.

<sup>34</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 98.

<sup>35</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 98.

there is an equal and empowering agreement between the watcher and the watched to go elsewhere, together.

The boundaries of these theatrical clefts are porous and malleable. Their manipulation is generative to dramaturgical ends. As theatricality is a space carved from life by an intentional gaze, what is in the theatrical frame is collaborative space. The frame, the assertion of theatricality itself “attempts to transform the reality that surrounds” the audience.<sup>36</sup> The theatrical frame is also practiced in transformation. Once both the performer and the spectator have come (or at least, should have come) to an agreement through the frame to do so together, both parties “consciously occupy the here-and-now of a space different from the quotidian, to become involved in activity outside of daily life.”<sup>37</sup> This collaboration calls another world, another space, another reality entirely into being that is clefted from our own. Different, but not separate. Like Féral, I think about this transformational space, this invocation of another world, as shared between both artist and audience.<sup>38</sup> “Theatricality does not emerge passively from an ensemble of theatrical objects whose properties one could enumerate at a glance, but as part of a dynamic process belonging to both the actor and the spectator, who takes possession of the action he watches.”<sup>39</sup> She points to the importance of both the spectator and the spectated, the performer and the audience, when it comes to establishing theatricality. She says that,

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<sup>36</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 99.

<sup>37</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 100.

<sup>38</sup> I do appreciate how Féral explores the limits of this kind of transformational “other” space and recognizes that sometimes, theatricality can dissolve when the acts inside the frame leap beyond it and cause harm. When it comes to committing harm, Féral says, “Such acts break the tacit contract between spectator and theater that guarantees that what one witnesses is representation, inscribed in a time and space different from the quotidian, in which the forward march of time is suspended and thus reversible, an act in which the actor reserves the possibility of returning to his point of departure. In attacking his own body (or that of an animal), the actor destroys the conditions of theatricality. Henceforth, he is no longer in the alterity of theatrical space, but has crossed back into reality; his act has transgressed all shared rules and codes and is no longer perceived as illusion, fiction, or play.” (Féral, 104) When the theatrical boundary is crossed and rendered invisible without consent, the world’s collapse.

<sup>39</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 102.

theatricality is the result of a perceptual dynamics linking the onlooker with someone or something that is looked at...By watching, the spectator creates an ‘other’ space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian, and in this space he inscribes what he observes, perceiving it as belonging to a space where he has no place except as external observer. Without this gaze, indispensable for the emergence of theatricality and for its recognition as such, the other would share the spectator’s space and remain part of his daily reality.<sup>40</sup>

Féral begins to articulate the reasons why I argue that manipulations of frame can be understood as abolitionist gestures when she says that “theatricality is the imbrication of fiction and representation in an ‘other’ space in which the observer and the observed are brought face to face. Of all the arts, the theater is best suited to this sort of experimentation.”<sup>41</sup> Manipulations of the frame rehearse this abolitionist practice of becoming face to face over a productive boundary rather than a fixed division.

### **Carceral Frames: The Panopticon**

The theatrical frame presupposes that there are people on either side of it, watchers and the watched. The audience watches. The performers are watched. Depending on the thickness or thinness of the theatrical frame, sometimes, like in the case of the production of *Marat/Sade*, the performers watch back. From audience to art and sometimes back again, theatricality depends upon a gaze that seeps through the porous theatrical frame. As this theatrical cleft is carved out, the gaze of the audience punctures through the porous boundary of the theatrical frame. In this chapter, I consider the ways that theatricality manipulates the frame through which we gaze to

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<sup>40</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 105.

<sup>41</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 105.

liberatory ends, a place where visibility through boundary can be an enmeshed site of liberation instead of a normalizing site of separation.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault references Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as both a physical prison and a metaphor to discuss the carceral gaze as the vector of a violent, normalizing, and disciplinary power. Designed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the panopticon is a design concept for an institutional building that allows for control of inmates through merely the potentiality of gaze. In the panopticon, all inmates of a prison are visible from a tower. Although that tower may or may not be actively staffed, the threat of the normalizing gaze is always present enough to control the inmates in view. Foucault says of the inmate incarcerated in the panopticon, "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication."<sup>42</sup> The panopticon, as a carceral frame, employs the gaze as a normalizing machine, disenfranchising the body as an object to be watched, rather than a subject with the capacity to watch back. Further, through this watching or this threat of watching, in the panopticon, inmates control and police themselves. The panopticon runs itself, given that incarcerated people are sure of being watched but unsure how and where, so they must behave to avoid punishment. The panopticon is a carceral wall that works to police and control its subjects through the normalizing power of this faceless gaze. This normalizing gaze is assured but invisible, much like the audience to the asylum-stage in Weiss' *Marat/Sade*. Performer-inmates know and feel that their audience is present, but they are generally not visible. When the performer-inmates crash through the theatrical frame, they find themselves face to face with the normalizing gaze of the bourgeoisie. For Foucault, the panopticon is both a physical building and a metaphor for the kinds of disciplinary and normalizing power embedded in

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<sup>42</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

Modern institutions. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century police, like the guards in the panopticon, “had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception.”<sup>43</sup> The panopticon’s faceless but present normalizing gaze is present everywhere in the carceral landscape, extending beyond the prison as institution and leaking into schools, hospitals, and police.

By contrast, within the theatrical frame, the subject on stage is both an object of information and a subject in communication. So is the audience. As Féral says, theatricality is a “process that recognizes subjects in process; it is a process of looking at or being looked at.”<sup>44</sup> In Bentham’s panopticon, however, disciplinary power is a process that is “visible and unverifiable.” How can the theatrical frame take an oppositional approach to Foucault’s articulation of panoptic frames? Like the panopticon, the theatrical frame turns the entire theatrical body into a field of perception. While different dramaturgical manipulations of that field can serve a variety of ends, the core aim of the abolitionist theatrical gaze is not punishment or even normalization. It’s not control, it’s understanding. Foucault says, “The panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheral ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.”<sup>45</sup> Theatres’ porous frame resists panoptic dissociation on either side of the boundary, by say, vibrating the body with music, hailing to an audience through direct address, or emphasizing hyper theatricality.

When it comes to the spatial boundaries of carceral frames, I look to geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore who asserts that if freedom is embodied and understood as a place, incarceration and imprisonment turn people into territories to extract their resources and steal their time.

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<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Féral, “Theatricality,” 98.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

Gilmore argues if containment is a place and that containment is determinate, freedom must be a place too. “Abolition geography” says Gilmore, “starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place. Place-making is normal human activity: we figure out how to combine people, land, and other resources with our social capacity to organize ourselves in a variety of ways, whether to stay put or to go wandering.”<sup>46</sup> Gilmore’s abolition geography challenges and reworks carceral frames into something that does not rely on separation to ensure freedom.

By using prison-centered maps, Gilmore establishes the ways that prison boundaries extend beyond their edges to manipulate American geography and American cities, dropping containers and walls that manifest the opposite of freedom. Prisons decimate the environment around the prison, killing flora and fauna and dumping waste and cleaning chemicals into the earth. Through its borders and frames, prison changes the landscape of both the city and rural areas. The carceral state is geographically organized as separate. In the same way that the carceral state is contained in a physical space and the geographic ripples beyond, Gilmore’s concept of abolition geography stresses the embodiment of abolition in specific localities, in a material world rather than a distant utopia, beyond simply a metaphor. In this chapter I argue that the theatrical frame can be one of those specific localities. Although theatre itself is a metaphor and the lines between “actual” and “fictional” are still present, the world that is built is a material one too.

In a way, this chapter theorizes theatrical frames as an abolitionist geography, a boundary space that allows for difference, without separability. A space that houses dramaturgical practices (such as porousness, making/unmaking, failure, repetition) for an abolitionist rehearsal for life. Like Gilmore’s assertion about the relationship between geography and incarceration on one hand, and geography and abolition on the other, certain manipulations of the dramaturgical frame

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<sup>46</sup> Gilmore, “Forgotten Places...”, in *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation*, 474-5.

can use this space as a site to practice crossing borders and walls. If the theatrical frame is not made of stone like a prison wall, how can dramaturgical practices allow for a rehearsal of the many tenants of separability that govern carcerality?

### **Manipulations of the Theatrical Frame**

If theatricality itself is a frame with permeable and transformational capacities that emphasize difference without separability, what are abolitionist dramaturgical manipulations of the frame that materialize the theatre as an abolition rehearsal hall? A framing device (or a frame story or frame narrative) is dramaturgical technique that thickens or thins the space between the theatrical world and the real world, or theatrical worlds within theatrical worlds. Féral's frame is a useful term as it provides a visual metaphor; this dramaturgical technique attends to what is within or outside the frame and what the frame is made of. The theatrical frame has to do with the porous and moveable boundaries of the performance, keeping it distinguishable but without separating it from everyday life. This section considers the ways that the theatrical frame is thinned, like in autobiography, so the fictional world resembles reality, or thickened, like in a musical or a play-within-a-play, so the fictional world is obviously constructed and deconstructed.

One example of a thickening manipulation of the frame is offered by dramaturgical choices that Lionel Abel coins as "metatheatre" in 1963. Metatheatre is theatre that is dramaturgically aware of itself. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, Patrice Pavis defines metatheatre as "Theatre which is centered around theatre and therefore 'speaks' about itself, 'represents' itself."<sup>47</sup> In other words, theatre that is aware of and emphasizes (or attempts

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<sup>47</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Metatheatre," in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 210.

to destroy) its own theatricality. In his entry on the concept of metatheatre, he establishes four different kinds of metatheatre: theatre within theatre, the image of reception of the play (or the representation of an audience watching a play, inside a play), self-consciousness of enunciation, and the staging of the theatrical work of staging. Here, I will focus on the first and the last of his subcategories of meta-theatre. Theatre within theatre is centered around the fact that “the represented reality appears to be one that is already theatrical,” like de Sade’s “play” performed by the performer-inmates of *Marat/Sade*. Pavis identifies this as a form of “*antitheatre*, where the dividing line between play and real life is erased.”<sup>48</sup> The last of his categories of metatheatre, staging of the theatrical work of the staging, most closely aligns with Bertolt Brecht’s work, where the “staging (mise-en-scène) presented to the audience should give an account not only of the text to be staged, but also of the attitude and *modality* of its creators with respect to the text and the acting.”<sup>49</sup> Pavis says, “the staging is not confined to telling a story but reflects on theatre and puts forward its reflection on theatre by integrating it, more or less organically, into the performance.”<sup>50</sup> This kind of metatheatre is often political, offering a meta-critical lens to view theatre’s potential for change beyond the theatre. In this way, while framing devices can offer a protective distance from the material, they also allow for a deep and close reflection on what is in full view. If Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* is asking audiences to confront class injustice, what does the obvious construction of the story through subtitles and uber-theatricality reveal to us about the construction of the capitalist reality he is railing against?

The last subcategory of metatheatre, the staging of the theatrical work of staging, is a manipulation of the frame to reveal its mechanisms for us to recognize the machine can be taken

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<sup>48</sup> Pavis, “Metatheatre,” 211.

<sup>49</sup> Pavis, “Metatheatre,” 211.

<sup>50</sup> Pavis, “Metatheatre,” 211.

apart. I understand this kind of metatheatre to be a metaphor for abolitionist gestures of recognition, destruction, the (re)creation of anti-carceral ways of addressing harm. Alienation effect, or what Patrice Pavis defines as a “device that places the reality represented at a distance so that it appears in a new light, revealing its hidden or too-familiar aspects in a fresh way,” is a kind of staging the theatrical work of staging.<sup>51</sup> Pavis establishes two main categories of the alienation effect. The first is the “Alienation-Effect as Aesthetic Principle,” which focuses on a definition from nineteenth century Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky. Shklovsky refers to “priem ostraneniya” or “making strange device” as “an aesthetic device that consists of altering our perception of a literary image by making it unfamiliar.”<sup>52</sup> Shklovsky also thinks about frames as if they were some sort of magnifying glass. He refers to this process of looking at a thing closely to understand it again as “*ostranenie*.” He says that the very purpose of “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.”<sup>53</sup> Shklovsky’s frame depends on distance, playing life at some distance (separated not by space but by the delineation of the theatrical frame) to defamiliarize it so that it becomes freshly visible, again, in more detail to us. Pavis says, “In theatre, [the alienation effect] has to do with ‘disillusioning’ techniques that negate the impression of a stage reality and reveal the artifice of the dramatic construction or of a character. The spectator’s attention is drawn to the way in which the illusion is created, the way in which the actors build their characters.”<sup>54</sup>

Pavis then moves from Shklovsky to Bertolt Brecht for his second category of Alienation Effect, which names alienation from strictly an aesthetic act to one that is inherently more

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<sup>51</sup> Pavis, “Alienation Effect,” in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Pavis, “Alienation Effect,” 18.

<sup>53</sup> This quote is cited in the entry titled OSTRANENIE in *Play: Dramaturgies of Participation* by Jenn Stephenson and me, original citation is Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, (University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

<sup>54</sup> Pavis, “Alienation Effect,” 18-9.

political. After the audience is sufficiently alienated from the work onstage, made aware of its construction and its commentary, the “alienation effect makes a transition from aesthetic device to ideological responsibility in the work of art.”<sup>55</sup> Pavis says that Brecht “saw this device as capable of transforming the spectator’s approving attitude, based on identification, into a critical one.”<sup>56</sup> Brecht’s alienation effect hopes to take its spectators from passive receivers to active transformers through an awareness of the instability and impossibility of the theatrical frame. The Brechtian alienation effect, understood as a kind of frame, speaks to what August Boal names as a Marxist through-line in Brecht’s thinking. Boal says, “Brecht was a Marxist; therefore, for him, a theatrical work cannot end in repose, in equilibrium. It must, on the contrary, show the ways in which society loses its equilibrium, which way society is moving, and how to hasten the transition.”<sup>57</sup> If Brecht’s audience is aware that the world can be changed from within the theatrical frame, he is optimistic that the world outside of the frame can be changed as well.

In contrast, Augusto Boal’s forum theatre *thinks* the frame for political purposes as Boal positions his participants as both spectators and actors or spect-actors. Within the umbrella of his Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal’s forum theatre invites both spectators and actors to intervene in the performance, stopping or changing things that relate to their own oppression. Importantly, the theatrical frame is fragile, it’s stopped and started in forum theatre. In his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal situates his poetics in relation to Aristotle and Brecht. He says,

Aristotle proposed a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which

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<sup>55</sup> Pavis, “Alienation Effect,” 19.

<sup>56</sup> Pavis, “Alienation Effect,” 19.

<sup>57</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 105.

the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in preposition to the character....But the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for chance - in short, trains himself for real action.<sup>58</sup>

For Brecht and Boal, thickening and thinning the theatrical frame has intense political effects that serve to cast the spectators as players in the drama in some way. Thinning and thickening the frame reminds us that division is not a given. Further, for Brecht and Boal the theatrical frame is transformational and porous, in a way that gestures towards abolitionist dramaturgy even if this concept does not yet arise in their work.

This practice of investigating the dramaturgical thinning and thickening of frames first occurred to me when I read Robin D.G Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* during PhD coursework. First published in 2002, Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* thinks through Black futurism and what Kelley calls "freedom dream" through the history (and the present and future) of revolutionary Black scholars, artists, and activists. Although he is not a dramaturg, the aesthetic and political frame for Kelley's reflections is the dream: specifically, the dream of freedom or the dream of liberation. In his introduction for the twentieth anniversary edition, Kelley asks, "what had happened to the dream of liberation that brought many of us to radical movements in the first place?"<sup>59</sup> What was the shape and quality of the Black radical dream for the future, and how can that dream be a guide for a transformed world? He is concerned with the world built on the other side of the border between the world as we know it

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<sup>58</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>59</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, x.

and the world we want: “Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.”<sup>60</sup>

Robin D. G. Kelley then examines the Black radical future through a surrealist frame, and he connects surrealist artistic expression (or aesthetic or frames) to Black radical thought. He describes the Chicago Surrealist Group’s “basic aim,” which is “to lesson and eventually to completely resolve” the space between “everyday life and our wildest dreams.”<sup>61</sup> Kelley says that surrealism is not an “aesthetic doctrine but rather an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought.”<sup>62</sup> In the same way that I argue theatre is a space to experiment with complete separation, Kelley believes that surrealism is a frame for the work of “self-transformation, changing the way we think, live, love and handle pain.”<sup>63</sup> In Ric Knowles’ dramaturgical text, *How Theatre Means*, he defines surrealism by “its primary languages” of “images and movement rather than the spoken word.”<sup>64</sup> There is an expansiveness of surrealism as a thick frame, a space rife for transformation. Surrealism’s transformation occurs through what Nicolas Bourriaud calls a “liberation through the irrational (Dada, Surrealism, the Situationists)...opposed to authoritarian and utilitarian forces eager to gauge human relations and subjugate people.”<sup>65</sup> Surrealism is transformational and liberatory in its irrationality. Because of the way that it can be changed and transformed, like moveable productive boundaries as opposed to separating stone walls, surrealist frames are generative in the way they are explored. If we can,

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<sup>60</sup> Kelley, xii.

<sup>61</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Foreword” in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* by Cedric J. Robinson, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 21.

<sup>62</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Ric Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014), 119.

<sup>65</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2002), 12.

as Kelley says, “live through our third eyes, to see life as a possibility,”<sup>66</sup> what is stopping us from making that imagination a reality?

What does this have to do with the theatrical frame? The surrealists are interested in an entirely reconstituted world that leans into unconscious desires that does not rely on strict separation and logic to survive. Kelley says the surrealists “are speaking of new social relationships, new ways of living and interacting, new attitudes toward work and leisure and community.”<sup>67</sup> This is exactly what is called for when approaching abolition through the metaphor of the theatrical frame. How can we theorize the theatrical frame as a dramaturgical space that allows us to move from a recognition of what’s inside the frame, be it on stage or in prison, and towards an abolitionist gesture that dreams up alternate possibilities of an enmeshed and layered existence? How can manipulating the frame be an abolitionist gesture, both on the stage and beyond?

### **Case Study: *Lilies***

In the opening scene of the 1996 film version of Michel Marc Bouchard’s play *Lilies*<sup>68</sup> directed by John Greyson, it’s 1952 and a black luxury car drives through the dense woods and onto the grounds of a Quebec prison. After the driver talks with a guard at the edge of the prison, the gates open and the car enters the facility. Clad in his pontifical, Bishop Bilodeau gets out of the car and is greeted by the prison’s Chaplain who genuflects, kissing Bilodeau’s ring. The Chaplain tells Bilodeau that “the confessional will take place in the chapel,”<sup>69</sup> and he swiftly

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<sup>66</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Lilies*, directed by John Greyson (Montreal Alliance Films, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> *Lilies*.

leads the Bishop through the prison grounds, over and through the various markers of separability that demarcate the prison.

*Lilies*, or *Les Feluettes* in its original French, was written by queer Francophone playwright Michel Marc Bouchard and premiered in 1987. The play centres around a re-enactment of a tragic queer love triangle between Simon Doucet, the Count Vallier, and the Bishop Bilodeau. In the play, the Bishop Bilodeau arrives to an undisclosed location (in the case of the filmed adaptation, a prison) where he is forced to witness a re-enactment of events leading up to the death of Vallier and the imprisonment of Doucet, who were outed as queer to their community in the fictional Roberval, Quebec. To confront Bilodeau's own participation in the violent events of the past and to illustrate the slippery, unstable, and useless border between "guilty" and "innocent" Doucet restages the past in the present, manipulating the frame to abolitionist ends.

In the film, from the front gate of the prison to the chapel doors, the Chaplain and Bilodeau pass through ten locked doors that separate the outside from the inside, each one unlocked for their passage and then locked again immediately by guards. As the two men traverse the prison towards the chapel, the camera pans to a group of inmates working in the sun, painting the inside surface of a prison wall. Then, the camera pans to a large open field, empty but entirely fenced in, foregrounding an open blue sky. We see a prison guard with a rifle perched atop the prison's external wall. Bilodeau and the Chaplain are watched in all their carceral border-crossing. Bilodeau and the Chaplain finally arrive at the prison chapel and a guard unlocks the chapel door to permit Bilodeau and the Chaplain entrance. The camera peers into the chapel through a chain link fence, reminiscent of the audience's perspective on one side of the bars in the film adaptation of *Marat/Sade* discussed earlier in this chapter. Seated at pews in the chapel, a group

of eight or ten inmates are still, in prayer or reflection. One inmate is singing. The space is reverent.

Bilodeau is told by the chaplain that he is here as a clergyman to hear a private confession from his childhood acquaintance Simon Doucet, who is incarcerated behind the prison walls. Bilodeau seems uneasy in his awareness of the group of inmates in the chapel, saying to the Chaplain, “I thought this was a private confession.”<sup>70</sup> The Chaplain gestures towards a confessional booth, with two closed doors, sitting along the back wall of the chapel. Privacy. Above one side of the booth, the light is on, signaling that it is occupied. Someone is waiting. Bilodeau blesses the inmates sitting in the pews that face him and the Chaplain unlocks the gate to the fence that separates the two men from the inmates sitting in the chapel. Hesitantly, Bilodeau crosses the threshold and enters the frame of the prison, between the seated inmates and towards the confessional booth. He crosses the carceral threshold and seems afraid, aware of the fundamental difference between himself and the others in the room.

He opens the confessional door and sits uneasily on one side of the booth, offering a blessing to the man who occupies the other side, divided only by a screen to obscure the view. “Your Chaplain said you had a very important confession to make,” Bilodeau says to the man. “He spoke of peace and forgiveness.”<sup>71</sup> The man on the other side of the booth then lights a match, revealing himself as Bilodeau’s old acquaintance Doucet. Bilodeau recognizes him from their youth and seems—ashamed? Afraid? The camera cuts to outside the confessional booth where the Chaplain hurriedly turns off an overhead light in the Chapel and encourages the inmates sitting in the pews to set the stage. They move pews for set pieces and props. They work together to get into costume and makeup. A “play” is about to begin.

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<sup>70</sup> *Lilies*.

<sup>71</sup> *Lilies*.

Back inside the confessional booth, Doucet reminds Bilodeau of their history. “We used to do some acting together, at the boy’s school...but that was before the trial, before the lies, before they found me guilty of murder.”<sup>72</sup> Bilodeau starts to realize that this is not a confession but a confrontation. Doucet plans to interrogate Bilodeau about his role in the tragedy that caused the death of Vallier and ruined Doucet’s life, the lines between “guilty” and “innocent” are intentionally erased in favour of acknowledging the entanglement of the events that led to this tragedy.

Doucet’s tone is pointed when he says to the Chaplain, “Father, I’m about to commit the sin of revenge”<sup>73</sup> and, as if on Doucet’s cue, the Chaplain then locks the door of the confessional booth from the outside and Bilodeau, trapped, sensing he is about to be accosted says, “I hardly see how I can right the wrongs of the judicial system. I am a Bishop; you should speak to a judge.”<sup>74</sup> The Chaplain removes the door handle of the confessional booth to reveal a perfectly framed square peephole to the action outside the booth. A viewfinder. A new boundary to see a world through. A literal frame. It’s as if Doucet insists that together, through the lens of multiple world’s conjured by performers, the two men must watch the entanglement of this tragedy again. Through the confessional booth-viewfinder frame, Bilodeau squints and sees two performer-inmates in tableau, ready to start the show. The frame is drawn both around him and between him and the actors as he watches a play about his own life staged from Doucet’s memory, performed by inmates, and featuring commentary from Doucet.

Through the metatheatricality of the play-within-a-play, Doucet and the other performers draw a new border around Bilodeau, holding him inside a confessional-booth in a prison to

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<sup>72</sup> *Lilies*.

<sup>73</sup> *Lilies*.

<sup>74</sup> *Lilies*.

witness the acts of his own past, restaged in front of him. Who is held in the carceral context is changed through the assertion of the theatrical and the viewfinder frame for a moment, but they are not contained in defined separation, rather productive witnessing. Bilodeau crosses the border into Doucet's prison, only to be held within the boundary of theatrical frame, within a prison. Bilodeau (and in turn the audience-watcher) are watching these borders be destroyed and redrawn by the players in *Lilies*. Through a literal viewfinder in a confessional booth, the autobiographical play-within-a-play is placed in clear view and Bilodeau has no choice but to confront the ways he is complicit in this tragedy. The additional theatrical frame put into play through the metatheatrical staging of the story is the mechanism that confronts Bilodeau with a truth that he has denied and evaded without in turn, containing him in a prison himself. In witnessing the truth, Bilodeau is not charged but he bears responsibility. He too is implicated in this queer love triangle tragedy.

These opening scenes illustrate the many frames and boundaries crossed and reconstructed, illustrating the slipperiness, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of all people inside and outside. The moving theatrical frame that is drawn and erased and drawn again manifests an abolitionist stance on the unfixity and instability of the carceral frame. The sheer number of locked doors and thresholds crossed in the opening montage illustrate just how thick the carceral frame has been constructed. In contrast, when we enter the theatre in the prison, boundary lines are drawn and erased and redrawn again. Through the metatheatrical crossing of boundaries in the inmate-staged play, this film positions the theatrical frame as porous, manipulated in search of truth not punishment. *Lilies*' metatheatricality challenges the permanence and opacity of Doucet's carceral frame, in a way freeing him from bearing the sole responsibility for his friend's death. By erasing and redrawing the frame through

metatheatricality, Bilodeau is forced to reckon with his own complicity. No longer does Doucet have to bear this weight of Vallier's death alone. Through the frame manipulation of the play-within-a-play, Doucet and his fellow inmates reveal his innocence of the crime he was convicted of by the state not to incarcerate Bilodeau, but rather to force him to confront his own participation in the tragedy and take accountability. While Bilodeau literally 'framed' Doucet of murder, Doucet 'framed' Bilodeau in his own complicity and involvement in the death of Vallier. For Doucet, the end goal is not Bilodeau's incarceration but his acknowledgement that he too participated in this tragedy. The men are not so different.

The fact that the re-enactment happens explicitly *inside* a prison-theatre is not implied in the original play text but rather, is a dramaturgical choice employed by both this film adaptation and by other recent productions of the play.<sup>75</sup> Through this extra metatheatrical frame of setting the play in a prison, the frame is rendered visible. Another obvious assertion of the theatrical frame is through casting: all the roles, women or men, are meant to be played by men. This becomes a metatheatrical dramaturgical device that comes into play during the reenactment, making obvious this overlapping, integrated relationship between metatheatrical, fictional, and actual words. In the film, while some of the re-enactment remains in the world space of the prison, with simple handmade props and costumes in view and prison uniforms with DIY adjustments, through the possibilities of film, Doucet's "play" comes to life, and we are transported to a detailed (historical) fictional realm. While we know the performer-inmates are sitting on the pews in the prison-theatre re-enacting a memory, in the film they appear on the lake at Roberval. The metatheatrical frame remains in view, as the characters from Doucet and Bilodeau's past are still obviously played by Doucet's fellow inmates, who happen to be all men.

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<sup>75</sup> Buddies in Bad Times, LemonTree Creations, and Why Not Theatre, "Lilies; Or, The Revival of a Romantic Drama," *Buddies in Bad Times*, May 2019 [buddiesinbadtimes.com/show/lilies-or-the-revival-of-a-romantic-drama/](http://buddiesinbadtimes.com/show/lilies-or-the-revival-of-a-romantic-drama/)

The costumes change from prison uniforms to elaborate clothing, but the masculine bodies are always visible. This is a metatheatrical staging come to life, not a historical flashback. It's not a memory but a staging of story with an abolitionist purpose. Sometimes the glitch of these overlapping worlds becomes obvious, and we can see the 'real' Bilodeau and Doucet sitting not in the confessional booth but rather on the grass in the 'fictional' Roberval. At a particularly tense dinner in the play-within-a-play, 'actual' Doucet and Bilodeau appear in their prison uniform and pontifical respectively, at a formal dinner in Roberval, side-by-side with the characters in the play.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the theatrical frame is both physical (prison walls and confessional booth viewfinders) and conceptual (the sense that "this is a play and not real life" conjured by Doucet and his fellow inmates). By making these frames malleable, indistinguishable, and at times unnecessary, *Lilies* materializes the abolitionist notion of difference without separability. Along with these borders, the act of witnessing is a core feature of theatricality as it has to do with the act of seeing *through* the frame, with the qualities and processes of watching. Witnessing is political and there is an extensive literature in performance and cultural studies,<sup>76</sup> that complicates notions of truth and history as different than witnessing.

Performative witnessing is another dramaturgy of the unstable frame. Performative witnessing does not just notice or record what has happened; it is generative. In referencing theatre work by Sins Invalid and other Disability-led arts projects, Disability justice scholar artist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha says that centering witnessing as a dramaturgy reminds her of the co-created reality that theatre has the potential to conjure. Thinking about witnessing

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<sup>76</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Julie Salverson, "The Art of Witness in Popular Theatre." *Canadian Theatre Review* 90, (1997): 36–39.

reinforces theatre as a ripe space to practice abolition because at its core theatre is a relational world-building space. As argued elsewhere in this chapter, unlike prison, theatre resists separability and necessitates collective and consent-based world building practices. In Piepzna-Samarasinha's book *Care Work* they say that her "favourite performance spaces are spaces that become temporary, two-hour communities that are autonomous zones that feel like being free. Being in them, we can smell and taste and feel things we have always wanted but rarely witnessed - both in what we see on stage and how we interact and participate as an audience that serves as a community of witnesses."<sup>77</sup> This capacity for world-building emerges through analogy and fiction, but it materializes through actual theatrical spaces as a property of the frame that creates spaces for liberation. This capacity to dream, embody, and bear witness to possible worlds also generates a responsibility on the part of both performers and audience.

Brecht and Boal's frame dramaturgies provoke the audience to act through their witnessing. Witnessing does not mean passively watching a play, then returning to the actual world entertained but unchanged. For Brecht and Boal, to accomplish the act of witnessing, there is action required. For Boal, this action happens within the theatre, offering witness-spectators the chance to change their own narrative as a way of seizing the tools of their life. For Brecht, spectators should let their outrage at depicted injustice seep outside the walls of the theatre. Witnessing is an active process. Different from mere listening, witnessing is intensely enmeshed, acknowledging difference but denying separability. Rather than an inert transfer of information, there is energy and vibration in the exchange between sharer and witness that bounds over any sort of impermeable wall that separates the two. In his book *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan

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<sup>77</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, 150.

Robinson says that “witnessing empowers change.”<sup>78</sup> This change happens both for the sharer and the witness. Theatre scholar Julie Salverson agrees. She says, “To be a witness, I must find the resources to respond. It isn't only passing on a story that matters; I must let the story change me. This makes me vulnerable in the face of another's vulnerability. I participate in a relationship. But to be present in a relationship, I must have a self to offer.”<sup>79</sup> Indigenous scholar Samantha Nock says that when we witness a story, “that story becomes a part of us,” and “[y]ou have entered a very specific and powerful relationship that exists between the storyteller and the witness.”<sup>80</sup> We are enmeshed.

This act of witnessing through the porous boundary of the theatrical frame is a core gesture of the theatrical arena. For theatre to be theatre there must inherently be a watcher. Through an abolitionist manipulation of the frame, that watcher can become a witness, implicated and called to action inside the story. Like Bilodeau in *Lilies*, witness-frames can be a space to feel our complicity in carcerality. In *Lilies*, the carceral frame around Bilodeau vanishes in favour of a new frame drawn by performer-inmates to get at the truth of Bilodeau's complicity in the tragedy. While Bilodeau does not take Doucet's place, through dramaturgical manipulation of the frame, he found himself once again inside the story, forced to reckon with his own complicity in the tragedy and take accountability for harm done.

At one point in his witnessing of the re-enactment, Bilodeau, fearful of the truth of his own complicity, is overwhelmed by the confrontation and bursts through the confessional booth, attempting to leave the chapel entirely. He tries to break free of the frame placed upon him by

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<sup>78</sup> Robinson, “Acts of Defiance in Indigenous Theatre: A Conversation with Lisa C. Ravensbergen,” in *Arts of Engagement*, 187.

<sup>79</sup> Julie Salverson and Bill Penner, “Loopings of Love and Rage: Sitting in the Trouble,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 181, (Winter 2020): 37.

<sup>80</sup> Samantha Nock, “Being a witness: The importance of protecting Indigenous women's stories,” *Rabble.Ca*, September 4 2014 [rabble.ca/indigenous/being-witness-importance-protecting-indigenous-womens-stories/](http://rabble.ca/indigenous/being-witness-importance-protecting-indigenous-womens-stories/)

Doucet and his fellow inmates. He is both escaping the story and entering the story. While crossing the frame of the viewfinder and Doucet's memory world, he finds himself not back in his own reality but back in the prison world. As he bursts through the confessional booth doors and onto the prison-stage, he is stopped by the group of performer-inmates. They hold Bilodeau captive in the centre of the chapel in a large embrace. Bilodeau is now held within another boundary, the arms of incarcerated men. He begs the men to stop their performance. Showing solidarity with Doucet, the men insist on continuing the story and getting to the truth of the testimony, all while embracing Bilodeau as he reckons with his own involvement. They are not abandoning him in his reckoning with his own complicity, they are holding him to it.

Bilodeau returns to the booth to watch the end of the story. In this moment, it seems that everyone, including Bilodeau, insists upon a collective responsibility to enact justice through accessing the truth for Bilodeau to witness. In this way, Bilodeau confronting his involvement, telling the truth about his own complicity in the story is a redefinition of justice as truth-telling and responsibility rather than carceral punishment. This happens in a moment when the boundaries and borders of the carceral frame are slippery and undefinable. Together with Bilodeau, the incarcerated chorus uses the frame for their own, and more specifically, Doucet's liberation. The incarcerated chorus holds Bilodeau, different but not separate, to erase carceral containers in favour of taking accountability in a collective. Although Bilodeau leaves the containment of the confessional and bursts through the physical boundaries between the booth and the prison-stage, he remains inside the conceptual frame (and the memory), held by the bodies of the performer-inmates and the new truth of the true entanglement of this tragedy.

To be clear, this is my reading of the way the permeable, drawable, and erased frame has the potential to be abolitionist in *Lilies*. If the play is understood as a story of "you got the wrong

guy,” it is not abolitionist, but rather presents a reformist agenda or what Nicholas Fesette refers to as a “reformance,”<sup>81</sup> which is a dramaturgy that aims to fix the carceral system as opposed to abolish it. However, if the play is understood as an exercise in erasing, drawing, and making permeable the theatrical frame as boundary between free and unfree through the vector of guilty and innocence, we must ask, to what ends? *Lilies* is distinctly not abolitionist if Doucet is freed and Bilodeau then takes his place in prison. It’s important to note that the play ends not with a new sentence for Bilodeau but rather, a devastated Bilodeau who is forced to take accountability for his participation and entanglement in the tragedy.

As I mentioned before, in the prologue for the text of Michel Marc Bouchard’s *Lilies*, the setting and first stage directions read, “A proscenium stage. We [hear] someone entering in the dark.”<sup>82</sup> Like in the film discussed above, after the initial confrontation between Bilodeau and Doucet, the stage directions stipulate that the curtain rises to reveal a chorus of men set to re-stage the events that lead to Simon’s imprisonment. “I just invited my old schoolmate to a little theatrical evening, like we used to organize back in those days,”<sup>83</sup> Simon says to a terrified Bilodeau. Although the 1996 film is set in a prison, the play-within-a-play that is enacted in *Lilies* is not explicitly set inside a prison. Rather, in the text, the play is set in a nondescript “proscenium stage.” That could be any stage anywhere, a school, a community centre. Although the play insists upon a metatheatrical frame, the shape or quality of this frame becomes a helpful metaphor for abolition when it is porous, unstable, and malleable. This unstable theatrical frame can be experimented with in world of the play (choices made about casting, setting, etc.) and outside of the world of play (extra programming that centres incarcerated people, etc.).

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<sup>81</sup> Fesette. “Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World.” *Theatre Journal* 74, no. 2 (2022): 173–192.

<sup>82</sup> Michel Marc Bouchard, *Lilies*, (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Bouchard, *Lilies*, 13.

As stated in the press release for the 2019 version of *Lilies* produced by Toronto-based Buddies in Bad Times, LemonTREE Productions, and Why Not Theatre, “[i]n this reimagined production, director Cole Alvis (*bug*, *The Kente Cloth*) actively engages with the prison as the setting where this story unfolds, directing a cast of predominantly Indigenous and Black artists to make visible the high incarceration rates of these communities.”<sup>84</sup> In the 2019 production, setting the play in a prison allows the production to “revisit the past with a new lens, incorporating critical discussions around colonialism, the justice system, and their own lived experiences into their creative vision and process. Centering Indigeneity and diverse worldviews, the creative team brings this romantic drama into the 21st century, unearthing love, lies, and colonialism.”<sup>85</sup> By opting for a frame that also explicitly sits in a prison, both productions of *Lilies* cast the audience as witnesses to the fiction (the “true” story for Doucet) and through extension, as a witness to the contemporary carceral reality.

In this 2019 production of *Lilies*, producing companies further participated in material (not metaphorical) abolition work through their assertion that *Lilies* be a “community engaged process.”<sup>86</sup> Alongside the production, assistant director Nikki Shaffeullah and the artist-activist group Confluence Arts Collective created *The Countess and Me*, an “original theatre piece inspired by *Lilies*, created and performed by community members with a range of lived experience with incarceration.”<sup>87</sup> On the National Arts Centre’s website for Shaffeullah’s project *Stages of Transformation*, which highlights Shaffeullah’s and Mpoé Mogale’s work in bringing abolitionist practices to theatre performance in Canada, artist-activist and member of

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<sup>84</sup> “Press Release: *Lilies* Or the Revival of a Romantic Drama,” Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, March 26 2019 [buddiesinbadtimes.com/wp-content/uploads/A-queer-masterpiece-reimagined-Lilies-Or-the-Revival-of-a-Romantic-Drama-comes-to-Buddies-May-4-26.pdf](https://buddiesinbadtimes.com/wp-content/uploads/A-queer-masterpiece-reimagined-Lilies-Or-the-Revival-of-a-Romantic-Drama-comes-to-Buddies-May-4-26.pdf)

<sup>85</sup> “Press Release,” Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

<sup>86</sup> “Press Release,” Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

<sup>87</sup> “Press Release,” Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

the Confluence Art Collective Amina Mohamed interviews *The Countess and Me* team members Charlene Chapman, April Labine, and Laverne Malcom. In the interview, the women discuss their experience working on *The Countess and Me*, naming some of their dreams and hopes for the future. To begin the interview, Mohamed shares the mandate for Confluence Arts Collective:

Confluence Arts Collective came together over a shared investment in dignity, humanity, and justice for people experiencing, or who have experienced incarceration. Through artistic processes, Confluence strives to create moments of community convergence, self-determination, and self-expression for criminalized people. We recognize that criminalized people are disproportionately those living in poverty, Indigenous, racialized, queer, transgender, women, and themselves victims of crime. We aim to open up humanizing spaces to explore and articulate who we all are outside of, and because of, criminal convictions, social marginalizations, and situations of incarceration.<sup>88</sup>

Mohamed, a queer Somali artist with a lived experience of incarceration (her younger brother is currently incarcerated on a life sentence) says that that the *Countess and Me* was an “an original play created by the women at PASAN in response to *Lilies*’ themes of justice and care, based on the participants’ own stories.”<sup>89</sup> Through their work with *Countess and Me*, Confluence Art Collective insists that theatre, as both metaphor and materializing machine, is an appropriate “vehicle for social change, and can support individuals and communities with healing.”<sup>90</sup>

Dramaturgical manipulation of the theatrical frame can be understood as abolitionist in the ways that they implicate the watcher in both the creation and destruction of the carceral context,

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<sup>88</sup> Amina Mohamed, Charlene Chapman, April Labine and Laverne Malcolm, “Theatre as Healing for Formerly Incarcerated Woman,” *Stages of Transformation: National Arts Centre*, May 2022 [nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/transform/theatre-as-healing](http://nac-cna.ca/en/stagesoftransformation/transform/theatre-as-healing)

<sup>89</sup> Mohamed, Chapman, Labine and Malcolm, “Theatre as Healing for Formerly Incarcerated Woman,”

<sup>90</sup> Mohamed, Chapman, Labine and Malcolm, “Theatre as Healing for Formerly Incarcerated Woman,”

insisting that the carceral divide is both useless and unnecessary when it comes to addressing harm. As illustrated through the *Countess and Me*, these witness frames as manipulations of the dramaturgical frame are porous and changeable. What we think are fixed borders (real/fiction, free/unfree) are complicated and manipulated through dramaturgies of the frame. Things slip out and calls to action become explicit through the act of witnessing. In *Lilies*, both the actors in the prison world (and in the conjured town of Roberval) are practicing new worlds where relational accountability is more important than punishment. Through experimenting with the instability of finite borders of past and present, guilt and innocence, free and unfree, manipulations of the dramaturgical frame in *Lilies* can serve as rehearsal grounds for manipulations in the carceral frame, materializing other kinds of enmeshed responses to harm doing.

### **Case Study: *Break Horizons***

In *Lilies*, the play-within-a-play frame dramaturgy is a rehearsal hall for a practice of porosity that abolishes definite and separable carceral barriers in favour of addressing harm-doing through taking responsibility in a collective embrace. This second case study examines the ways that music and non-localized storytelling abolish time and space borders in Kim Senklip Harvey's rock musical *Break Horizons*. Describing herself as “a cultural evolutionist, Indigenous theorist, and...dirtbag,”<sup>91</sup> Kim Senklip Harvey is the Governor General's award-winning writer of *Kamloopa* and matriarch of abolitionist and anti-colonial live performance in so-called Canada. Last I spoke with her, she was working on a PhD in Law.

In 2021 between the third and fourth waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, Syilx and Tsilhqot'in Nation member Harvey premiered sections of her play *Break Horizons* online at the

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<sup>91</sup> Kim Senklip Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*, uploaded February 4 2022, *YouTube*, 1:12:50, [youtube.com/watch?v=nph9RBrkycE&ab\\_channel=KimSenklipHarvey](https://youtube.com/watch?v=nph9RBrkycE&ab_channel=KimSenklipHarvey)

TRANSFORM Cabaret Festival<sup>92</sup> co-presented by The Cultch and Urban Ink. *Break Horizons* is an Indigenous futurist rock musical about five Indigenous femmes who are surviving sentences in a minimum-security prison. The play is not confined to specificity in time or space, as audience, we witness their past that led them to their incarceration, their present as survivors inside, and their future. We witness them in solitary confinement, on a dream tour of Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo Jump or falling through dimensions of time and space. Strengthened by their collectivity inside the Break Horizons minimum security prison/healing lodge, the femmes are both “battling against the persecution of the crown and voyaging into the deep space within their spirits.”<sup>93</sup> The fictional worlds on stage blend with one another, the femmes shift between their bodies as incarcerated Indigenous femmes and their ancestral spirits also held captive in prison through rock music and elaborate scenography. In *Break Horizons*, all five femmes in the Horizons Healing Lodge are in for “‘crimes’ that impeded them from getting the basic necessities of life.”<sup>94</sup> Y is incarcerated for defending her life against her abusive partner, X for trying to keep her family together, Z for defending her land, W for doing what she had to in order to survive on the streets and finally Scarlett, imprisoned for fighting for “their right to a home in this world.”<sup>95</sup>

In *Break Horizons*, music acts as a manipulation of the frame that allows for a kind of visceral vibration between art to the audience. Music travels easily through the porous and invisible boundaries between fictional and actual worlds in the theatre. Scientifically, sound and

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<sup>92</sup> At TRANSFORM, the musical was shown as a film that featured some of the songs from the musical fully staged, interspersed with conversations between Harvey and other team members talking about the process and their intentions behind the project. A few years later, Kim generously shared the script with me. This analysis is based both on the script in progress and the archival footage of this concert-documentary.

<sup>93</sup> “INDIGENOUS SHOWCASE: BREAK HORIZONS -19+ SCREENING,” *The Towne*, accessed June 25 2024, [thetowne.ca/movie/indigenous-showcase-break-horizons--19--screening](http://thetowne.ca/movie/indigenous-showcase-break-horizons--19--screening)

<sup>94</sup> Kim Senklip Harvey, “Ceremonial Edict,” in *Break Horizons: A Rocking Indigenous Justice Story (Draft 8)*, emailed to author October 17 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Harvey, “Ceremonial Edict,” *Break Horizons*.

light waves travel quickly, and music specifically has the capacity to affect in a felt, visceral way. In Antonin Artaud's early writing on his Theatre of Cruelty, he writes about his desires for affect or vibration in the theatre. He wants theatre-makers to think of audiences as a group of snakes, with widespread sensory input channels open to the experience. He writes,

if music affects snakes, it is not on account of the spiritual notions it offers them, but because snakes are long and coil their length upon the earth, because their bodies touch the earth at almost every point; and because the musical vibrations which are communicated to the earth affect them like a very subtle, very long massage; and I propose to treat the spectators like the snakecharmer's subjects and conduct them by means of their organisms to an apprehension of the subtlest notions.<sup>96</sup>

This first section of the chapter considers way that music has the potential an abolitionist dramaturgy of the frame, easily passing through and leaking into the real world, literally moving us to our feet. Music has the capacity to world-travel in the theatre, touching witnesses both cognitively and viscerally.

In an interview about why he chose the vehicle of musical theatre to tell this story about the horror of Canada's Indian Residential Schools, Corey Payette (Métis), says, "When musicals work, they help to speak emotions that are beyond words."<sup>97</sup> In Payette's musical *Children of God*, music acts as an expansive and affective frame that stirs up memories for the characters. Set in two timelines, their lives as adults and their lives as children living the horrors of residential school, *Children of God* follows a group of Indigenous people as they trace the ripples of generational trauma that reverberate long after they left the school. In *Children of God*, the

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<sup>96</sup> Antonin Artaud, "No More Masterpieces," *Theatre and Its Double*, 74.

<sup>97</sup> Shawn Conner, "Q&A: Children of God creator Corey Payette gives musical release to a serious subject," *Vancouver Sun*, May 17 2017 [vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/local-arts/q-a-children-of-god-creator-corey-payette-gives-musical-release-to-a-serious-subject](http://vancouver.sun.com/entertainment/local-arts/q-a-children-of-god-creator-corey-payette-gives-musical-release-to-a-serious-subject)

musical frame is a space where the children keep themselves safe and build resilience in the face of great trauma. They practice their language through song. They remember elements of their early childhoods through song. They dream about their families and talk to their mother through song. The music in *Children of God* is memory-linking frame. Music in this way is representative of an actual tether between the kids at residential school and their homes, their families, their language, everything that came before.

In the case of musicals as a theatrical frame, the experience is visceral in how it is different from life. The emotional affect comes from this larger-than-life quality that Payette is naming. Musicals also allow for some level of distance without complete separation. The performativity of musicals asserts a kind of alienation effect that almost seems to both touch deeply and leave distance. Musical theatre, as a genre ripe for affect with plenty of theatricality, allows for contradiction, complication and juxtaposition. For example, in *Les Misérables* the tragic character and third wheel Eponine sings a lament underneath a tender love song between her lover Marius and his lover Cosette called “Heart Full of Love.” The two parts of the song fit together but express opposite desires. There are moments of dissonance and resolution. They are different and distinct but blend in harmony. When Eponine wails her loneliness on an unresolved longing note, Marius and Cosette express their undying love for one another and resolve the chord. The vehicle of the musical theatre song manages to communicate both emotions, not as distinct or separate but intertwined and complex. For Payette, musical theatre as a frame offers the expansive, multi-layered space that is necessary to tell stories that feature both incredible pain and remarkable resilience of Indigenous survivors of residency schools.

In the concert documentary that premiered at the TRANSFORM Cabaret Festival, Harvey introduces *Break Horizons* by naming the devastating statistics around how Indigenous

women are the fastest growing prison population in Canada. “With Indigenous youth representing close to 50% of the youth custody population, Indigenous women being the fastest growing prison population and with suicide rates 3 times higher, Indigenous peoples are needing our urgent support.”<sup>98</sup> She says through learning about these devastating realities for her people behind bars, she felt urgently called to channel her arts practice towards their care. She says,

This was my call to action to illuminate and bring attention to the violence and oppression that was happening to our peoples as they are being locked up. As an interior Salish-Plateau storyteller, I recognize that a part of my responsibilities are to speak for those who need our attention, who need our help, who are being oppressed by the state and right now Indigenous and Black and racialized people need our attention but like...how the fuck was I going to get anyone interested and engaged in prison reform. Nobody wanted to talk about it, nobody wants to talk about it, it’s not sexy.<sup>99</sup>

Like Payette, Harvey gravitated towards the affective potential of music as a kind of affective frame-travelling device for the story. In *Children of God*, the music is a bilingual memory linking device. In *Break Horizons*, the music is a transformational vibrational device. In the concert documentary about *Break Horizons*, Harvey recalls growing up listening to classic rock and roll and greatly admiring the work of Johnny Cash as a prison musician. She considers “Folsom Prison Blues” and draws comparisons between rock music and ceremony, realizing “that one thing that brings people together is music. In ceremony, in Indigenous culture and in non-Indigenous culture. And thus, *Break Horizons*, a rocking Indigenous justice ceremony was born.”<sup>100</sup> After she settled upon music as an element of her theatrical frame in *Break Horizons*,

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<sup>98</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>99</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>100</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

she narrowed her focus towards a specific genre. Drawn to the rock and roll revolution, she became interested in what rock viscerally does to people. Like Artaud, she is interested in the vibration. What is about “that vibration that literally moves us?”<sup>101</sup> She compares the vibrational transformation that occurs in rock music to the physical transformation that she has experienced in ceremony. For Harvey, rock music extends an inherent invitation to stand up, it calls you to your feet. So does ceremony. The Indigenous justice ceremony in *Break Horizons* actively transgresses the imagined boundary between art and audience, character and audience member, present and future, and hails the audience as witnesses.

Music in *Break Horizons* is an active assertion of a kind of enmeshed inseparability. The audience finds themselves together in an unspecified time and space with these incarcerated Indigenous femmes, who in the carceral Canadian reality, are distinctly separate populations. It’s not about empathy as much as it’s about asserting the collectivity within abolition. Harvey’s musical co-directors Adrian Glynn and Mischelle Cutler say, “Music is such a specific way for a character to emote. A melody can say so much that a monologue can’t say, just a few notes strung together and a few words strung together can tell you about what’s going on in a character’s heart and brain in such a different way...”<sup>102</sup> As a frame traveller, music has the capacity to express multi-dimensional storytelling. Cutler goes on to say,

There is too much in the script to be captured in words. There is so much history and future and worlds coming together that it can’t be spoken. It’s also a really important access point for the performers and for audiences because people might not intellectually understand every piece of the story, they might not know the history, they might not

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<sup>101</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>102</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

understand everything, but there is an access point there, something hits your body before something hits your mind.<sup>103</sup>

Where Harvey and Payette and so many other artists have turned to music, in her essay “Difference Without Separability,” Denise Ferreira da Silva points to the imagination as a site to discover alternatives to a world dictated by separation. She writes, “What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imagined each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms relating through the mediation of forces, but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/as which they exist?”<sup>104</sup> I situate da Silva as proposing a kind of abolition geography in the imagination, asking readers to use their imaginations to conjure a world that does not depend on separation and complete distinction for understanding and order, but instead recognizes a kind of metaphysical and multidimensional enmeshment present between all things, all worlds. What if instead of the modern imagination’s obsession with individual or the carceral understanding that my freedom is dependent on the containment of others, I could imagine something more entangled? When I remember that my physical being is made up of the same stars that make up an orca or the lake or the incarcerated woman, what new enmeshed anti-carceral world is revealed?

da Silva offers the quantum physics notion of *nonlocality* as a way of thinking which “supports a kind of thinking that does not reproduce the methodological and ontological grounds of the modern subject, namely linear temporality and spatial separation.”<sup>105</sup> A classic principle of quantum physics, nonlocality specifies “a more complex reality in which everything has both actual (spacetime) and a virtual (nonlocal) existence.”<sup>106</sup> Nonlocality insists that there are multi-

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<sup>103</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>104</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 63.

<sup>105</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 64.

<sup>106</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 64.

dimensional connections between all beings (living or not) on earth and so, the complete ontological separation of beings is not a necessary or helpful way to live. We are more entangled than that. All particles and atoms are recycled and of the same stars so really, we are fundamentally and knowingly connection. Non-locality, in the way it insists upon a deep enmeshed knowing

allows us to imagine sociality, in such a way that attending to difference does not presuppose *separability*, *determinacy*, and *sequentiality*, the three ontological pillars that sustain modern thought. In the nonlocal universe, neither dislocation (movement in space) nor relation (connection between spatially separate things) describes what happens because entangled particles (that is, every existing particle) exist with each other, without space-time.<sup>107</sup>

da Silva argues that if nonlocality in quantum physics states that “everything has both actual (spacetime) and a virtual (nonlocal) existence,” if there really is a fundamentally interconnectedness between individuals because we are all made of the same atoms and particles, “then why not conceive of human existence in the same manner? Why not assume that beyond their physical (bodily and geographic) conditions of existence, in their fundamental constitution, at the subatomic level, humans exist entangled with everything else (animate and in-animate) in the universe.”<sup>108</sup> If we can understand difference as a fundamental expression of human entanglement, as opposed to an “an unresolvable *estrangement*...sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 64.

<sup>108</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 64.

<sup>109</sup> da Silva, “On Difference,” 65.

In the concert documentary about *Break Horizons* that refers to the carceral World As We Know It, Kim Senklip Harvey says that she doesn't "believe we're going to end this [colonial] war by serving up narratives that are trauma-centered because I think that attacks and deteriorates our humanity."<sup>110</sup> I think Harvey is connected to da Silva's argument here and advocating for an enmeshed humanity in the kind of storytelling that musicals privilege. Trauma narratives insist upon a kind of fundamental painful exploitation and separation that does not privilege nonlocality. *Break Horizons* is a case of complex and beautiful entanglement in which the audience is called to act. In this way, Harvey is using the theatrical frames of music and world building to easily crash through the carceral frames of colonization and criminalization.

In the Ceremonial Edict that appears first in the text of *Break Horizons*, Harvey introduces the play as an "Indigenous Futurist story that honors the spatiotemporalities of Interior Salish ontologies."<sup>111</sup> Colonial and "western linear laws of space and time"<sup>112</sup> need not apply to this performance that Harvey explicitly names a ceremony, as she encourages her audiences to get used to both time and space travelling. She says, "In this ceremony, I respectfully ask you to release yourselves from the shackles of western knowing and go to that place inside yourselves beyond thinking, beyond what can be 'proven' and to submit yourselves to the mystical incomprehensible experience that is being alive."<sup>113</sup> Harvey is establishing the story as a nonlocal one that specifically requires the open imagination of an audience. This is where Harvey explicitly links ceremony to rock and roll. She says,

As we call on our Ancestors to help rumble this story with us, we activate traditional inter-National healing. We will use traditional elements like copper to ride the oldest

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<sup>110</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>111</sup> Harvey, "Ceremonial Edict," *Break Horizons*.

<sup>112</sup> Harvey, "Ceremonial Edict," *Break Horizons*.

<sup>113</sup> Harvey, "Ceremonial Edict," *Break Horizons*.

vibrational waves of the Universe and make rock and roll together. For that is what this is, an opportunity for us to break ourselves free from a history of missing the greatest act we can do - bear witness to one another and our own precious, necessary and powerful lives to keep the balance of this extraordinary environment.<sup>114</sup>

For Harvey, rock and roll is emancipatory and transformational like ceremony; it allows the audience to spiritually “break ourselves free” while we bear witness to representations of very real lives of Indigenous femmes surviving in prison across so-called Canada, in turn, rehearsing the world of breaking them free. She ends her introduction to the play with a call to action. She offers a formal invitation to non-Indigenous people who are being asked to bear witness to this play firmly set within ceremony: “So welcome to your vision quest, one that you are entangled in and requires much transformation.”<sup>115</sup> This play is a play, but it is also a ceremony. This ceremony is ceremony, but it is also a rock show. This rock show is a picture of a prison where Indigenous femmes, who are the fastest growing prison population in Canada face suicide rates 3 times higher than the average Canadian.<sup>116</sup>

When *Break Horizons* starts, the house lights are dimmed but the space is “steaming.”<sup>117</sup> While vendors and theatre staff are “taking orders, helping Elders to their seats, and vibing out,”<sup>118</sup> actors talk directly to the audience. One of the five femmes, first appearing as Shifter, enters the space in a “black galactic latex catsuit” and starts to mingle and flirt with the audience. While this very material (orders, Elders, latex catsuit) pre-show rock show moment warms up the theatre, the shifting cosmic world of the stage is also waking up. “An orca swims by,” and

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<sup>114</sup> Harvey, “Ceremonial Edict,” *Break Horizons*.

<sup>115</sup> Harvey, “Notes on Nenquay: The Universe,” *Break Horizons*.

<sup>116</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons: A Concert Documentary*.

<sup>117</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 1.

“Animals, Elements, Ancestors and Dark Matters from all dimensions enter the Long Lodge with the witnesses (audience).”<sup>119</sup>

Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love,” reverberates throughout the theatre. The Shifter directly addresses the audience and tells us she is disappointed with how we have broken her heart. We have lost our humanity through the way we have treated each other and the Earth. She sings with Led Zeppelin, “You need cooling, [b]aby I’m not fooling. I’m gonna send ya, [b]ack to schooling, [a]-way down inside, [a]-honey you need it.”<sup>120</sup> The theatrical frame as boundary is unsteady between audience and performer: rendered both hyper visible through the floating Orca and invisible through the direct address from Shifter to audience. The audience wonders, when are we? Where are we? Who are we to this being on stage? Are we in a theatre or somewhere else? What world is this? The Shifter explicitly tells us, “You came into a theatre, but now you’re in a Long Lodge and you are entering a transfor-fucking-mational ceremony.”<sup>121</sup> We have been seen and hailed by the Shifter, as witnesses-audiences, to implicate ourselves in a vibrational rock and roll vision quest-healing justice ceremony. Buckle up.

The shifter begins our “schooling” with an explicit call-out to see if any of the audience-witnesses knows whose territory we are on. Do we know the laws and protocols of this nation? All playfully underscored by Zeppelin, the Shifter says “How did you sapiens, beings so tiny, make a mess this big and put us all at such risk?...Since the beginning of that first big *bang* the Universe has been growing in deep balance. But the Queen’s people have chosen destruction mode, pillaging, and polluting in all ways. And you feel it don’t you?”<sup>122</sup> The Shifter positions this performance ceremony as a sort of reckoning and tells us that because of the dehumanizing

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<sup>119</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 1.

<sup>120</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 8.

<sup>122</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 4.

way we treat one another and the complete disregard of the planet through climate warfare, she (and the planet) has decided to fight back. “Indigenous peoples hold the knowledge of these lands and if they are not freed your time here is over.”<sup>123</sup> The boundaries of the frame are still unclear.

The world on stage seamlessly shifts from theatre to ceremonial space to cosmic lecture hall and then to prison when Shifter then introduces us to Scarlett, a femme and a spirit that the Shifter has known “since the beginning of it all,” struggling in solitary confinement inside Horizons Prison Lodge. Shifter says, “The only way to kill a spirit, the essence of a life is to starve it...Starve it from everything it needs...Cut it off from culture, community, so it can no longer breathe.”<sup>124</sup> This is what da Silva refers to as the “unbridgeable ethical divide,”<sup>125</sup> or separability that governs both *The World As We Know It* and the carceral system more specifically. Rather than an entanglement with Scarlett and the matriarchal spirit that accompanies her, Shifter shows us how the carceral reality has cut her off, ultimately killing her spirit.

Through direct address in *Break Horizons*, we are between the borders of actual theatre and the fiction onstage. The characters are also referencing our (and their) ability to travel between the boundaries of other temporal and spatial worlds. Throughout the play, the femmes travel from inside Break Horizons healing lodge to a dream-tour outside at the dusty Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo Jump in Alberta. Through song, they travel from solitary confinement to the cosmos with their ancestors. By conjuring worlds and traveling through them, the femmes move from cell walls in solitary to the cosmic universe and back. At one moment, during a recreation

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<sup>123</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 6.

<sup>125</sup> da Silva, “On Difference Without Separability,” 57.

of the incident that brought Y into prison, the stage direction says she “goes in for another attack against everything, [her] boyfriend in the present, their territory enemy from 400 years ago, a predator from 7,000 years ago.”<sup>126</sup> After her boyfriend lays dying, the femmes then transport into a courtroom where they are sentenced for their crimes. When the gavel hits, the “dimension starts to crumble and the femmes notice it.”<sup>127</sup> We end up back in a solitary cell with Scarlett and watch as the violent prison guards harass her. Next, as the dimensions continue to bend and world boundaries are drawn and crossed and erased, the femmes end up at Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo Jump where the Shifter becomes a tour guide who tells the femmes about their ancestors, warriors who risked their lives for buffalo. While her material body is suffering in solitary, her cosmic existence is teetering on the edge of a cliff with her ancestors below. Scarlett gets closer and closer to the edge, loses her balance, and falls into the pit.

After Scarlett falls in, we leap in time and space again but this time back to the Horizons Healing Lodge, where the group of femmes sit in a semicircle with the Shifter, who has now transformed into Harriet, a facilitator of group therapy. Harriet keeps referring to Horizons as a prison and the femmes keep correcting her to “It’s a fucking healing lodge!”<sup>128</sup> The Shifter breaks the frame again and speaks directly to the audience. “Can you tell the witnesses the difference between a prison and a healing lodge please?”<sup>129</sup> Y asks who we, the audience, are. The lights come up and the Shifter introduces the audience, the witnesses, to the Horizon Femmes. In this moment, we are explicitly cast as witnesses, much like witnesses in the courtrooms that sentenced these femmes, seers from the outside who doll out carceral punishment as justice. This direct address through the frame mirrors the audience’s role as

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<sup>126</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 13.

<sup>127</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 15.

<sup>128</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 40.

<sup>129</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 40.

witnesses rooted in the actual carceral world as a jury of distanced outsiders who doll out jail time. The roles are reversed in the theatre and the witnesses are learning instead of their actual-world position as possessing the so-called truth.

Just like witnesses in a courtroom and Bilodeau in *Lilies*, *Break Horizon*'s audience-witnesses are actively present. Unlike the "visible but unverifiable" eyes of Foucault's panopticon, in the theatre we are witnesses that are visible and verifiable and the boundaries between us are indistinguishable, movable. The femmes look out to us and ask for our help in seeing, really *seeing*, the horror of what is happening in prisons across so-called Canada and joining in the multi-dimensional act of breaking the material and metaphysical horizon of carcerality. The Shifter says to the femmes (and ultimately to us), "A part of knowing how to be present is knowing how to deeply listen and derive teachings from stories you might have heard or are being asked to hear in a different way. This is an excellent opportunity to practice that."<sup>130</sup> The women discuss how they know what deep listening is and looks like, mirroring yet another lesson about our enmeshed reality to us. "Um, deep listening is something that almost transcends the present, like a portal that goes through a drum to activate the blood. Lots of people can listen but it takes practice and a great amount of courage to go beyond this form and deep, deep, deep into ourselves."<sup>131</sup> Like the musical that transcends the boundary of the theatrical frame in the theatrical frame, deep listening and witnessing transcends the theatrical frame.

We transition from group therapy back to Scarlett's cell in solitary confinement. She cries out seeming to forget the fact that we as activated audience-witnesses are watching her, "I have all these things to give and no one to share it with, no one to bear witness it, alone here. Why

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<sup>130</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 62.

<sup>131</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 63.

must you torture me like this.”<sup>132</sup> The Shifter who is also named The Universe and PACYCAP, asserts nonlocality saying,

Bear witness and honor the cosmic bonds that thread us together. For we all come from the guts of this one Universe. This event, this Breaking ceremony unshackles us from the impermanent pains of the past. And gives us evolution into a new present. Knowing that each and everyone of us, every part, piece and person are the necessary components for love and creates this life.<sup>133</sup>

Through the vibrational co-presence of *Break Horizons*' rock show and the instability of the frames between the many worlds, our inseparability with the carceral context is emphasized. This is the specific power of the theatrical frame. Boundaries between worlds are always unstable but technically in view. They are not made of stone. Through dramaturgy, they are productive and creative.

A core principle of the carceral gaze as described by Foucault through the panopticon is that prisoners in the panopticon cannot see the guard in the tower and thus cannot be sure when they are/aren't being watched. In contrast, *Break Horizons* explicitly casts the witness as an enmeshed and co-present participant in the abolitionist future. In the panopticon, inmates are certain of the potential of being watched but they cannot see the watcher. In *Break Horizons* our inseparability is emphasized, instead of our difference through the vibrational co-presence of the rock show and the instability of the frame. In Harvey's *Break Horizons*, the femmes see us, and we see them as they travel through time and space towards transformative justice and abolition liberation. As evidenced in *Break Horizons*, through an abolitionist theatrical frame as opposed to the panoptical carceral one, the co-present gaze is firmly attached both to the storytellers and

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<sup>132</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 86.

<sup>133</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 107.

to the witness, regardless of what may seem to separate us. The boundary that divides the theatrical experience from the actual world—the theatrical frame—is not permanent or impermeable. It is a vehicle for abolition, a rehearsal space for dissolving carceral frames. The audience's embodied *presence* is central to the experience of *Break Horizons* and to the theatrical frame in general. Our presence and the presence of the femmes is verifiable and central to the task of witnessing through the theatrical frame. The audience is visible and verifiable through the theatrical frame; they agree to witness the play's action, and the work seeks to generate further action because of that witnessing. The boundary that divides the theatrical experience from the 'real' world—the theatrical frame—is not permanent or impermeable; as a vehicle for abolition, it's a play space for transforming the carceral frames of colonial violence.

### **Chapter 3: Theatrical Time**

Remember that during time in prison it is not where you are but who you are, because time is time.

- Walter Daily<sup>1</sup>

Where the last chapter considers the theatrical practice of manipulating space through dramaturgical negotiations of the theatrical frame abolitionist, this chapter considers theatre's practice of manipulating time as similarly abolitionist. In the context of the prison industrial complex, time is a weapon, a compass for punishment, and a measurement for isolation and trauma. Time is owned by the subject until the prison dictates that the subject must forfeit their time to the state to make up for a so-called crime. However, as Walter reflects, although time is stolen from incarcerated people in myriads of ways, there is still a kind of productive taking back of time that people inside exert. They are confined for a certain amount of time and despite that carceral violence, they do things with that frozen time. They make art. They build networks. They survive the time that is stolen from them.

Time in theatre is a tool, utilized as malleable and manipulatable in a variety of dramaturgical ways to a variety of dramaturgical ends. This chapter considers the ways that time, and its capacity for manipulation, is a tool for liberation within the frame, carving out a space to materialize new ways of being in time that is not weaponized. This chapter considers the ways that time works in the theatre and to what ends. Here, I consider the dramaturgical manipulation

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Daily, "Goals & methods of control units: Survival Strategies," *Survivors Manual: Survival in Solitary*, edited by Bonnie Kerness, (Newark: American Friends Service Committee), 59. [afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Survivors%20Manual\\_0.pdf](https://afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/Survivors%20Manual_0.pdf)

of time as a practice to materialize new ways of conceptualizing time that resists the carceral context. Where the first chapter argues that dramaturgy allows us to consider frames as malleable boundaries not finite borders, this chapter presents theatre as a place to make something of time, rather than the carceral practice of taking something with time.

First grappling with the temporalities of carceral capitalism within the neoliberal state, this chapter considers the ways in which time is served and wielded as a weapon in dealing with conflict, resulting in the “premature death”<sup>2</sup> of those deemed disposable to the prison within racial capitalism. Following this investigation of time as a decompositional practice within the carceral context, this chapter analyzes two different abolitionist treatments of theatrical time: duration and syncopation. Here I consider the ways that theatre presents a time space that resembles an abolitionist rehearsal hall. This chapter features analysis of Lilith and Cie’s durational participatory dance performance *Invisible* and the Circle Project’s *What Fools These Mortals Be*, a filmed tableau vivant that is “of time.”<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I contrast this weaponization of time with abolitionist dramaturgical generation with time through durational intimacy, syncopation, and restart.

### **Neoliberal Carceral Time**

British geographer Dominique Moran writes about carcerality in relation to geography. Moran argues that although carceral and abolition geographies have

an implicit awareness of the significance of time, in as much as it is time served inside of spaces of confinement that literally yields the research focus for much of this work, there is little critique of what time might mean in the carceral context, despite the increasing

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in globalizing California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 244.

<sup>3</sup> David Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

awareness and discussion of the innate variability of time within recent human geography.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, Moran says her work serves to intersect various disciplines like “human geographers working on spaces of incarceration, and criminologists and prison sociologists working on time in prison” in order to specifically deal with how time works in relation to the prison industrial complex.<sup>5</sup> She writes in 2012 and says that she is wary of carceral geographies further reinforcing and “[reproducing] a one-dimensional focus on space which reflects an unhelpful dualism between space and time,” with prison spaces conceptually representing “stasis” and prison time “as the domain of dynamism and progress.”<sup>6</sup>

If we, guided by abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her revolutionary work on abolition geographies, can think about “bodies as places, then criminalization transforms individuals into tiny territories primed for extractive activity to unfold - extracting and extracting again *time* from the territories of selves.”<sup>7</sup> In response to harm-doing, the prison industrial context restricts space and weaponizes time, using the “corrosive effects of time”<sup>8</sup> in concert with limited space and relative isolation as its primary weapon and mode of punishment. To speed up the state-sponsored “premature death”<sup>9</sup> that is doled out by carceral punishment within racial capitalism, time is literally taken from lifetimes deemed more disposable than worthy of attention in the case of conflict and harm-doing. Gilmore suggests that the carceral context harvests time from incarcerated individuals. Behind bars, time is sped up and thrown out, wasted and discarded. Through the weaponization of time, prisons, or “[d]eliberately propagated

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<sup>4</sup> Dominique Moran, “‘Doing Time’ in Carceral Space: Timespace and Carceral Geography,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 94, no. 4 (2012): 305–16. [jstor.org/stable/23360828](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23360828). 305.

<sup>5</sup> Moran, “‘Doing Time,” 305.

<sup>6</sup> Moran, “‘Doing Time,” 207.

<sup>7</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Abolition Geography*, 474.

<sup>8</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography,” 474.

<sup>9</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography,” 477.

fatalities, and the forms and patterns that coalesce into premature death, reveal human sacrifice as an organizing principle, or perhaps more precisely as an unprincipled form of organizing, which returns us to racial capitalism and the role of criminalization in it.”<sup>10</sup> Through this time extraction, prisons terminate futures, dragging out what abolitionist scholar Lisa Guenther refers to “dead time,”<sup>11</sup> or the process of cutting lifetimes short by wasting precious time as a mode of punishment. Stealing time resulting in premature death is a primary organizing principle within the prison industrial complex. Gilmore says that “This process opens a hole in a life, furthering, perhaps to our surprise, the annihilation of space by time.”<sup>12</sup> In the carceral context, if bodies are territories, they are stripped of their resources through time theft. As both a method of punishment and an economic machine that generates wealth for some and poverty for others, freedom for some and unfreedom for others, the prison industrial complex removes people from the rich and relational spaces of their lives to lock them into an enclosed space for a predetermined amount of time, corroding and wearing away at their lifetime. Coupled with restricted and isolated space, time is the weaponized currency of carceral punishment, doled out in symbolic increments. Inside prison-time, moments are continually wielded as punishment: no phone time, no visitation time, extra time in solitary. At its core, abolition seeks to destroy the carceral context that relies upon stealing time.

Lisa Guenther, Queen’s University National Scholar in Political Philosophy and Critical Prison Studies, writes about the cruelties of carceral time in her chapter “Dead Time: Heidegger, Levinas, and the Temporality of Supermax Confinement,” in *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*. In the context of supermax prisons in the US, she writes “[j]ust as security

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<sup>10</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography,” 477.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013), 195.

<sup>12</sup> Gilmore, “Abolition Geography,” 474.

doors chop up supermax space, so too does the prison schedule chop up supermax time; the supermax inmate is subject to a rigid schedule of feedings, showers, and short sessions in the ‘dog run.’”<sup>13</sup> She unpacks the ways this division of time undermines incarcerated people as “temporal subjects,” cruelly manipulating time into something that is not the subject’s and “seems both to grind to a halt and to slip away without incident or event.”<sup>14</sup> The dehumanizing feeling of needing to wait for someone else to alleviate one’s needs, instills what Guenther names as a “dependence” on prison authorities that “overvalues the prison official as a source of (temporary and limited) release from an otherwise interminable waiting.”<sup>15</sup> Guenther analyzes the way that the carceral space weaponizes waiting - waiting for a correctional officer to bring mail, waiting to be approved for a visit, and ultimately waiting for the end of a prison sentence. “This urgent demand to do nothing - to hurry up and wait -” she says, “characterizes most aspects of prison life.”<sup>16</sup> For the carceral subject in the carceral context, time is not one’s own. In her article “‘In the interval: Frantz Fanon and the ‘problems’ of visual representation”” Kara Keeling references Fanon’s articulation of this kind of violent and entrapping temporal structure as “anticipation and explosion.” Although Keeling and Fanon are not talking about carcerality but rather anti-Black racism, the quotation speaks to a quality of colonial time that resembles carceral time. She writes

The temporal structure of the colonial mode of representation of otherness that Fanon describes through out his book...is that of a closed cycle of anticipation and explosion

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<sup>13</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 195.

<sup>14</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 196.

wherein the Black's explosion, because it is merely what has been anticipated, always occurs "too late," and the explosion - decolonization - is impossible ("it is too soon . . . or too late")<sup>17</sup> Time in these contexts, carceral, colonial, and racist, is not intended to be malleable by subjects. The subject does not control it. Guenther traces this process in the carceral context and argues that time materializes into carceral power, "the prisoner is bound to negotiate with this asymmetrical structure, not only of power but of *power over time*. The implicit message of intensive confinement is: You are no longer in charge of your own time."<sup>18</sup> The carceral subject has no power over time and the way time is organized is finite and rigid. In her chapter, Guenther poses a question: "At what point does the arguably legitimate right of communities to punish offenders and even to limit their control over time and space become a form of violence against the prisoners' ontological status as temporal, spatial, intercorporeal subjects?"<sup>19</sup>

In neoliberal carceral capitalism under the "regime of the clock,"<sup>20</sup> time largely functions as an external and empirically objective system that advances or develops, something that passes without our involvement. In his book *Theatre & Time*, David Wiles argues that "in a consumer society, it is hard to escape from conceptualizing time as a resource that we want to spend or consume to our maximum possible profit. Time begins to seem like a thing, not a mode of being."<sup>21</sup> In the capitalist context, time ticks away external to our bodies and we are victims to its passing. We clock in and clock out as time continues to flow. We hate our birthdays as we age. We map our commutes compared to the traffic delays that keep us from our designated start times. In neoliberal carceral capitalism, time is external to our bodies and can be given, spent, or

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<sup>17</sup> Kara Keeling, Kara. "In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20686152>, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 199.

<sup>20</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 12.

stolen as it continues to pass by. However, time as an external journey developing forward isn't the only way time functions and is a colonial conception of time that stiffened into truth during the capitalist turn towards productivity and efficiency. Echoing post-structuralists like Michel Foucault, Wiles notes that "time is a socially produced act of dividing and counting, and time therefore has a history. Calendars and clocks are not simply a way of measuring time; they are a means of imparting a rhythm to life, which is another way of saying a discipline to life."<sup>22</sup>

David Wiles cites early twentieth century modernist philosophers like Henri Bergson who argued that we should "uncouple time from space" and as Wiles puts it, "seek the experience or duration, because space relates to the external world, while time is an aspect of consciousness and self."<sup>23</sup> As opposed to thinking about time as cogs moving in a machine turning external to the rhythm of our bodies, we can "cease to think of time as a thing, but manage to apprehend it as part of ourselves, then we discover the freedom to be ourselves."<sup>24</sup> Phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau Ponty push this tension farther, suggesting that not only is time an internal clock but an internal clock to be perceived mainly by our senses as opposed to our consciousness. Wiles cites Merleau Ponty who "argued that we cannot apprehend time through thought but only through our senses. My body is not some object from which I can actually separate my sense of self, and by the same token time is not some thing inside which I exist."<sup>25</sup> Henri Lefebvre too was interested in times that "contrasted the mechanical rhythms of capitalism with the polyrhythmia of a more natural human life."<sup>26</sup> In concert with one another, neoliberal

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<sup>22</sup> Wiles *Theatre & Time*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Wiles *Theatre & Time*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Wiles *Theatre & Time*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 10.

and carceral time are manipulations of time to extractive ends and this chapter considers the ways in which dramaturgical manipulations of time arrive at more liberatory ends.

### **Theatrical Time**

Rather than wielded as a weapon, time is a core generative principle of drama. Theatre's existence as live is a temporal imperative. Furthermore, theatre, through its definitive liveness, offers audiences the ability to observe and engage with manipulations of time. In his work articulating the features of postdramatic theatre, Hans Theis Lehmann speaks to the postdramatic "collision" with time as a key dramaturgical function of the new genre of performance.<sup>27</sup> This collision is generative. Lehmann states that through the relationship with the inevitable real time of performance, theatre can be used as a arena to notice and practice distortions and manipulations of time.

In the same way there is a duality and enmeshment of space through dramaturgies of the theatrical frame, theatre also presents at least a dual experience of time. As theorized by Patrice Pavis in his *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, "[a] fundamental point is the dual nature of time: there is the time that refers to itself, or *stage time*, and the time that must be reconstructed using a symbolic system, or off-stage time"<sup>28</sup> or what he refers to as dramatic time. In his entry on time, he lays out a taxonomy of various manipulations on time: when the dramatic time as greater than the stage time (many, many years in some of Shakespeare's history plays) or the Aristotelian practice of stage time being as equal to dramatic time.<sup>29</sup> Lehmann's postdrama disrupts, manipulates, distorts and focuses on time to "prevent the appearance of time as time," in favour of "the real time of the theatre process in its entirety, its fore and after play

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<sup>27</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, (London: Routledge, 2006), 155.

<sup>28</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Time," in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, 409.

<sup>29</sup> Pavis, "Time," 410.

and its accompanying circumstances; the circumstances that its reception in a very practical sense 'takes up' time, 'theatre time' that is life time and does not coincide with the time of its stage."<sup>30</sup> Lehmann writes that manipulating time is also a practice of the Brechtian tradition of Epic Theatre, where "part of the design of epic theatre is a dramaturgy of leaps in time that point to a human reality and behaviour as discontinuous."<sup>31</sup> In his book, David Wiles says when it comes to these dramaturgical manipulations of time, he is mainly interested in "the way in which plays are neither *in* time nor *about* time, but are *of* time."<sup>32</sup> Because the liveness of the theatrical frame creates a cleft, drawing a boundary between the time of the play, the space we are consciously sharing in a live performance, and the sprawling schedule of our continued life, we can rehearse abolitionist manipulations of time.

Theatre offers the arena to observe and engage with productive and generative manipulations of time that counter the carceral and capitalist weaponization and extraction of time. Theatre theorists and practitioners are experts at engaging with time as what Deborah Pollard calls a "compositional tool."<sup>33</sup> Through dramaturgical manipulation, time is stretched, thinned, slowed, stopped or layered to different dramaturgical aims. This taking control of time directly counters extractive carceral time discussed above. New Zealand based artist and scholar Pollard says that "time-based dramaturgies...directly aim to foreground the complex subjective experience of time that often belies accelerated contemporary living."<sup>34</sup> If the carceral context is a feature of contemporary living that relies on an accelerated death through "organized abandonment,"<sup>35</sup> how can dramaturgy provide us with examples of other, more liberating manipulations of time?

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<sup>30</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 154.

<sup>31</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 158.

<sup>32</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Pollard, "Entanglements with Time: Staging Duration and Repetition in the Theatre," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 76 (2020): 330.

<sup>34</sup> Pollard, "Entanglements with Time," 331.

<sup>35</sup> Gilmore "Forgotten Places," in *Abolition Geographies*, 471.

Through the analysis of two different case studies, this chapter focuses on two different abolitionist manipulations of time: durational time and syncopated time. This chapter investigates ways in which we can practice abolitionist dramaturgical manipulations of time.

I return now to Nicholas Fesette's writing about time in his article on abolition dramaturgies. He begins the second section of his paper "Abolition Dramaturgies: Reformance, Waywardness, and the End of the World" with a dramaturgical analysis of Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu's *Pass Over*, using the play as a case study in how "abolition stages creation, connection, and experimentation."<sup>36</sup> As Fesette points out, *Pass Over* is a play about passing time. Loosely inspired by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Pass Over* features Moses and Kitch, and "creates a dramatic situation wherein a world is imagined without carceral control in all its tentacular aspects."<sup>37</sup> Besides the perpetual waiting and passing time of its two protagonists, *Pass Over* exists in a complex temporal state. "This abolitionist vision of *Pass Over* captures the trans-temporal resonances of the play's title,"<sup>38</sup> argues Fesette. He draws our attention to the time and the setting of Nwandu's play: "now, right now / but also 1855 / but also 13th century BCE" and "a ghetto street. A lamppost. Night / but also a plantation / but also Egypt, a city built by slaves."<sup>39</sup> Much like the layered and unspecified boundaries between space when the theatrical frame is understood as a site of abolition, Fesette articulates the fact that time is malleable and lawyered in *Pass Over*. In the article, he names the dual dramaturgical effect of this expansive temporal situation in *Pass Over*. He says, "[t]he space-time that Nwandu conjures in her preliminary notes, in which the physical setting is expansively cross-temporal and transhistorical ('but also . . . but also . . .'), indexes how Moses and Kitch, as symbolic figures, have been

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Fesette. "Abolition Dramaturgies," 182.

<sup>37</sup> Fesette, "Abolition Dramaturgies," 183.

<sup>38</sup> Fesette, "Abolition Dramaturgies," 183.

<sup>39</sup> Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu, *Pass Over*, (New York: Grove Press, 2018), 5.

repeatedly ‘passed over’ by machinations of racial capitalism across time and space.”<sup>40</sup> Fesette points out that through the way time repeats itself in an uncertain and unsteady manner in *Pass Over*; we can notice the pervasive and cyclical effects of racial capitalism on Moses and Kitch. Building upon Fesette’s work in tracing the abolitionist potentials of manipulated temporality in *Pass Over*, I consider the potentials of duration and syncopation for the abolitionist project. Time, as theatre’s playground and prison’s weapon, is manipulatable to liberatory ends within the theatrical arena. This chapter proposes how this practice of manipulating time is a rehearsal for abolitionist manipulations of time that oppose carceral and neoliberal time.

### **Case Study: *Invisible***

The goal of Lilith & Cie’s seventy-two hour<sup>41</sup> participatory dance piece *Invisible* is to render the intelligence of the collective visible.<sup>42</sup> The title suggests that if our collective intelligence is generally invisible, three days with nine dancers and a dog in a dedicated collaborative space will render our collective brilliance obvious and perhaps already present. To manifest the tiny ecosystem of co-created utopic art in *Invisible*, the artists and participants use durational time as relational adhesive. “Offered as a game aiming to render collective intelligence visible,” *Invisible* “builds over time so that temporality becomes a choreographic material. Those who encounter the work withdraw themselves from the daily rush of activity and lose their sense of time.”<sup>43</sup> In opposition to the extractive qualities of carceral time, *Invisible* using durational time as a generative space and a compositional and relational practice.

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<sup>40</sup> Fesette, “Abolition Dramaturgies,” 184.

<sup>41</sup> Although this analysis discusses a 72-hour performance of *Invisible* at Montreal’s OFFTA in July 2022, the show itself is malleable and has been performed over 24, 36, 48 or 72 hours. This specific production of *Invisible* was produced by Lilith & Cie with Danse-Cité, LAVI – Laboratoire Arts Vivants et Interdisciplinarité, and Département de danse de l’UQAM.

<sup>42</sup> Aurélie Pedron and Kathy Casey, “Freedom in the Invitation: Lilith & Cie’s *Invisible*” *Canadian Theatre Review* 197 (Winter 2024): 82.

<sup>43</sup> “*Invisible*,” *Lilith & Cie*, accessed June 25 2024, [lilithetcie.com/portfolio/invisible-en/](https://lilithetcie.com/portfolio/invisible-en/)

Here's how it worked: over seventy-two hours, participants were invited to a large room full of objects waiting to be collaboratively animated. Choreographer Pedron was joined by nine dancers, her dramaturg Kathy Casey, and her dog. The room was full of plants, records, rugs, blankets, and couches. Along the perimeter there were corkboards and photos, a gramophone, a gong, a disco ball, and a lighting board. Journals and notes from the dancers were strewn about the room. Attendees came and went while nine dancers and the creative team stayed in the theatre. Through an introductory tabletop game, audience members were invited to participate in tasks like opening studio windows, operating the lights, and reconfiguring the carpets and furniture in the space. We were invited to DJ through overhead speakers by plugging our phones into aux cords hanging from the ceiling. Participants were instructed to play as much as possible, told our creative inputs will shape the experience. Together, the participants needed to negotiate turn taking, crafting both a queue and a vibe with each other while the dancers improvised and responded to the participatory inputs. Instructions for relation were not explicit but intuited. In addition to audience participation, the primary “compositional tool” that *Invisible* uses to reveal this atmospheric collective intelligence is durational time. *Invisible* manipulates time through its duration, offering the collective seventy-two hours together instead of the customary performance time of two or three hours.

*Invisible* relies on a gentle kind of ongoing community negotiation that requires a patient and sustained hand. *Invisible* uses durational time to co-create collaborative and liberatory ends. In *Invisible*, we are gifted a cleaved-out space that does not follow the rules of neoliberal time: there are no instructions, there is no task to “complete,” or the rules of carceral time: we are not being stolen from or entrapped. Rather, in this space, we are told to work together to reveal our collective desires and negotiate our time spent, together. This section of this chapter investigates

the ways in which seventy-two hours of *Invisible* aims to rehearse a kind of railing against the annihilation of space by time that dominates carceral capitalism. Through durational intimacy, *Invisible* creates a space by time.

My partner Cameron and I arrived at *Invisible* at 2pm, around hour 36 of the durational dance experience. We were met in the lobby by a guide who invited us to play a tabletop game to learn about the geographical boundaries of *Invisible*. First, he showed us a game board that mirrored the geography of the performance space. Here's the exit, here's a couch. He pointed out the eight aux cables along the perimeter of the space connected to speakers. He showed us a gramophone and a tape player. He directed us to the small section of the room that was a private Green Room for the dancers. From a deck of instructional cards, he laid out a series of phrases in both English and French that spoke to the values of the show. Some of these were suggestions and offers for our participatory gestures like "silence is a possibility" and "do nothing, receive" or "now might be a good time to play your music." These prompts did not feel limiting, they were reassuring. He then gave us each a different set of six cards and told us to choose two that described how we were feeling. Where the first set of cards were suggestions for my participation, this set of cards were feelings or states of being. I chose "I'm in a good mood" and "I'm feeling a bit shy." I returned them to the game master, and he gave me two cards in return, "let it be communicative" and "listening is an action." The game master tells us to exchange our shoes for our own complete deck of cards that offer more participatory prompts and suggestions. If we're feeling stuck with what to offer once we enter the dance constellation, we can pick a card and let it guide us. "Go whisper/say/sing something to a dancer," a card reads. "Go lay down in the center of the space." "Find a moment to go look out the window."

Sockless, we opened the door to the performance space, and it felt like I was entering a portal to another dimension. It was quiet, aside from the sounds of dancers in socks gliding on the floor in the center of the space. Four or five dancers moved in relative quiet while audience members cozied up on chairs around the perimeter of space. We immediately found an empty corner to take it all in. Seduced by the expansiveness of the invitation, I explored the perimeter alone while the dancers continued to glide in near silence. Cameron settled in a seat along the edge of the room. Directly opposite Cameron, I ended up in a corner with a napping person perched atop a hammock, a telephone with a lightbulb, a lighting board with a cue sheet, and a cork board with a bunch of pictures from the 80s and 90s. I pushed the button on the lighting board for cue 61 “cyan” and then (like a bad lighting designer) immediately changed my mind in favour of cue 63’s “red red red.” I felt a call to do something else. What should I do next? What’s the right thing to do? “Listening is an action.” Because of the expansiveness of the durational time and wide invitation, I did not feel rushed. I decided to do nothing and wait.

Suddenly, realness. A baby. The dancers and the assembled audience watched as the baby crawled into the middle of the room, clumsily making their way through the improvising dancers as if they were invited centre stage. The energy of this interruption was unexpected and electric. What will the baby do? What will we do? The music stopped and the baby clocked that they were the centre of the action. The baby raised their hands. The dancers did the same. The baby gurgled. The audience laughed. I honestly couldn’t tell you how long this moment lasted.

After the baby waddled back to their caregiver, I found a notebook sitting on a table and I opened it. It belonged to a dancer named Rachel. I remember a card from the deck that said I could read or write something in a dancer’s journal, so I gingerly opened the green book. Many of the entries are in French but some of them are in English. She writes, “I’m exhausted but my

yellow pants are bringing me joy.” I scan the room for yellow pants. I find her (and her pants), and I laugh to myself. I know you but you don’t know me. I talk to her in my head. I keep reading. She writes of the kind of elation and joy she feels in this sustained practice. She recognizes audience participants by name and clothing. I write her a secret note about how I’m feeling pressure to contribute something profound. I put the book back where I found it, and we leave the room.

From 2-9pm, *Invisible’s* dancers and other participants continued their sustained exploration of collective intelligence in the theatre, and Cameron and I walked 15,000 steps through Montreal. We talked about what songs we’d play when we had the courage to take over the aux cord. We walked around the Mile End neighbourhood with an imagined soundtrack in our heads, thinking about the ways the dancers could take our offer and spin them into gold. We reflected on our potential inputs to the space. We imagined the ways our choices would affect others. Cameron considered playing one of his favourite metal songs but then remembered the baby. As time passed for the dancers, it did for us as well. The world turned. The performance space kept going, with or without us. With time as the main ingredient, stretched and slowed, we were crafting collective intelligence.

When we arrived at 9pm, the energy was a bit more playful. Sexy. Vibrant. A group of six dancers were running and jumping about the space to something that sounded like Joe Cocker or 70s Beatles. The dancers seemed to be balancing between exertion and pleasure in every passing moment. Time passed. The dancer Silvia (earlier that afternoon, Cameron and I looked online to match photos to faces and learn their names) was wearing purple splash pants dancing to a Motown song with Charlie. They were having fun. So was the room. The dog approached Cameron and I for a welcome sniff then returned to her comfy bed. A bright purple light came on

in the corner with the phone and the hammock, and Pedron, the choreographer answered the call. She greeted the caller, chatting for a moment before she passed a set of Bluetooth headphones to Charlie who was dancing in the middle of the room. He talked to the caller in English while he continued to dance with the group. “The body is finite and I’m feeling that” he says, “but the spirit is infinite and I’m also feeling that.” How long have we all been together? How can the finite and infinite be held together in one body?

In an interview about *Invisible*'s participatory invitation for *Canadian Theatre Review*, Pedron and Casey explicitly name the fact that they are interested in using duration as a practice for crafting a space of *freedom* with this durational show. In this article they articulate the ways that they dramaturgically “structure the invitation to indirectly influence audience behavior, balancing freedom with limits.”<sup>44</sup> Part of these limits were to support a productive set of relations between participants and dancers, the point was “to create a relationship between the spectators and the dancers, cross-influence between the actions of the spectator, of the spectators on the dancers, of the dancers on the spectators, etc.”<sup>45</sup> In this way, *Invisible* uses durational dramaturgy as an arena for nurturing these relations *without* a strict set of finite rules to follow, without punishment if the rules aren't followed. In this interview, they articulate an abolitionist dramaturgy, the balance between supporting productive boundaries without restriction and separation. In this case, one of their dramaturgical practices for addressing the realities of a group of people sharing time and space is focused duration. Abolition doesn't insist that harm won't happen but rather, insists upon more productive, anti-carceral ways to meet harm when it does happen. The stretched time in *Invisible* makes this possible. This process of reimagining relations with strangers in a collective takes time.

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<sup>44</sup> Pedron and Casey, “Freedom in the Invitation,” 82.

<sup>45</sup> Pedron and Casey, “Freedom in the Invitation,” 87.

At 2am, we walked back to the theatre a different way, weaving through the alleyways, eavesdropping on various backyard parties, and inhaling second-hand smoke. We were half exhausted and half energized from the ways our real-world time passed while the fictional world time passed in parallel. We got to the building and from our vantage point outside, Cameron pointed to a third story window. The disco ball spun inside the theatre in soft purple light. The vibe in the room was very different in the middle of the night. Most of the pillows were now on the floor supporting sleepy heads and feet. The dog was sleeping deeply with two other participants on the couch.

Three of the dancers vibrated their bodies in silence in the middle of the space. The energy in the room felt manic under exhaustion. It felt like a too-late end to the party. Something in the room had overstayed its welcome. The vibrating continued for about 10 minutes until and under a hanging speaker that looks like a UFO, a couple started making out. I think about consent and care and wonder if the limits of this kind of free sustained play were more likely to be pushed in the middle of the night, in the dark. I wondered, in what ways can we negotiate out of this moment together, without boundaries and without punishment? Pedron walked over to a gong, rang it and all three dancers stopped vibrating immediately. Pedron plugs her phone into one of the aux cords and changes the feel of the room by playing Lee Perry's "Having a Party." She comes across as a loving matriarch, she had a light touch with her adjustment although it was powerful and transforming. The dancers notice her change the room. They look grateful.

After walking back to the hotel in the middle of the night, we fell asleep at 4am, making a playlist of songs we could bring to the dancers. Our metric for deciding what would work or not was slippery. Cameron wondered what would happen if he did decide to play something a bit more hardcore. Would the dancers enjoy dancing to our contribution? Would heavy metal scare

the dog? I found myself aware of the social stakes of choosing music; I rarely reached for the aux cord. I wanted to fill the time with something worthwhile, I wanted my contribution to be meaningful to the other strangers with whom I shared this experience. I remember it feeling nice to continue to dedicate time to this space in my head, while it was very much still vibrating eight blocks away.

When we returned to the theatre on the next day at 3pm, for the first time, we could hear the music from outside the room when we arrived. When we entered this time, there were nearly thirty audience members in the space. This was more people than we'd seen so far in the room. We sat in a corner on a wooden bench with an aux cord and settled in. As we got cozy, Rachel sat beside Cameron and said, "Have you tried playing music yet? It's fun, you'll like it." Did she read my note? Does she recognize us? I feel shy, grappling with an intense familiarity with this person and wondering if she recognized us. I wonder if, after seeing us return time and time again she recognized us. She must. This feels like a parasocial relationship. I wondered how she's passed her time. I wondered when she'd most recently slept or ate. She encouraged us gently. "This speaker is pretty quiet, so it's like you're the only people who will hear it." She walked away and Cameron and I looked at each other with determination. I played the song I'd been thinking about for three days, Donna Summer's "Bad Girls." The bench vibrated below us and we realized the speaker was under us, shaking our seat and reverberating the bass into the room. The people close to us started tapping their toes and I felt. I felt like a good party guest, I honoured the aux cord. I flashed Rachel a thumbs up. Rachel came back again and offered us each a piece of chocolate. A reward.

On the other side of the room, there was a woman who was dominating the aux cord, playing a few songs back-to-back. It was interesting to notice how sound had drawn two

concentric circles on the ground because in our little corner, we were all grooving to Donna Summer and on the other side, they were listening to a woman's ongoing playlist. I'm sure in the centre of the room, the songs overlapped for the dancers as they lived between sound worlds. Sylvia plugged her own phone in and played Quebecois rap with a heavy bass. She turned up the volume. The concentric circles disappear, and the room becomes huge again. I follow this sonic thread and play a song that reminds me of growing up with a group of Caribbean girlfriends. Sylvia smiles at me. The room changes again.

After our fourth visit, we decided it was time to make the trek back home to Kingston and we left the theatre at hour 71. On our drive home to Kingston, I called the theatre phone and left a message to thank them all for their sustained discovery. In a weird way, I felt like I was calling my family. They returned my call almost immediately, within two minutes. "Hi Mo? It's Rachel, I got your message." Rachel! I was shocked. "Of course I remember you!" What did she write about me in her notebook? Should we stay in touch? We talked about how she was feeling, and she told me she felt like a cloud. I feel like I'm back in the theatre with her or she's in the car with me.

This show is worth a lengthy description of the parts that I've provided here because according to how I understand the show's purpose, these tiny moments within the stretched out temporal dimensions are the alternative experiences of time that don't follow the rhythms of carceral time, ultimately revealing the collective intelligence. Durational and collaborative creativity enables the collective intelligence. *Invisible* asks us to feel, move, and embody different temporal rhythms of time as it passes to negotiate a new world together. How do people establish a queue without a facilitator? How can we decide which music fits the feeling of the room? What happens when something bad inevitably happens? The soft negotiation around

hogging the aux cable. The gong to stop the uncomfortable vibrations. The chocolate in exchange for a song. By taking the durational time to notice and negotiate freedom within boundaries but not borders, relational intimacy in *Invisible* reveals collective intelligence. As a long process of sense-making through negotiating how our offers affect others, we manipulated time to liberatory ends with everyone in the room. We worked together to reveal collective intelligence. These responses, intimate in their sustained existence and in their truly relational input and output, enact a micro-community, committed to revealing the collective intelligence.

People who are incarcerated are experts in manipulating time to survive the carceral context. Despite carceral time theft, people in prison stretch, shrink, or otherwise manipulate their experience of durational carceral time to survive. Regardless of the ways that the carceral context steals time through sentencing or organizes time through strict schedules that separate the carceral subject from his own temporal control, people inside prison find ways to manipulate time to liberatory ends. In the American Friends Service Committee's *Survivors Manual: Survival in Solitary*, Latif Asad Abdullah of California writes that one of the things he learned in solitary was the importance of using his time for contemplation, meditation and visualization. He says,

Those who have televisions: spend time watching nature programs, not for the lone sake of entertainment, but now in the context of an everyday struggle in which we realize the forces of sensory deprivation. Ponder the insights entailed within nature itself, as we look at animals, life beneath the sea, the galactical skies, the ecological systems, and we shall prevail.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Latif Asad Abdullah, "The Senses," *Survivors Manual: Survival in Solitary*, 18.

As Paul Redd of California writes, “You recall the old adage — cliché: don’t let time do you, you do the time.”<sup>47</sup> He uses time in solitary to imagine being elsewhere, “[o]nly my body is being held captive. To put it more plainly, 95% of time daily is spent writing and thinking outside of prison.”<sup>48</sup> In “Tips from a transgender woman in a men’s facility on surviving in AdSeg (higher levels),” Anonymous writes about the ways she also used durational time as transformational. While surviving inside she said one of the wisest choices she “made was to change my voice by reading aloud to myself, the best practice there is, and plenty of time to get the pitch just right.”<sup>49</sup> Anane Baye Camara writes that Time Management is one of the key survival tactics to endure solitary. They write about the danger of people inside aiming to simply pass time while they survive. Camara writes,

I say this because the concept itself is synonymous with bull shitting, and that isn’t healthy for those of us confined for years on end in Control Units or otherwise. So I have concluded that it’s important for us to formulate some form of “time management.” All one has to do is sit down with pen and paper and write out his daily activities for three days or so. If the individual is not involved in meaningful study, exercise, dialogue, etc., he quickly sees that his day is wasted aimlessly. So one should list the things they are interested in doing, chart them according to time of day and length and institute this daily. Being mindful of when you’re most alert for study, and appropriate times for exercise, meditation...But in such a situation as Control Units, it’s important to maintain control over our own selves as much as possible. Developing discipline is one thing, keeping it is another!”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Redd, “Inner consciousness v. isolation,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Redd, “Inner consciousness v. isolation,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, “Tips from a transgender woman in a men’s facility on surviving in AdSeg (higher levels),” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Anane Baye Camara, “A practical guide from an Indiana SHU,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 50.

In reflecting upon the ways that carceral time can corrode, Ronald Epps of Maryland writes “From within and beyond the one hundred thousand dollar, 8 by 14 square foot steel and stone Sensory Deprivation cell that is designed for my mental, physical, and social dehumanization, I bring to you this letter of concern regarding the adverse effects of long-term Sensory Deprivation.”<sup>51</sup> Epps spent more than a year in Supermax long-term intensive solitary confinement, “denied and deprived of direct human contact,” and when he finally was released he writes that,

a fellow prisoner shook my hand and then proceeded to put both arms around me to embrace me and I became visibly shaken and cringed up as if I had been physically violated. I had not had any physical contact with another human being in so long that I wasn’t used to being touched. I had become super-sensitive to one of the basic human senses — the sense of human touch.<sup>52</sup>

Epps writes that through long-term solitary confinement and sensory deprivation, he has “now become more anti-social than ever and I now have a zero-degree tolerance level for double-celling and general population settings.”<sup>53</sup>

If *Invisible’s* durational time is a compositional practice, stretching time in favour of generation, prison works with time as a decompositional tool in the exact opposite way. While many people inside find ways to be creative and take back the time that is stolen from them, prison is a durational experience that intends to be destructive. Time is what is served in contemporary carceral society. Time is what is lost. Stolen. Wasted. Taken. Where does it go? What is created from that theft? What is it for? Another kind of transformation must be possible.

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Epps, “Sensory Deprivation is Depravity,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 8-9.

<sup>52</sup> Epps, “Sensory Deprivation is Depravity,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Epps, “Sensory Deprivation is Depravity,” *Survivors Manual in Solitary*, 11.

Through its durational stretching around seeking participation (however small or mighty) *Invisible* puts a lot of faith in performance's capacity for generating emergence, for generating a space that is liberatory through a lengthy negotiation of boundaries. Much like the people in my citational universe, *Invisible* cleaves out a space for a world that emphasizes observation, interaction, negotiation, and collaboration through a durational container rather than separation and punishment. Although this show does have utopic tendencies, I am interested mainly in the ways they show invites a kind of co-regulated negotiation in dealing with the existence of conflict as it inevitably pops up. When a couple started making out under a light and Pédrón noticed discomfort from her dancers, she decided to redirect energy with a new song. She did not banish these participants; she changed the music. The negotiations of *Invisible* tell us that a new world that is already there if we look hard enough and take the time to work it out together. In other words, this durational show embraces the abolitionist notion that we keep each other safe. We negotiate boundaries and discomfort together. Abolitionist world building insists that divergent activities be negotiated without someone telling someone else what they can or cannot do. *Invisible* offers participants a rehearsal hall to learn about non-carceral or anti-carceral practices of place-making, like changing the music — literally changing the beat or the rhythm that organizes that spacetime - rather than escalating difference into conflict and potential exclusion or coercion. *Invisible* insists that in moments of conflict, collective intelligence is already in the room through the way we negotiate boundaries with one another and use our time to productive ends. Using time as a compositional practice in this way can present an antidote to carceral capitalist manipulations of time. In *Invisible* and other durational worlds, "time-based dramaturgies in the work directly aim to foreground the complex subjective experience of time

that often belies accelerated contemporary living.”<sup>54</sup> In *Invisible*, time is shared but not stolen. Time is spent and not taken. Conflict is not erased but rather, worked out in a way that doesn’t require segregation and separation but rather through reconfiguring space-time in a different way.

In spending this time, the theatre space of *Invisible* becomes a space in which everyone is free. Not free to do harm, but free to do what they want to build the world they want. Free to take actual-world time to make offers based on careful reflection. Free to take time to feel comfortable in the room. In using duration as a compositional practice, the space can become a co-created and negotiated liberatory space. The show never results in anything beyond the sustained experiment. There is no rehearsal for a show because rehearsal, as shown in *Invisible*, is an end to itself rather than a preparation for something else. The time spent in the room is precious and fleeting. Participants and dancers are not preparing or rehearsing for a performance through this improvisational participation. In *Invisible*, there is no plot or characters besides the people inhabiting the room, existing, inspired and exhausted, in the here and now. The space provides a frame for us to arrive and explore these ways of arrangement so we can both reveal and imagine the future that is already here, if we take the time to notice. *Invisible* is an anti-carceral rehearsal hall, counteracting the temporality of the prison industrial complex through its open choreography and durational time.

Jill Dolan says, “utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better.”<sup>55</sup> *Invisible*, in its duration, presents a space to practice observation, negotiation, collaboration and intimacy, even in the face of conflicting ideas about how the world should be. Time is the collective’s embrace. Citing Hans Theis Lehman, Deborah Pollard says that “time-based dramaturgy deconstructs how meaning might be perceived within

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<sup>54</sup> Pollard, “Entanglements with Time,” 331.

<sup>55</sup> Jill Dolan. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, 6.

the theatre medium.”<sup>56</sup> In *Invisible*, durational participation brings a collective together to negotiate and make decisions on a small scale. The work is intensely relational, amplified through duration. Pollard says, “time can be experienced as a measurement of past and future, as chronology, as cycles of nature and the cosmos, as mathematical equations and as tempo and rhythm.”<sup>57</sup> The liveness of the durational theatrical event makes the complex subjective experience of time a collective and generative one.

### **Case Study: *What Fools We Mortals Be***

Syncopation is another kind of temporal adjustment. In music, syncopation speaks to a disruption in the expectations of rhythm. By stressing the off-beat or a surprising accent, syncopation plays havoc with the notion that musical time moves forward uninterrupted and even. Determinate. Syncopation happens in between beats, between the previously established rhythm and inserting something surprising. The result may sometimes out of tune or off beat but appealing in its temporal dissonance. Unexpected. Affected. Syncopation implies both movement and pause, the expected and the unexpected note, resulting in something dissonant and surprising. Whereas duration stretches time to enable new co-creative futurities, syncopation stops and starts time, manifesting disruption and discontinuity. Manipulating time through syncopation offers a look at multiple temporalities housed within and between capitalist clock-time, disrupting the violence of neoliberal and carceral time.

Syncopation can be measured in tiny, incremental units, like beat to beat or second to second but it can also reference larger swaths of time, past and present and future. In her book *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider writes about the dramaturgy of historical re-enactments

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<sup>56</sup> Pollard, “Entanglements with Time,” 336.

<sup>57</sup> Pollard, “Entanglements with Time,” 334.

as a visible act of staging time distorted and out of sequence. She writes between what she names as “art and war,” studying practices of re-enactment both in the realm of US Civil War reenactments and in theatre and performance art. She is interested in

the citational ‘get-up’ of the before, during, and after of any action taking place in or as re-action: the affected effects and after-affects of art/events posed as relative to origin(al)s. I wonder here not only about the “as if” but also about the “what if”: what if time (re)turns? What does it drag along with it? I am interested in the attempt to literally touch time through the residue of the gesture or the cross-temporality of the pose.<sup>58</sup>

Schneider is interested in the capacity of performance or in this case, re-performance, to “touch” time. Re-enactments in both the historical and performance context make visible the uses of time as a compositional tool, housing more than one temporality at once for a certain dramaturgical reason. Perhaps the historical re-enactment is an act of nostalgia, a marker of ways we have or haven’t really changed from the period we’re reinhabited.

Schneider also points to a variety of approaches of manipulating time through doubling it. She points towards the Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, an uncannily perfect re-enactment of an archival of *Hamlet*. In this production, the repetition makes visible the “labor of repetition is, in such work, rendered apparent as labor.”<sup>59</sup> This labour of repetition curiously shows us both how possible and impossible it is to fully and accurately represent the past. Referencing The Wooster Group’s *Poor Theatre* where actors painstakingly re-enact scenes alongside filmed documentary, Schneider names the “a queasy reiteration in which the live actors appear ghost-like and the

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<sup>58</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 2.

<sup>59</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 16.

filmic actors appear oddly enlivened across the undecidable interstices of their cross-temporal mimesis.”<sup>60</sup>

While the previous section of this chapter dealt with touching time through stretching time and the prison industrial complex deals with wielding time by weaponizing it, Schneider isolates and analyzes another kind of “the temporal tangle.”<sup>61</sup> Where the first case study of this chapter was about the ongoing-ness of time, this second case study is about the start and the stop and what happens in between. Regardless of how time is controlled by the carceral context, something surprising happens between the beats.

Schneider’s analysis is centered around time’s returns, the double, and the leakage that accompanies the doubling of temporalities in one single view. Where linear concepts of time insist upon the fleeting, ephemeral, and spent quality of time, Schneider articulates that “[r]eenactment troubles linear temporality by offering at least the suggestion of recurrence, or return, even if the practice is peppered with its own ongoing incompleteness.”<sup>62</sup> This treatment of time as recurring, returning, and incomplete is an abolition dramaturgy. When actors in Schneider’s performance art experiences or US Civil War reenactments in the present attempt to try at “re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork or act” they are participating in the “memory industry,” with “authenticity”<sup>63</sup> as a leading dramaturgical objective. Driven by this desire for authenticity, re-enactments create an effect that Schneider refers to as “syncopated time,” a disruption of the apparently solid line between then and now, making simultaneously visible both the past and present.<sup>64</sup> The living is visible in the dead and the past is visible in the

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<sup>60</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Schneider *Performing Remains*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 14.

present, disjointed, out of sequence and interrupting/ed. The impossibilities and failures to meet authenticity become paramount and generative. Schneider argues that the most fruitful part of performance as a “time-based art [encounters]” is in thinking about “the fold: the double, the second, the clone, the uncanny, the againness of (re)enactment. This book, then, troubles the prevalence of presentism, immediacy, and linear time in most thinking about live performance.”<sup>65</sup> We are quick to notice the impossibilities of authentic re-performance when the fold is thick and the present is in obvious view. What theorist Richard Schechner refers to as the inherent existence of “twice-behaved behaviors” trouble linear and an uninterrupted flow of time. If time can be folded in upon itself, what is the relationship between present and the past? If Schneider is interested in moments when time isn’t just fleeting and can be re-performed and doubled, how can we think through doubled time within the abolitionist frameworks of de-weaponizing time?

My master’s thesis centered around dramaturgically activating the temporal fold by performing historical stories in site-specific locations. I was interested in the ways that site-specific performance could activate a feeling of connection with the past, more specifically, a connection between “then, now, and since.”<sup>66</sup> Through performance that activated the site as witness, my thesis work manifested a “double or even triple time register,”<sup>67</sup> in order to open a space to consider our deep connection not just to history but to everything else that inhabited these spaces between then and now. By activating the space as witness to both the past (through historical performance) and the present (through the audience watching in situ), historical site-

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<sup>65</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Mariah Horner and Grahame Renyk. “Matter Matters: Performing a Stone in the Woods,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 163 (2015): 59–63.

<sup>67</sup> Freddie Rokem. *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, (University of Iowa Press: 2000), 21.

specific performance uses Schneider’s folds and syncopation to complicate messy truths of history and performance. “By juxtaposing reality (through the materiality of site) and fiction (fiction in narrative and storytelling),” site-specific historical performance “serves to make visible history as performance, as arbitrarily recorded, as flawed, as performative, and as flexible to change as memory.”<sup>68</sup> In historical site-specific performance, syncopating time and double time registers allows for a specific kind of witnessing capacity for the audience.

A similar tension between stop and start and life and death in re-enactments is present in the tensions between photography and live performance. Translated from French as ‘living pictures’, *tableaux vivants* feature live models frozen and silent in a dynamic image. Somewhere between a living painting and a live performance, *tableaux vivants* privilege stillness. A still and quiet form of live performance, *tableaux vivants* feel like a living, breathing photograph. In many cases, special emphasis is placed on posing the human form, lush costumes, makeup and set, and dramatic facial expressions. Tufts University Professor Tina Wasserman traces the genealogy of *tableaux vivant*, asserting:

[m]uch like the static posture of the living model –posed as such for a drawing, painting, or sculpture – the *tableau vivant* stages the body into a motionless and silent pose. A close ancestral form to the later mechanical recording technologies of photography and cinema, it predates and prefigures both as an early form of live visual reproduction.<sup>69</sup>

Wasserman says that “technique appears to have originated as medieval liturgical dramas and later evolved into popular entertainment and secularized art forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that replicated well-known works of art, dramatic scenes from literature and

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<sup>68</sup> Mariah Horner, “Performing the Past in Situ,” Master’s Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2017, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Tina Wasserman, “Still Lives: *Tableaux Vivants*, Moving Images, and the Digital Uncanny,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40 no.5, (February 2022): 582.

historical scenarios.”<sup>70</sup> Accompanying this history in pageantry, at the turn of the 20th century, tableaux vivant was used in protest and politics. Notably, in 1913 at the Hollywood Bowl, W.E.B DuBois directed a pageant-style tableau vivant, called *The Star of Ethiopia* to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>71</sup>

In Wasserman’s study of Vancouver-based artist Adad Hannah’s tableaux vivants, she says “[w]ith such distinctive temporalities drawn, photography seemed to fortify its aesthetics around stillness, the past, and deathliness, while cinema, conversely, around movement, the present, and lifelikeness.”<sup>72</sup> Photography has another kind of syncopated temporality, an abrupt stop. There is a snapshot taken while time marches forward, in photography there is sometimes surprising activity in the syncopation. We know there was likely movement and transformation before and after the photo was taken. “This challenge of confronting ‘simultaneous temporal registers,’ or the awareness of the visible then and now,” Schneider says, categorizes reenactment as “not the thing itself (the past), somehow also not not the thing (the past).”<sup>73</sup> This is similar in photography. We know the photo isn’t *the* event but rather, a moment of the event, frozen in time. While Wasserman, a moving image studies and trauma and memory studies scholar, writes about Hannah’s tableaux vivants staging of Théodore Géricault’s nineteenth-century painting, “The Raft of the Medusa,” the second case study in this chapter looks at a collaborative tableau vivant that Hannah created with formerly incarcerated women at the Circle Project called *What Fools These Mortals Be*.

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<sup>70</sup> Wasserman, “Still Lives,” 582.

<sup>71</sup> Shannon Murphy, “Tableaux Vivant: History and Practise,” *Art Museum Teaching: A Forum for Reflecting on Practice*. December 2012. [artmuseumteaching.com/2012/12/06/tableaux-vivant-history-and-practise/](http://artmuseumteaching.com/2012/12/06/tableaux-vivant-history-and-practise/)

<sup>72</sup> Wasserman, “Still Live,” 577.

<sup>73</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 8.

Created in 2019 by filmmaker Brenda Longfellow and restorative justice practitioner Brenda Morrison, The Circle Project is an ongoing arts project that facilitates collaborative relationships between artists and formerly incarcerated women in Vancouver. In the “about” section on their website, The Circle Project says they are interested in using “imagination, storytelling, performance and play to generate rich and intimate encounters with the complex and layered experience of women who are reclaiming their lives on the outside.”<sup>74</sup> If understood through the lens of applied theatre tradition, The Circle Project facilitates theatre and other art practices as tools to these formerly incarcerated women, practices for expressing themselves as they re-experience life now outside of prison. The Circle Project is an arts collective interested in looking at art as a way communicate the complexities of living as a formerly incarcerated woman.

In February 2022, The Circle Project invited artist Adad Hannah to stage a tableau vivant with a group of formerly incarcerated women, filmmakers, and restorative justice practitioners. After a few weeks of rehearsals and workshops exploring what form the group wanted the project to take, one of the participants, Jess Hanley, suggested the group stage a version of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Over three weeks in studio, the Circle Project artists would construct the set, props, and costumes used in the project and perform all the characters in *What Fools These Mortals Be* loosely based on Shakespeare’s play. Featuring Erica Anthony, Becky Blonski, Rosie Cece, Chas Coutlee, Barb Davidson, Monica Graham, Jessy Hanley, Jodi Savage, Amanda Staller, Cathee Porter, Meena Toor, Emily Trainer, Natasha Warren, and Pam Young, the tableaux vivants film *What Fools These Mortals Be* is a suspended take on the classic.

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<sup>74</sup> “About,” *The Circle Project*, accessed January 14, 2023 [thecircleproject.online/about/](https://thecircleproject.online/about/)

Reading Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with abolition and syncopation in mind illuminates carceral tensions between anarchy and order in the city and the forest. Through both dreams and magic, Shakespeare's characters' lives are syncopated, starkly and abruptly altered throughout the play. They fall asleep and wake up completely changed. Rules are written and rewritten. Early in the play, we learn that young lover Hermia is under the threat of death or banishment due to her father's anger over her choosing a lover that he doesn't approve of. Wanting to avoid her punishment and marry her true love Lysander, Hermia flees and leaves the city walls to go to the forest, "the wood, a league without the town."<sup>75</sup> The two lovers sleep. Once in the forest, Lysander and Hermia are joined by Helena and Demetrius and all four young lovers fall into the rules of the forest, victim to Puck, Oberon, and Titania's magic interventions, who meddle with the outcome of the four young lovers and in a twist of fate, all switch lovers. In witnessing the chaos of the young lovers and the constant changing of their minds, Puck exclaims the title of the Circle Project's adaptation, "what fools these mortals be!"<sup>76</sup> Falling victim to magic spells and the alluring power of dreams, the characters in *Midsummer Night's Dream* lives are syncopated by sleep. They fall asleep in love with someone, then they wake up in love with someone else. Undeniable livelihood and transformation happen between the pauses. Surprising dissonance influences the characters in the spaces in between waking hours.

Examined as a work of abolition dramaturgy, *What Fool These Mortals Be* adapts *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a filmed series of tableaux vivants or living pictures that employ syncopation as a time-strategy to depict and disrupt the experiences of neoliberal carceral time. The film is silent, bouncing between frozen tableaux featuring women from the Circle Project

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<sup>75</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Russ McDonald, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 9.

<sup>76</sup> Shakespeare, *Midsummer Nights Dream*, 45.

that reanimate memorable moments in the play. Each scene features multiple angles on a tableau vivant that features textural costumes and rich set and lighting design. Although the actors are frozen in tableau, they are undeniably active and alive. *What Fool These Mortals Be* adapts *Midsummer Night's Dream* into a 27-minute filmed series of living pictures that feature the formerly incarcerated women of the Circle Project. The film is silent, bouncing between tableaux that feature women reanimating memorable moments in the play. The moment when Bottom is turned into an ass. A depiction of the four lovers quarrelling. A still of Hermia being banished by her father. Each scene features multiple angles on a live picture, frozen in time. Although the actors are frozen in tableaux, there is a tension between their inevitable liveliness and the desire to stay still. When Oberon tasks Puck with creating a love potion to trick Titania, although frozen in tableaux, we watch Puck's eyes widen and zero in on a rhinestoned orange flower, like they are zeroing in with focus. In this way, these performers are dancers, performing the art and the work of staying still.

The actors are trying to hold a pose but there is significant effort in stillness. Rather than being frozen in time like in a photograph, or actively animated trying to recreate a battle like in a US Civil War re-enactment, viewers can feel the tense effort it took to craft the scene. Their hands shake slightly as they maintain the freeze, dipping the glistening flower in a jar, the moment suspended in air. Later in the play when the mechanicals take on their play-within-a-play, Flute as Thisbe and Bottom as Pyramus kiss through a hole in the wall. Because the actors freeze in tableaux just before the kiss, we watch them softly sway back and forth, like a magnet is keeping them in suspended attraction. Shaking slightly and inching together and away from each other as they hold the pose. This stillness but inevitable life presents a rich commentary on life after prison here. After prison, incarcerated people are forced to work so hard just to stay

still, to maintain the basic means of life and to endure what's next. They carry the normalizing weight of the collateral consequences of having been in prison, being surveilled by parole officers and checking in constantly with the state. There are so many difficult to navigate and normalizing rules that formerly incarcerated people are straining under, so much weight they're carrying, just to stay still and survive.

Because of the silent tableaux, *What Fools We Mortals Be* seems to live in a pause. The women in the tableaux are as still as possible but they are obviously breathing, blinking, and swaying softly, their livingness resisting the stillness of the frozen picture. The complexities and impossibilities of the tableaux vivant are another manipulation of time, stopping it while it is still alive, making visible both the freeze and the life behind the freeze. At first glance, each scene looks like a still picture but the longer we watch, we see the traces of living, breathing existence animating the forced freeze of the tableaux. We watch the actors breathe, blink, smile, or sway within their playful expressions. Although the actors are stuck in situ, life exists vibrantly underneath. Time stands still and yet the story unfolds. This is a tension between the dynamic nature of film and the frozen quality of photographer. Wasserman writes about the ways the two temporalities of the photo and the video, complicate each other as Hannah “has harnessed the stillness associated with photography as a disruptive force to puncture the passage of time we normally associate with cinema.”<sup>77</sup>

*What Fools These Mortals Be* exists in syncopated time, in the stillness of the picture and the lives of those inhabit it. Despite the pause, the breath of these formerly incarcerated women continues as vibrant. There is vibrancy beneath the sentence of stillness. Importantly, this stillness is different in many ways from the imposed containment and stillness of a prison

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<sup>77</sup> Wasserman, “Still Lives,” 591.

sentence. It is peopled, for one. The women performed these acts together. It is lush and vibrant, in both imagination (it's a play) and materiality (the costumes and set are gorgeous). Most importantly, it's generative. It's composition. This act of stillness was a consented to collective creation.

Why is syncopated time an abolitionist manipulation of time? In a video about the making of *What Fools These Mortals Be* one of the women talks about how prison also put her own life in a pause. She speaks about how although she is free from her time in a federal prison, she is still stuck conceptually within the walls of the institution. Her existence as a temporal subject is split, still serving "time" of her sentence through the violent surveillance by parole officers and in governmental record on the outside. Through her experience with the Circle Project, she was able to play in another world while still facing the stuck reality of her own. She said that theatre, or more specifically, this show "brings us to a fantasy world."<sup>78</sup> This act of moving elsewhere approaches what Jill Dolan subtitles her introduction in *Utopia in Performance*: "the feeling of being elsewhere."<sup>79</sup> Although paused in tableaux, these characters are accessing magical anarchy within the woods. Although they are free, the actors are still attached to the prison as "formerly incarcerated people." Although not a live performance, there is a special kind of embrace of failure and ephemerality in *What Fools These Mortals Be*, as the breathing women fail at staying frozen and that is the point. Their livingness cannot be denied. Their living breathing selves are too vibrant to be kept still. Still in the tradition of the revolutionary power of Boal's theatre he says that "theatre is change and not simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being"<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Brenda Longfellow, "What Fools We Mortals Be: The Making Of," *Vimeo*, uploaded Monday September 5 2022, [vimeo.com/746707559](https://vimeo.com/746707559)

<sup>79</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope in the Theatre*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 28.

In his book *Theatre & Time*, David Wiles offers five thoughts on rhythm. First, he says, “rhythm is movement.”<sup>81</sup> Even in the distorted or manipulated rhythm of syncopation, there is an element of pause and restart; the pause is a precursor or result of movement. Rhythm is continuum. That connects nicely with the tableaux vivant in *What Fools These Mortals Be*, where for the characters, dreams change the course of everything; lovers become enemies and vice versa. Formerly incarcerated women experience a similar kind of radical change through pause and restart. Lives are put on a forced pause in prison, as time is fast forwarded, stolen through the prison industrial complex. When this forced pause comes to an end and the ‘play’ button is pushed again, time has both stood still and sped up. The Circle Project then invites formerly incarcerated women to create their own pause, taking time out from the pressures of ‘successful re-entry’ to be still together. Syncopated time helps to account for the folded duplicity and complexity of inside/outside and the layered freedom of dreaming other realities from within a prison cell. Syncopated time includes disjointed visits from friends and family that surprisingly interrupt and suspend the durational punishment that is serving time inside. As time is actively being stolen while it stands still, syncopation is a confusing kind of stopped and started punctuation from inside the prison walls.

This chapter is concerned with the ways dramaturgy can manipulate time in parallel ways to abolition, countering the annihilation of space by time in the carceral context. In what ways do theatre and prison create or destroy through sustained and held attention, through time passing, or through repetition? How can the dramaturgical practice in manipulating time be an arena for creating and destroying time in an abolitionist awareness? If the carceral system can, like

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<sup>81</sup> Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 15.

Gilmore asserts, annihilate space by time for lives deemed disposable, how can theatre emancipate or liberate space by time? Or liberate space with time?

## **Chapter 4: Rehearsals**

### ***The Godot Cycle: Repetition and Rehearsal***

In the sweltering summer heat, actors Eric Craig and David Christo “look like shit”<sup>1</sup> as they wrap up the final moments of their fifty-four-hour cycle of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in an underground parking garage at the 2011 Toronto Fringe Festival. In a review of the play in *Canadian Theatre Review* playwright David Yee compares the looping experience of this production of *Godot* to attending a “real life *Fight Club*,”<sup>2</sup> with both actors exhausted and dirty after performing the entirety of *Waiting for Godot* a total of twenty-three times in a row. Yee said that this experience was not like watching a play, it was like watching a “title fight” between “Christo & Craig vs. Time & Fatigue.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Godot Cycle* starred Christo as Estragon and Craig as Vladimir in a production that looped for more than two days. No intermission. Over and over and over again. Only leaving the stage for a ten second to ten minutes break between the performances, the actors were performing a marathon. Audience members could come and go to this parking garage as they pleased (one person apparently stayed for fifty-two hours before leaving.) While Christo and Craig continued their marathon performance time and time again, Pozzo, Lucky, and the Boy would be played by twenty-five different actors who swapped in and out during the cycle.

*Waiting for a Godot* is a great candidate for a durational adaptation. It’s about waiting. Famously in limbo, Estragon and Vladimir are stuck in suspension, waiting for something that is unclear. In his review, Yee cites Craig in saying that “the themes of futility and the *struggle to*

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<sup>1</sup> David Yee. “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before: A Review of The Godot Cycle,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 152 (Fall 2012): 68.

<sup>2</sup> Yee, “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before,” 68.

<sup>3</sup> Yee, “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before,” 68.

*continue* seemed germane to the [durational] concept, but also increasingly relevant to the trappings of daily life.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically countering the binge-paced dramaturgy of attending as many shows as possible in a Fringe festival, this marathon performance seemed meaningful against the rapid-fire artistic consumption at the Toronto Fringe in 2011. *The Godot Cycle* said wait with us for a while. We are and sweaty and exhausted but still we pass the time. Taking the time to do this over and over together has meaning. Yee says, “In a play that’s famous for nothing happening, the repetition of that *absence of progression* created a potential energy in the room that, over fifty-four hours, became achingly palpable.”<sup>5</sup> This lack of progression and on-stage stagnation famously punctuates *Waiting for a Godot*, and is amplified in a durational staging like in *The Godot Cycle*. According to Yee, this tension between the ongoing repetition of the durational loop and the stillness of the plot, surprisingly brought a level of energy and “hopefulness”<sup>6</sup> to the show. The actor bodies could in fact persist! They could experience the piece again and again and again and again in a “communal atmosphere of hope and desperation.”<sup>7</sup> In another reflective piece of writing in *Canadian Theatre Review*, performance scholar Lawrence Switzky noticed that this direction encouraged a kind of paying attention to “collective feelings”<sup>8</sup> as the time passed. It was easy to notice the vibe shift in the room. Estragon and Vladimir’s hopelessness and frustration is shared by an audience, some of which have shared the space for hours together. Some of those feelings are countered by the audience desire to watch these actors win the marathon. In his article, Switzky looks at two durational shows to explore the transformative potential of duration, analyzing how laboured exertion can

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<sup>4</sup> Yee, “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before,” 68.

<sup>5</sup> Yee, “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before,” 68.

<sup>6</sup> Yee, “I Feel Like We’ve Been Here Before,” 69.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Switzky. “Marathon Theatre as Affective Labour: Productive Exhaustion in The Godot Cycle and Life and Times.” *Canadian Theatre Review* 162 (Spring 2015): 26.

<sup>8</sup> Switzky, “Marathon Theatre,” 26.

be transformed into hope through theatrical process and the community that is gathered. The act of *doing* the dramaturgy over and over again is in and of itself transformational. The focus on process being the point is amplified through the fact that the performance is repeated, again and again.

Abolition is a dream for the future but also is actively happening in the present. While the goal is the abolition of all prisons, jails, institutions, police and the many intersecting institutions and ideologies that prop up the prison industrial complex, we are walking toward abolition every day. Abolition is being manifested in many small and big ways actively on the ground every day because abolition is preparation, but it is also process in the present. Organizations like the Prisoner's Correspondence Project out of Montreal connect people on the outside with incarcerated neighbours and strangers through a pen pal project. Artists, educators, caregivers, death workers, loved one's advocate for and visit their incarcerated kin inside. Abolitionist activists and individuals are actively wearing away at the prison industrial complex every day. Enacting what El Jones calls "Abolitionist Intimacies" is both rehearsing the abolitionist world we want for future generations while also actively manifesting it for the now. Repetition, which I extend to the concept of theatrical rehearsals, is another dramaturgical practice for the abolitionist future.

Transformative Justice (TJ) as an alternative to carceral punishment practices many dramaturgies that I would associate with rehearsal. As defined by Mia Mingus on *Transform Harm*, transformative justice is "a political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm and abuse. At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging in harm reduction to lessen the violence. TJ can be thought of as a way of

‘making things right,’ getting in ‘right relation,’ or creating justice together.”<sup>9</sup> TJ practices emphasize context, conversation, and healing above punishment and segregation. Some examples of TJ processes are healing circles, education and prevention, and dialogue. TJ is about looking at both the conditions of the harm and the conditions to ensure it doesn’t happen again. TJ as an act is an interactive process, a verb and a place. As we enact alternatives to carceral punishment we are manifesting what Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to as an abolition geography.

Like an act of TJ, the rehearsal is also both an act and a space. It houses a distinct act that is both the thing and a space to prepare the thing. It features a collective of creators imagining and manifesting a new world through negotiation, embodiment, and ephemerality. Rehearsals house collective feedback and collective witnessing. This chapter is about rehearsals as site of a process for abolition, considering the ways that rehearsals enact the abolitionist practices of understanding, dialogue, compassion, repetition, failure, collectivity, and negotiation.

### **Dramaturgies of Rehearsal**

Translated as *répétition* in French, rehearsal is a preparatory space and time. It is both a practice or a trial and a low-stakes event that serves to embody potential dramaturgical, acting, or scenographic choices. It’s mechanical and it’s iterative. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, Patrice Pavis defines the rehearsal as “[w]ork by the *actors*, supervised by the director, in which they learn their lines and prepare the performance.”<sup>10</sup> Pavis conjures the German translation for rehearsal, *Probe*, and says it “gives a much better idea of the experimentation and the trial-and-error process involved before a final solution is adopted.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,” *Transform Harm: A Resource Hub for Ending Violence*, January 11 2019, [transformharm.org/tj\\_resource/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/](https://transformharm.org/tj_resource/transformative-justice-a-brief-description/)

<sup>10</sup> Patrice Pavis, “Rehearsal”, in *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> Pavis, “Rehearsal”, 308.

Rehearsal is a pre-performance space for trial and error, making space for both effort and failure. In Mark Fortier's book *Theory/Theatre*, he cites acclaimed theatre director Peter Brook in saying, "if rehearsals are performances, performances must retain the quality of rehearsals: 'creation and exploration need not and, in fact, must not stop on the last day of rehearsal'; theatre is always a self-destructive act and is always written in the wind."<sup>12</sup> If theatre is ephemeral, rehearsals occupy even more ephemerality in their preparatory state. Although rehearsals are theatrical, they are not exactly performances. They contribute to performances but unlike performance, there is no audience that is external to the theatrical process. Rehearsal occupies a complex space between life and performance.

Rehearsal duplicates a scenario to prepare for a desired outcome. Rehearsal asks us to practice for the "real thing," by embodying a variety of choices to learn how it feels in our bodies. As opposed to just "reading" a text, rehearsal invites players to embody the performance gestures. "Try it on your feet," you'll hear a director say. Actors are asked to try out certain choreography or tonality in their voices. Actors can be asked to follow their instincts or instead, take direction. Rehearsal is a repetitive practice that prepares through inviting embodiment ahead of time, what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls "prefigurative politics,"<sup>13</sup> or living like the liberatory future has already happened.

There are a variety of theoretical and practical approaches to rehearsals throughout theatre history and geography. In typical unionized theatre spaces here and now in so-called Canada, rehearsal processes occur four to six weeks immediately preceding the performance, where actors and directors will work out the mechanics of a performance by embodying it ahead of time, both through conversation and through actual play. They will work together and try new

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre*, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 149.

things, making offers and responding to offers from others. As with any other theatrical practices, there are a variety of guides that point towards specific rehearsal techniques for different desired outcomes or genres. Sometimes rehearsals involve the entire production team, sometimes they are one-on-one between director and actor. Sometimes intimacy directors are hired in rehearsal contexts where vulnerability and consent feel paramount. Some rehearsals are improvised. Some rehearsals are table reads or meditations or workshops. Some rehearsals are open to the public, but most are closed.

One important non-abolitionist element of rehearsals for most mainstream, unionized theatre in my contemporary and geographical context is the desire for perfection and repeatability. When rehearsals use their mechanics to produce a repeatable and symmetrical performance, rehearsals are not liberatory. These kinds of rehearsals produce fixity as opposed to experimentation and embodiment. These kinds of rehearsals can resist spontaneity, randomness and surprise. Abolitionist rehearsals give us the opportunity, the stable footing, and the generative thought to be prepared to face randomness and unpleasantness when it inevitably comes for us. The abolitionist rehearsals I imagine are open to exploratory play. They are full of offers and safety and care.

Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud's respective 20th century rehearsal halls offer a pleasantly messy use for the performance practice. Both Artaud and Brecht were less interested in the kind of repeatable symmetry and thick frame that came from bourgeois theatre and more interested in activating visceral awareness of verisimilitude, or social truth, beyond the theatre walls. Because both Artaud and Brecht are interested in piercing the protective frame between theatre and life, rehearsals were understood less as a space for perfection and more as a flexible and quotidian space. Life seeps through the rehearsal doors and rehearsal techniques can be used to guide life.

Like Brecht and Artaud, Brazilian theatre maker and activist Augusto Boal, also had a specific revolutionary and generative use for rehearsals in his theatre. Like Brecht, Boal was interested in using theatre as a tool to create social change. Boal's rehearsals were not preparing symmetry and perfection but were rather "rehearsals for a revolution."<sup>14</sup> Boal's rehearsals were practice space for conflict and transformation.

Beginning with Brecht, Boal and Artaud, how can we theorize rehearsal not within the lens of bourgeois theatre as a tool of repeatable symmetry but rather a messy but productive practice space to manifest an alternate reality? How can the rehearsal be theorized as a rehearsal for the abolitionist revolution? How can we conceptualize rehearsal with one foot in and one foot out of its quotidian potential and use their preparatory space in the abolitionist project? How can we assert the practices and values within rehearsal, like failure, low stakes, repetition, in favour of the liberatory abolitionist present and future?

#### *Antonin Artaud's Rehearsal: Transformation*

In Liz Tomlin's *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990-2010*, she cites Antonin Artaud's specific resistance to the repetition for perfection that occurs within the theatre. Artaud, a French artist and major player in Europe's avant-garde making work in the early 20th century, had a major influence on understanding the theatrical machine as having a very powerful social function that moved beyond representative repetition. Tomlin argues that "Artaud's vision was of a theatre that refused repetition;"<sup>15</sup> she cites him further saying "that what has already been said no longer needs saying; then an expression twice used is of no value since it does not have two lives. Once spoken, all speech is

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<sup>14</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory, 1990-2010*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 25.

dead and only active as it is spoken.”<sup>16</sup> Rehearsal repetition is not a means to an end for Artaud because of its inauthenticity in relation to the visceral theatre he is calling for.

In Artaud’s essay “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” he calls for theatre makers to stop “harking back to texts regarded as sacred and definitive,” but rather “rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought.”<sup>17</sup> He calls for the creation of “word, gesture and expressive metaphysics, in order to rescue theatre from its human, psychological prostration.”<sup>18</sup> Artaud’s theatre operated as a “function in the proper sense of the world”, like veins and arteries pumping blood or the “apparently chaotic evolution of dream images in the mind.”<sup>19</sup> Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty abandoned texts as the center of the work, “attempt[ing] to stage productions straight from subjects, facts or known works.”<sup>20</sup> Because his work relied less on bourgeois theatre’s reliance on predictability, repetition and the written text, his rehearsals were understandably less prescribed. In *No More Masterpieces*, Artaud advocates for a more visceral and messy understanding of theatre’s slippery quality, abolishing the notion that “Shakespeare and his followers have instilled a concept of art for art’s sake in us, art on the one hand and life on the other.”<sup>21</sup> Rehearsal in this way can be understood as inhabiting a messier, overlapping space between art and life, rather than the middle of the binary.

Because Artaud is specifically interested in theatre’s capacity for transformation and social function, his rehearsals were famously flexible. American theatre scholar Kimberly Jannarone, in her article “The Theatre before Its Double: Artaud Directs in the Alfred Jarry Theatre,” tries to untangle Artaud’s reputation in French and English literature, citing his

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<sup>16</sup> Artaud, “No More Masterpieces,” 54.

<sup>17</sup> Antonin Artaud. “The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto,” 63.

<sup>18</sup> Artaud, “The Theatre of Cruelty,” 63.

<sup>19</sup> Artaud, “The Theatre of Cruelty,” 65.

<sup>20</sup> Artaud, “The Theatre of Cruelty,” 69.

<sup>21</sup> Artaud, “No More Masterpieces,” 55.

madness and his resulting incarceration in an asylum that reinforced “the image of Artaud as a brilliant/mad theoretician and inspirational writer but a failed theatre practitioner – worse, one *doomed* to failure.”<sup>22</sup> In this dissertation, this thread of failure is productive, connecting Artaud to the notion that the rehearsal space is a productive site to meet each other, then meet failure, and try again. Jannarone’s work in this context serves to “put to rest the worn image of Artaud as the delirious, inspirational, and mad creator of an impossible theatre of cruelty and to develop a more complete picture of his work—by an archival examination of Artaud's first theatrical endeavor: the Théâtre Alfred Jarry.”<sup>23</sup> Focusing on the six works that Antonin Artaud directed at Théâtre Alfred Jarry in Paris, France, Jannarone found that all six pieces were performed “off-season with few rehearsals and almost nonexistent budgets.”<sup>24</sup> The rehearsals were flexible and relied heavily on the relationships between the director and the artists in the room. Archival records around the rehearsals for his show *Ventre brûlé* remember Artaud as “reportedly extremely free with the performers and designers, and yet he managed to make the event representative of his own personal vision.”<sup>25</sup> The composer Maxime Jacob remembered working “entirely from conversations with Artaud and did not remember seeing a text at all.”<sup>26</sup> His rehearsals were not about situating the text perfectly inside the actor body but using the space to experiment in collective. “Actors testify that the atmosphere in the Jarry Theatre rehearsals was supportive and that, in terms of flexibility and experimentation, Artaud put into practice what he preached,” records Jannarone. Different from some of his contemporaries and directors that work within the bourgeois theatre form, Artaud did not have a tight grip on the rehearsal room. “That

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<sup>22</sup> Kimberley Jannarone, “The Theatre before Its Double: Artaud Directs in the Alfred Jarry Theatre,” *Theatre Survey*, 46 no 2, (November 2005): 247. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557405000153>.

<sup>23</sup> Jannarone, “The Theatre Before Its Double...” 248.

<sup>24</sup> Jannarone, “The Theatre Before Its Double...” 249.

<sup>25</sup> Jannarone, “The Theatre Before Its Double...” 252.

<sup>26</sup> Jannarone, “The Theatre Before Its Double...” 253.

free collaborative style removes Artaud from a direct line of more noted theatre directors of his time...who achieved their productions' unity by rigorous control of the ensemble, which often began in early training, long before rehearsal," says Jannarone, "Artaud's actors, gathered haphazardly and often the week before a performance, underwent no such schooling in the director's aesthetic."<sup>27</sup> Artaud's rehearsals were less about repetition and more about embodiment and relationality. Practice, ephemerality. Failure was a welcome companion in Artaud's rehearsal room, not an undesirable outcome to work again. For Artaud, failure, spontaneity, and refusal of fixity is a necessary companion to transformation in the rehearsal hall.

### *Bertolt Brecht's Rehearsals: Alienation and [Un]making*

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal cites Bertolt Brecht's disinterest in the "order" that can result from the bourgeois theatre's rehearsal practices. Boal says that, because Brecht "was a Marxist...a theatrical work cannot end in repose, in equilibrium. It must, on the contrary, show the ways in which society loses its equilibrium, which way society is moving, and how to hasten the transition."<sup>28</sup> Brecht's rehearsals, like Artaud's, had to make room for movement, change, or disruption rather than symmetry, perfection, and repeatability.

Some of Brecht's rehearsal practices centre around conceptualizing the actor more as a producer of gesture rather than a fully formed individual conjured by the actor's magic. The actor is not only a character but rather, a vehicle of Brechtian's Epic Theatre, which aims to incite social change beyond the theatre. The Brechtian actor "never forgets, nor does he allow it to be forgotten, that he is not the subject but the demonstrator...The feelings and opinions of demonstrator and demonstrated are not merged into one."<sup>29</sup> Like Brecht's audience, his actors

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<sup>27</sup> Jannarone, "The Theatre Before Its Double..." 253.

<sup>28</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 125.

must never fully become their character but rather maintain some emotional distance. The Brechtian stage is not magic, it's instructive. His actors and his stories are guides on how to be revolutionary in an oppressive world. Brechtian acting style is not about constructing an illusion but rather conducting a demonstration.

As discussed in the chapter about theatrical frames, one of the core innovations that Bertolt Brecht brought to the theatre is his alienation effect, or the opposite of a willing suspension of disbelief. Alienation effect depended on a distance that serves to remind the audience that they are in fact in a theatre. Brecht writes about the alienation effect as an unsettling of the audience, who “can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place.”<sup>30</sup> Brechtian audiences have an obligation, a responsibility beyond the theatre. Brecht’s audiences should not be swept up in the magic of representation but must always be aware of the construction of both the theatre and ultimately the world to change it. “Catharsis is not the main effect of dramaturgy,”<sup>31</sup> he said. In this way, Brechtian theatre is a rehearsal for actual world action rather than a fictional story to escape into. The alienation effect first works by “turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.”<sup>32</sup> Then, once the theatrical machine shines extra light on social reality, the distance fostered through the alienation effect should remind an audience that actual transformation beyond the theatre is possible. Brecht said, “We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of

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<sup>30</sup> Bertolt Brecht. *Brecht on Theatre*, 92.

<sup>31</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 143.

human relations in which the action takes place but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”<sup>33</sup>

Putting himself in opposition to Aristotelian dramaturgy, Brecht says “the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and how it may be changed).”<sup>34</sup> Like Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, Brechtian theatre had a social function around transformation and so, his Epic Theatre staged its theatre-ness, making obvious the material construction of the narrative coming to life on his stage. His use of projections, scene titles, *deus ex machina*, narration, and music, are all theatrical techniques that remind audiences of the fiction they are witnessing. Brecht wanted his audience to be actively engaged in commentary. In their comparison of the rehearsal practices of Brecht, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Jerzy Grotowski, and Peter Brook, Shomit Mitter argues that Brecht’s “audience is to be induced not to share the reality of the situation presented, but to review it.”<sup>35</sup> She says, “estrangement is not propaganda: it teaches insight.”<sup>36</sup> For Brecht, a theatre that has been constructed can mirror a world that is similarly constructed. And can be deconstructed. Where Artaud is interested in the visceral feelings of the theatrical body and the machine it plays in, Brecht’s theatre, like Augusto Boal’s, is a tool, an instrument for social change. Brechtian theatre is a rehearsal for life, not a complete illusion. “The illusion created by the theatre must be a partial one, in order that it may always be recognized as an illusion,” Brecht says, “Reality, however complete, has to be altered by being

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<sup>33</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Shomit Mitter. *Systems of Rehearsal: Stanislavsky, Brecht, Grotowski, and Brook*. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Mitter, *Systems of Rehearsal*, 36.

turned into art, so that it can be seen to be alterable and treated as such.”<sup>37</sup> Brechtian theatre is a rehearsal, not just as a means to an end but as an ongoing process.

*Augusto Boal’s Rehearsals: Embodiment & Quotidian Life*

For the author of *Theatre of the Oppressed* Augusto Boal, theatre is a liberatory medium that functions as a “rehearsal for the revolution.”<sup>38</sup> Boal, like Brecht and Artaud, is interested in theatre’s capacity for transformation. “Theatre is change,” Boal says, “not a simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being.”<sup>39</sup> In the latter third of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal proposes a new paradigm of theatre, the “poetics of the oppressed” which “focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change - in short, trains himself for real action.”<sup>40</sup> Boal’s theatre invites spectators on stage to embody, change, and govern the action. Here’s how it works: in a workshop setting, Boal works with a collective of marginalized people to rehearse potential conflicts together. In this rehearsal room, spectators intervene, stop and start the action, changing things to rehearse different outcomes. In his forum and applied theatres, “the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practise.”<sup>41</sup>

In the book, Boal is interested in how “theatre can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts.”<sup>42</sup> In his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, first, participants learn their body

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<sup>37</sup> Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 219.

<sup>38</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>39</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 122.

<sup>41</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 121.

as an instrument through collaborative theatre games like a slow-motion race or a cross-legged race. Then, the participants improvise real life educational experiences through characters like “hummingbird” or “bull,” channelling some of their experiences in school through archetypal exaggerations. Finally, the participants are invited to explore what Boal refers to as “simultaneous dramaturgy,” or the collective staging of a small, improvised scene where characters reach a crisis. When the on-stage players reach their crisis, they stop the performance and ask those in the audience for solutions. Participants must “improvise immediately all the suggested solutions, to correct the actions of words of the actors, who are obligated to comply strictly with these instructions from the audience.”<sup>43</sup> Boal’s spectator-actors thus write the conflict management practice through embodied rehearsal. For Boal, theatre does not function as Aristotle’s cathartic or moralizing doctrine; rather, theatre has the capacity to act as an arena to *practice* how we would behave. More importantly, his rehearsals embody the kind of trial and error that is required when meeting a crisis or harm. Pause, start again. Retry. Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* names rehearsal as an arena for liberatory repetition, a low-stakes do-over in the face of trauma or conflict where the practices of transformation are handed over to rehearse with. Boal argues that for theatre to act as “as a weapon for liberation,”<sup>44</sup> the tools of the theatre had to be put in the hands of the “oppressed.” Through establishing applied theatre as a form that invites the people to reclaim rehearsal as a space for their own liberatory “do-over,” Boal argues that his theatre materializes a liberated world through practice.

Boal launches his *Theatre of the Oppressed* in opposition to Aristotelian drama because, according to Boal, for Aristotle, “justice is always contained in reality itself as it is. He does not consider the possibility of transforming the already existing inequalities, but simply accepts

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<sup>43</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 132.

<sup>44</sup> Boal, “Foreword,” in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, ix.

them.”<sup>45</sup> So-called justice is a core outcome for Aristotelian theater. When Oedipus Rex reckons with all the harm caused, he is punished and plucks his own eyes out; he has no other option than to submit to his fate. Where Aristotle’s theatre realizes the most recognizable (read: carceral, punitive) forms of justice in conflict and harm-doing, Boal advocates for actual transformation, through practice and embodiment. In short, Boal proposes a theory around rehearsal as a preparatory space for political action.

### *Abolitionist Rehearsals*

In American scholar Jill Dolan’s book, *Utopia in Performance*, she argues that “live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”<sup>46</sup> Echoing the work of Augusto Boal, for Dolan utopian performatives are optimistic practices of rehearsal for and the actual manifestation of a better world in the theatre. Theatre and its relationship to change and transformation means that “[a]udiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation, that might let them reconsider the world outside the theatre, from its micro to its macro arrangements.”<sup>47</sup> Rehearsals more specifically hold the kind of creation and destruction practise that the theatrical imagination can hold. Dolan insists that “utopia can present itself in rehearsals, when a group of people repeat and revise incremental moments, trying to get them right, to get them to ‘work.’”<sup>48</sup> Utopian performatives and gestures are intensely relational, rehearsals for achieving our dreams.

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<sup>45</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 23.

<sup>46</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 39.

The concept of rehearsals was one of my first inspirations for this project on the intersectional potential between dramaturgy and police and prison abolition. I remember reading something about how people, white wealthy people especially, are unpracticed at dealing with conflict without the police.<sup>49</sup> We are so practiced and used to leaning on the prison industrial complex in our favour to face trauma and conflict that many of us, especially people like me with intersecting privileges, are lacking practice in alternative safer ways to deal with conflict. If I were faced with something dangerous, what would I do besides call the police? I remember trying to task myself with writing a list once of all the things I could do in a moment of crisis besides calling the police. Staying calm, listening the best I could. Communicating clearly. Maintaining physical distance or closing that distance, depending on what is called for in the situation. Calling a friend to support me. Trying to call the family or loved ones of the person-in-crisis. Calling a mental health crisis line or a harm-reduction worker. Asking if the person wants a glass of water or a cigarette. Making this list was an act of putting Boal's rehearsals for the revolution into practice in my imagination. I imagined a scenario and I created a different path out of it. Because carceral capitalism permeates everything, especially the way we deal with harm and crisis, calling the police is so habitual in white supremacy it's the subconscious reaction. If all we've ever known is to call the police, how will we come to know and embody alternative ways of addressing harm?

There are many communities and bodies of practice that are alternatives to the carceral reality actively happening in the world today. Around the world, there are networks of harm reduction that do not rely on calling the police, do not rely on locking people in cages. While I had been rehearsing my fingers on 9-1-1 in the carceral context, there have been an

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<sup>49</sup> imaginealternatives, "Feeling for the Edge of your Imagination: finding ways not to call the police," *Tumblr*, March 31 2010 [imaginealternatives.tumblr.com/](http://imaginealternatives.tumblr.com/)

immeasurable number of other, more liberatory rehearsals happening around me. In her book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about the Black and Brown women who continue to feed people and care for people who are organizing. Disabled community members in her network in the Bay Area, California and Toronto have created and will continue to create their own care webs, avoiding the state's intervention in their care and avoiding entanglement with institutional control. Transformative justice practices born and nurtured in some Indigenous communities continue to call people accountable to their own harm-doing without locking them in prisons.<sup>50</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls this way of living an alternate, more liberatory reality within the one dominated by white supremacist capitalism prefigurative politics. She says that “prefigurative politics is a fancy term for the idea of imagining and building the world we want to see now. It's waking up and acting as if the revolution has happened.”<sup>51</sup> Robyn Maynard and Leanne Simpson call it *Rehearsals for Living* in their collaborative book. There are communities of people who are actively rehearsing new ways of working through conflict without the prison industrial complex. In an article for transformharm.org, disability justice advocate Mia Mingus stresses that many Black, Brown, Indigenous, Queer and Disabled communities have been practicing alternative forms of justice, more specifically transformative justice “in big and small ways for generations—trying to create safety and reduce harm within the dangerous conditions they were and are forced to live in.”<sup>52</sup> There are many ongoing rehearsals that continue to be staged that both pre-empt and prepare us for a different future without the reliance on the prison industrial complex. Abolitionist Mariame

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<sup>50</sup> Larry Chartrand and Kanatase Horn, “A Report on the Relationship between Restorative Justice and Indigenous Legal Traditions in Canada,” (Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada Ottawa, 2016); “Restorative Justice: Maa-Mii-Nah-Chi-Ke-Win,” *Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services Corporation (NALSC)*, assessed June 26 2024, [nanlegal.on.ca/restorative-justice/](http://nanlegal.on.ca/restorative-justice/)

<sup>51</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Mia Mingus, “Transformative Justice: A Brief Description,”

Kaba illustrates the need for rehearsals in the abolitionist world because “[g]ranted, our vision is incomplete. There is no road map for justice, because under this system we have never seen it. But the current system has been thoroughly mapped, and it has already failed.”<sup>53</sup> Abolition isn’t just the abolition of police and prisons but rather the abolition of the pervasive ideologies of racial capitalism that depends upon carceral capitalism to function. Articulated clearly by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their work on the undercommons:

What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society<sup>54</sup>

Theatre, more specifically theatrical rehearsal, can act as an embodied site for bringing new realities into the present, as that is what rehearsal is already doing.

Carceral thinking is foundational to what Robin Kelley calls the “racial capitalocene”<sup>55</sup> in his “Afterwor(l)d” to *Rehearsals for Living*. This epoch deals with conflict, class and poverty in a way that falsely insists that prisons seem inevitable. But they are not inevitable. Prisons as we know it are an invented phenomenon that goes hand in hand with the white supremacy, class control, and poverty that came with the industrial revolution. Prisons were made and designed with a racial capitalist purpose. Rinaldo Walcott quotes Ruth Wilson Gilmore on a similar point, saying she wants us “to understand that the carceral state is a made thing, which means that it can be unmade.”<sup>56</sup> Earlier in his book *On Property*, Walcott reminds us that “there is a beginning

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<sup>53</sup> Mariame Kaba, “The State Can’t Give Us Transformative Justice” in *We Do This til We Free Us*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. “The University and the Undercommons,” *Social Text* 22, no 2 (Summer 2004): 114.

<sup>55</sup> Robin Kelley, “An Afterwor(l)d,” in *Rehearsals for Living*, 268.

<sup>56</sup> Walcott, *On Property*, 76.

to everything, including the police, which is another way of saying there was a time when things could have been different.”<sup>57</sup> As abolitionist Mariame Kaba reminds us, our timeline when it comes to the reign of carceral context is relatively small in the real scheme of things. She says “Your timeline is only for yourself to mark your growth and your living. But that’s a fraction of the living that’s going to be done by the universe and that has already been done by the universe.”<sup>58</sup>

Rehearsal is a site for unmaking and making, a site for recognizing that an abolitionist world is both happening and, on its way, and we must rehearse it to continue to prepare for it, manifest it, and usher it in. Abolition doesn’t argue for the disappearance of conflict and harm, conflict is a natural part of relational existence. Conflict, unlike the prison industrial complex, is inevitable. Abolition then seeks a new way of dealing with conflict and harm as it happens. If we know that prisons don’t work, that the number of prisoners continues to increase every year and reoffending still happens, what other ways can we deal with addressing harm?

It is not a matter of invention, but rather a matter of continuing to rehearse anti-carceral tactics that already practiced. There already are plenty of ways that groups of people around the world and in so-called Canada deal with conflict and harm without relying on carceral violence. It’s happening live, now. In *Rehearsals for Living*, Black feminist Robyn Maynard says that “[a]bolition is imagination work, anti-colonial struggle is imagination work, conjure work, science fiction in real time. It is daring to see that the world now did not need to be as it was, does not need to be as it is, and certainly, most importantly, need not - and will not - remain this way.”<sup>59</sup> There is in fact a road map. There are many and although they may not present clear and

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<sup>57</sup> Walcott, *On Property*, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Kaba, “Hope is a Discipline” in *We Do This ‘til We Free Us*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 176.

easy paths, there are directions to follow. Long before and within the prison industrial complex, there have been groups of people that dealt with harm and conflict in other ways.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard's *Rehearsals for Living* is a foundational text in my understanding of rehearsal as a liberatory space that exists between life and art. A letter writing exercise written during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the book is a beautiful and dynamic conversation between both scholars that explores Black and Indigenous ongoing world-making processes within the intersecting crisis of contemporary racial capitalism and environmental crisis. They write about both oppression and liberation in the context of iteration, putting the Oka Crisis in conversation with the arrests in Toronto after the Ryerson statue was toppled in 2021. Simpson and Maynard write about the cyclical and iterative nature of both carceral and racist violence and the cyclical and iterative resistance to that violence. Writing in the middle of the night one night after supporting efforts to free people who were arrested, Maynard nods towards the iterative life of carceral violence. She says "Thirty years since Oka. Because here we are in the midst of yet another period fraught with militarized police response to dissent, the criminalization of liberation-oriented organizing across North America. On the front lines of a general strike against carceral racial capitalism."<sup>60</sup> She then goes on to point towards the iterative relationship of resistance to this violence as well when she says, "But you're correct, Leanne, that each wave of struggle builds on the last,"<sup>61</sup> as

[r]esistance to the settler, police, and military brutality at Oka inspired three decades of struggle in its wake. Idle No More did not end but planted seeds. And, as this moment is making clear, the Black Lives Matter movement born in Ferguson in 2014, BLM 1.0 did

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<sup>60</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 105.

<sup>61</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 107.

not end, either, but saw the creation and expansion of root systems that would be ready for the next act. That would prepare us for the fire this time.<sup>62</sup>

Within iteration, Maynard rightly points to the two different core outcomes of rehearsal: practice and preparation. Each iteration that comes with both settler violence and the resistance to that violence “builds on the last,” practicing and preparing for the racist end of the world or the liberatory fight against that violence. It’s important to note that violence can also be iterated upon, normalizing itself. When university campus’ respond to activist student encampments with militarized police, they are practicing and preparing for other manifestations of carceral control. If the rehearsal of resistance reminds us that another world is possible and ushers it in, the rehearsal of violence continues to strengthen the carceral state.

In *Rehearsals for Living*, Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about how her ancestors were well practiced in dealing with conflict without police and prisons prior to the oversaturation of colonial institutions in so-called Canada. In her letters to Robyn Maynard talking about the ongoing existence of worlds without police and prisons, Leanne says,

I come from a society that, prior to colonialism, didn’t have police or the practice of policing - not because we were primitive or simple or nomadic, or because our population was too tiny to need policing, but because Nishnaabeg society was structured and practiced in such a way that, for the most part, the violence of policing wasn’t required to maintain social and political relation...Each living being is responsible for its own path in relation to the other living things with whom we share time and space. This means that I’m responsible for monitoring myself and my own behaviors and actions within that

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<sup>62</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 107.

matrix of relations. I'm not at liberty to interfere or judge or surveil the life paths of other living things.<sup>63</sup>

Simpson and Maynard argue that through relation, through resistance, they are actively living a rehearsal for liberation. This rehearsal has gone on for generations. This kind of relational acceptance and understanding doesn't insist on the abolition of harm (that would be impossible) but rather the abolition of prison, in all its confinements and violence, as the only way to keep a community safe. In her essay "So You're Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist" in *We Do This 'til We Free Us*, Mariame Kaba says that "A world without harm isn't possible and isn't what an abolitionist vision purports to achieve."<sup>64</sup> Rather, the point is to address harm in ways that do not compound interpersonal violence with state violence.

When it comes to these rehearsals, Simpson articulates the cognitive importance of respecting other nations within her worldview, recognizing that each nation is responsible for governing themselves and their actions within a network of relations. When she says that she is not in the position to punish or govern the choices of other living beings, she isn't denying the existence or possibility of harm but rather insisting on a trust in her relations that they can govern themselves. She goes on to write about how sharing and giving is so integral to the Anishinaabe worldview that within the Anishinaabe life in rehearsal, even harm itself is recontextualized. Early in the book, she talks about how she would feel if someone "stole" her canoe from her backyard. Having already unpacked Fanon's notion of "homelessness" as a call to the abolition of public property, Simpson insists that depending on the context, taking the canoe doesn't automatically mean the canoe is "stolen." She writes about how if it was one of her relatives taking the canoe, she would have space for them to use the canoe because it isn't "hers" in the

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<sup>63</sup> Maynard and Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, 179.

<sup>64</sup> Kaba, "So You're Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist," in *We Do This 'til We Free Us*, 3.

first place. Everything she has is meant to share with her community. If that relation of hers returned the canoe in worse shape, then they found it, she would still find a way to access compassion and accountability and find a path to repair the damage that does not in turn cause more harm. The context of harm is an important piece of the puzzle for Simpson. In carceral capitalism, all three of these realities would result in calling the police but in Nishnaabeg worldview, conflict can be and has been dealt in other ways, making space for nuance and complexity in the context of both the harm and the ways one can address harm. These issues are of course complex. This is not to say that by default, all Indigenous practices of dealing with harm are inherently abolitionist. For example, in her article “Re-Examining Culturally Appropriate Models in Criminal Justice,” Indigenous feminist Emma LaRocque argues against restorative justice and healing circles in the case of sexual assault against Indigenous women.<sup>65</sup> While Simpson makes a strong argument for non-carceral responses to harm, other Indigenous women have argued for more carceral responses to protect specifically Indigenous women.

Mariame Kaba’s book *We Do This ‘til We Free Us*, insists on the core principle that *we keep ourselves safe*, drawing on our own already practiced transformative and restorative justice. Late in the book she writes about friendship and kin as spheres where we can possibly understand the workings of transformative and restorative justice. When a friend hurts you, you don’t call the police on them. When a parent is homophobic to their adult child, the adult child doesn’t call the police but rather must bear the pain of the broken relationship, ask the parent to take accountability, find support in a community, and find ways to move past it. There is often a commitment to “working through” harm when it comes to our close personal relationships that

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<sup>65</sup> Emma LaRocque, "Re-examining Culturally Appropriate Models in Criminal Justice Applications," *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference*, edited by Michael Asch, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 75-96. <https://doi.org/10.59962/9780774853071-005>

doesn't apply when thinking about harm with strangers. For Kaba she says that the "unit of relationships"<sup>66</sup> is a sphere where we can begin to practice abolitionist ways of dealing with harm. She says, "[t]ransformative justice takes as a starting point the idea that what happens in our interpersonal relationships is mirrored and reinforced by the larger systems."<sup>67</sup> In these ways, abolitionist practice makes abolitionist process. Through engaging with rehearsals as an iterative approach to world-building that emphasizes and allows for co-presence, failure, vulnerability and risk-taking, this PhD project recognizes the challenge with one of the most predictable questions that I hear after telling people I am an abolitionist. What happens instead of prisons? What happens in the meantime? This chapter looks deeply at the dramaturgical potential inside the notion of "rehearsals," in all their failures, iterations, sharing, and world-building as a space within the theatre to begin practicing a future without police and prisons.

In the rest of this chapter, I look at two performance-rehearsals as case studies. These two case studies materialize various important elements of rehearsal in the work of Boal, Brecht, Artaud, Simpson, Maynard, and Dolan (failure, embodied repetition, making and unmaking) to theorize rehearsal as an abolitionist space. My first case study is a historical example, Maria Campbell and Linda Griffith's interNational work of theatre *The Book of Jessica*. *The Book of Jessica* chronicles a fraught collaborative process between Campbell and Griffiths, a Métis artist and white theatre artist from Toronto respectively. The book tells the story of their attempt at decolonizing creation and rehearsal process in the 1980s and early 1990s. *The Book of Jessica* chronicles the creation processes for Campbell and Griffiths as they co-created an autobiographical piece about Campbell with performance maker Paul Thompson in the 1990s.

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<sup>66</sup> Kaba, "Accountability is Not Punishment," in *We Do This Til We Free Us*, 149.

<sup>67</sup> Kaba, "Accountability is Not Punishment," *We Do This Til We Free Us*, 149.

While text of *The Book of Jessica* includes the play *Jessica*, it also includes reflections from both women about the rehearsal process.

Then, I look to what Richard Lam’s participatory tabletop performance *The Candlemaker’s Game*. In this performance, Richard Lam leads a transformative justice workshop for participants to work through one of their own personal conflicts through reflective prompts. I look to his realization that the way “desire” figures in actor training (“What does my character want? What is stopping him from getting what he wants?”) has an obvious and strong parallel to desire in seeking non-carceral resolution for conflict. Through conversations with Lam, he reminded me that because there is no actual core truth to the concept of so-called justice, conflict management is really a matter of storytelling, of witnessing people speak to what they need and finding ways to negotiate those needs in relation. For Lam, this is very similar work to actor training, the work that happens in rehearsals. *The Candlemaker’s Game* stages this participatory conflict-management rehearsal and offers the tools of the theatre to the participants.

### **Case Study: *The Book of Jessica***

Let’s tell the story of what happened, if we do that then maybe we’ll be free of the whole thing, heal everything. And I kick myself, ‘What did I just say? Who could stand to open it all again? Am I crazy?

– Maria Campbell<sup>68</sup>

Maria Campbell and Linda Griffith’s *The Book of Jessica* is a published text that chronicles the rehearsal and creation process of an internationally produced semi-fictionalized biography about Campbell’s life. *The Book of Jessica* includes both *Jessica*, the play text that

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<sup>68</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “Spiritual Things,” *The Book of Jessica*, 13.

was created performed, and an introductory section where Campbell and Griffiths tell the story of the creation process of *Jessica*. Unlike most published plays, the archive of the performance includes memoirs from both major parties, on the rehearsal and creative parts of the show. In this way, the rehearsals were as much “the point” as the created performance was. The second level of unsteady boundary between art and life is the fact that *Jessica* was improvised and based on Campbell’s life, to be performed and inhabited by Griffiths as an actor. Where in *Candlemaker’s Game* the realness, the “living,” comes from the participant and their autobiographical materials and the “rehearsals for...” comes from the narrative and game instructions, in *Book of Jessica*, the living exists both in the reflection on the work and in the work itself and the “rehearsals for...” comes from the fact they are exploring these questions literally in rehearsal. In an excerpt of a marginalia-like conversation in the text, Campbell says, “So can we stick this in with the story of the rehearsals and all that?” and Griffiths says “I think this is still the story of the rehearsals, the story of the rehearsals never ends...”<sup>69</sup>

From 1974 to 1989, Métis writer and activist Maria Campbell collaborated with Toronto-based theatre actor and creator Linda Griffiths on *Jessica*, an improvised text about Campbell’s life in which Griffiths would play Campbell. Although the production team remained relatively small, the fifteen-year creation and production processes were emotionally fraught and geographically spread out across the country. They worked together in theatres in Toronto and Edmonton with the support of then artistic director of Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille Paul Thompson. They drove through Regina and met at Gabriel’s Crossing at Batoche, Saskatchewan. When the first run of the show at the 25th Street House Theatre in Saskatoon “ends in disagreement” Campbell, Griffiths, and director Paul Thompson go no contact for three years.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “Spiritual Things,” *The Book of Jessica*, 64.

<sup>70</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “History,” *The Book of Jessica*, 9-10.

After two reworkings of the script and a complicated collaborative tension, *Jessica* wins the 1986 Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play. When Griffiths reaches out to Campbell about publishing the text, Campbell suggests that they instead “write a book of the story of the making of the play, which would include the playscript.”<sup>71</sup> The rehearsals. *The Book of Jessica* is that published text, including both the text of *Jessica* and a collaborative diary of the rehearsal and life that happened in between. On the first page of *The Book of Jessica*, Griffiths says “when I talked to Campbell, she said, ‘There’s all kinds of stuff around the play that isn’t in the play. There’s the whole story of what happened to both of us, we should put it all in the book. Who reads plays, anyways?’”<sup>72</sup>

In both form and content, *Book of Jessica* is a remarkably honest account of settler and Indigenous relationality and resultant harm through theatre-making practice and most specifically, dramaturgies of the rehearsal. Almost thirty years old at the time of my reading it, the first section of the book tells the story of *Jessica*’s creation and the friendship that was both formed and destroyed between white settler actor and creator Griffiths and Métis playwright Campbell. *The Book of Jessica* is written in dialogue, both in reflective journaling and in letters between Griffiths and Campbell. The first half of the book bounces between the voices of each woman recounting the rehearsal and creation process. *The Book of Jessica* is intimate, in many sections readers feel like a voyeur to a budding and then fraying friendship. Because this chapter is about rehearsals, this analysis is mainly concerned with the first half of the text, the recounting of the rehearsal and creation process. Subtitled “a theatrical transformation,” the *Book of Jessica* is a profound look at the possibilities and failures and complex transformation that can emerge within the liberatory rehearsal room that can lead to abolitionist rehearsals.

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<sup>71</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “History,” *The Book of Jessica*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “Spiritual Things,” *The Book of Jessica*, 13.

The first half of the book jumps between Griffiths account of the chronological story and excerpts from transcribed tapes from the process of creation or the process of reading the book. It's messy. Like life, memory and actuality sometimes contradict each other, interpersonal feelings throw a wedge into history. Campbell doesn't like the way that things are remembered. When Griffiths writes about the moment that she is brought into the project she says: "Finally, I was part of the idea, about to work with Paul Thompson, director of the maverick Theatre Passe Muraille, and Maria Campbell, Metis writer, activist, teacher, catalyst..."<sup>73</sup> Maria's thoughts appear next, indented like dialogue in a script. She says, "What a bunch of garbage. I'm a community worker. A mom. 'Metis writer'? - I should have a giant typewriter? 'Activist'? - I should be throwing Molotov cocktails? It just sounds so...so much like a white professor introducing me at a convention of anthropologists."<sup>74</sup> Their interaction is not necessarily immediately easy, the work of working to create in a culturally diverse setting is hard work and requires negotiation. After having met, they settled on the structure for the play and the creation process:

Maria had written a best-selling book, called *Halfbreed*, which was essentially the story of her life. But that was ten years ago. This proposed play was not to be an adaptation of the book but was to explore what had happened to her since its publication...Under Paul's guidance, we were to make up a woman who was Maria, but not really. I would hear parts of the book not included in the published version, I would hear stories. The stories included her re-entry into a Native spiritual world. I would become Maria, or a

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<sup>73</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 18.

version of Maria. I would interpret the world she showed me. Then, somehow, there would be a play.<sup>75</sup>

It's clear from this recounting that this rehearsal and creation process, was a rehearsal for settler-Indigenous living and artmaking, a creative interaction between Griffiths and Campbell as settler and Métis storytellers. At one point, Griffiths doubts it's a play at all. She reflects upon trips home to meet Campbell's family. She remembers awkwardness, anger, emotion, conflict. When Griffiths and Campbell go out to a dance together, Campbell offers Griffiths fashion advice in saying "You can't wear that, people will think you're poor and feel sorry for you."<sup>76</sup> In similar but opposite ways to Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, these two women are rehearsing, trying (and failing) to be in good relation with one another. Campbell and Griffiths are trying to craft something together, but they are encountering moments and pain and harm throughout their rehearsal. Repeatedly, live, in the moment. Griffiths confronts her own whiteness on a trip to Manitoba to meet Campbell's family. Griffiths says,

I sat in the kitchen with four other women in complete silence, drinking tea. It was the silences that made me feel white. I wanted to say, "All right, let's get a real conversation going here." I got the feeling that communication was happening, but I couldn't tell what it was. I ended up with a constant half smile on my face, trying to catch the jokes before they were made. Or maybe they weren't made, just thought. I felt disconnected, as if I had huge white hands dangling from a body not standing on the ground.<sup>77</sup>

The account of the play creation continues like this. There are genuine and joyful moments where Griffiths' playfulness makes her feel like part of the family and there are

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<sup>75</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 21.

<sup>77</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 21.

moments where Griffiths, swept up in her own whiteness, missteps and exploits Campbell's story. There is a particularly tense section in the book when Campbell takes Griffiths to meet her teacher Hannah and they go to a ceremony. While Griffiths recounts the ceremony in the text, there are interjections from Campbell and Griffiths where Campbell asks her to stop. Campbell interrupts Griffiths talking about the sacred object in the room and says, "I don't believe you're doing this! We went through all this at the rehearsals. We talked about why you weren't supposed to describe this, turn it into journalism. You told Hannah you wouldn't write it, you wouldn't talk about what happened in there. I believed you."<sup>78</sup> At one point, Campbell encourages Griffiths to assess her obsession with Indigenous suffering and read about some of the suffering over her own ancestors. "I felt like what you guys were saying was that you wanted magic, you wanted power, but not history."<sup>79</sup> Being idealistic in the rehearsal room in the face of conflict is not abolitionist, but running towards it with accountability and compassion has the potential to be.

At one point in the book, Campbell and Griffiths recount the first time that Griffiths had improvised the "Wolverine," in rehearsal a stubbornly violent predator trapped in a weasels' body. Shared with Griffiths as a teaching and a story that connected deeply with a painful moment from Campbell's life, after Griffiths does the improvisation, the energy in the room is uncomfortable. When the director Paul calls lunch, he leaves an interrupted Griffiths feeling "furious and betrayed"<sup>80</sup> that the rehearsal was suddenly pulled out from beneath her. Campbell then expresses her guilt, that she had perhaps brought Griffiths to a dark side without "protection." Griffiths then says,

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<sup>78</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 40.

To me, all rehearsals were protected by their very nature, especially improvisational rehearsals in which everything had to come from a kind of immediate, wide-open frequency. Theatre was already blessed, it didn't need more blessings to protect it from being theatre. Maria explained that we should have been forming a circle at the beginning and the end of each rehearsal, as if the rehearsal was a ceremony. To her, I had played with fire. How could I say that 'playing' was my ritual? It took Maria a long time to hear the theatre gods.<sup>81</sup>

When Griffiths says that rehearsals were "protected," I take this to mean that rehearsals were allowed to be difficult and messy and complex. It was safe for things to happen and things to fail. For Griffiths, there is something about the rehearsal that allows for a conflict-laden process to fall apart and back together.

After the play has a successful run in Saskatoon, Thompson and Griffiths decide they need to prepare an actual contract around the rights of the show. Although she claims to know the character should not be played by a white woman again, Griffiths asks for first right of refusal, citing the fact that she felt "seared by it, both a creation of it, and its creator...It was as if my blood was within it."<sup>82</sup> This letter is handed to Campbell and the relationship understandably fractures. Griffiths recounts Campbell having said "she had consulted a lawyer, that she wasn't signing anything. She said Thompson and I had gone behind her back and she wasn't having any of it."<sup>83</sup> The last chapter in the first section of the book is called *The Red Cloth* and it seems to speak to the moments near the end of writing the book. The most recent. At one point in this

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<sup>81</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "Spiritual Things," *The Book of Jessica*, 55.

section, they contemplate whether the play is not a play, it's a treaty. At least it's a rehearsal of one. A rehearsal of a treaty. And one that goes poorly at that.

Griffiths takes accountability for her colonial (and carceral) embodiment of the white "innocent" during the rehearsal process of *Jessica*. She says "It was the only way I could protect myself, with innocence, niceness. I just couldn't figure out why anyone would want to get mad at someone who was trying so hard... My only protection was my innocence, my little white hand on your arm - 'Maria, why are you angry? Why don't you like me?'"<sup>84</sup> The women use the character of the Wolverine to talk about the "ownership" of *Jessica* and it's ugly. Campbell confronts Griffiths for exploiting the story of her life, comparing Griffiths to the "man in Ottawa who writes out the Indian act."<sup>85</sup> They contemplate who created the story and Campbell says, "But in *Jessica*, who created the story? I didn't create it myself and you didn't either."<sup>86</sup>

Importantly, this diary of the rehearsal process does not resolve at the end. Just when you think the relationship has been unpacked and left on steadier ground, Griffiths says, "I think we'd better quit. Let's have a glass of wine."<sup>87</sup> At the end of the book, Griffiths and Campbell have not resolved their tension and messy conflict still ripples without intervention. Griffiths enacted harm and Campbell felt exploited. When asked by Griffiths if it was "all a lie," Campbell says, "It's not a lie, it's just a wound we want to be healed sooner than is possible. Maybe it'll take a hundred years. Angry or not, I feel good, and that's a lot better than feeling angry and bad."<sup>88</sup>

It's clear to me that Griffiths and Campbell understand the play as a relational rehearsal, expressing their positionality through messy relation with one another. In the room, in rehearsal

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<sup>84</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "The Red Cloth," *The Book of Jessica*, 71.

<sup>85</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "The Red Cloth," *The Book of Jessica*, 81.

<sup>86</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "The Red Cloth," *The Book of Jessica*, 91.

<sup>87</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "The Red Cloth," *The Book of Jessica*, 112.

<sup>88</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, "The Red Cloth," *The Book of Jessica*, 112.

and in this archive of rehearsal the women tried and failed and tried and failed again to craft and create a performance. Campbell asked Griffiths to investigate some of her own history, to which Griffiths says, “I could read as many books about Celtic goddesses as she wanted, but I was overwhelmed and fed by the Native world living and breathing in front of me.”<sup>89</sup> Angry at Griffiths’ obsession with her own trauma, Campbell says, “While you were being overwhelmed by my history and my oppression, you were making me feel like it was exclusively mine.”<sup>90</sup>

Did the conflict and dissensus that happened inside the rehearsal space evaporate, or could the failures of relationality, together with the attempt to try again, be understood as an abolitionist life in rehearsal? While the sacredness of storytelling was cheapened by the bourgeois theatre attempt at a perfect show under colonial contracts of the so-called professional theatre scene of the 1990s, can the rehearsal process of the show be understood as a productive and abolitionist space? *The Book of Jessica* is a formal record of rehearsals but more than that, it’s the record of a creation process through a friendship filled with dissensus. *The Book of Jessica* highlights iteration and ultimately failure as both a rehearsal practice and an outcome that is fruitful for abolitionist practice. As a rehearsal, what does *The Book of Jessica* tell us about failure? That it is inevitable. That conflict and failure and harm are necessary parts of both the creation process and of life, especially when that artwork is about relationality and settler colonialism. In the case of *The Book of Jessica*, the rehearsal of those tension points is entirely the point.

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<sup>89</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “Spiritual Things,” *The Book of Jessica*, 34.

<sup>90</sup> Campbell and Griffiths, “Spiritual Things,” *The Book of Jessica*, 35.

### Case Study: *The Candlemaker's Game*

The day before participants play *The Candlemaker's Game*, they receive a text from Richard Lam, the creator of the show. He introduces himself to them as the “Apprentice of Bees at the Candlemaker’s Workshop.” Bees, wax, heat, candles, candlemaker. He offers the participants an invitation: “To help you prepare, maybe think about someone who you don’t speak to anymore. This conflict should be big enough that it affected you, yet small enough that you can safely contemplate it. We’ll be there to guide you and give you everything you need for your game. See you soon.”<sup>91</sup> When participants arrive at the theatre, they are invited into a space with a variety of instruments and materials to assist in working with wax: a cauldron of wax, wax paper, spoons, molds, gloves, and temper seals.

Greeted by Lam and other members of *The Candlemaker's Game* team, participants enter the pre-performance space. One by one, Lam instructs participants to form two game pieces, a six-sided die and a small figure of a person, from wax. “I pour, you shape”<sup>92</sup> he says. While participants wrestle with the wax in their hands by manipulating the mould, they are invited to think deeply about this conflict that they brought from their own lives. Embedded with their intentional thoughts, the newly cast wax die represents the participant in the game and the small figure is to represent the other person involved in the participants’ conflict. As Lam pours the wax, he encourages participants to think about the last time they saw their “other,” the last time they looked them in the eye. Both figures fashioned out of warm wax in our hands, participants are immediately put in conversation with the other participant in the conflict. In a way, the die

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Show Spine,” email message to author, May 2 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Show Spine”

and the figure remind the participant that even in conflict, we are made of the same things. We are strong but under pressure or heat, we also melt.

When participants enter the performance space proper, they are led towards their own private desk with a “guidebook,” a candle, and a set of cards organized by each of the four suits of the custom deck: brass, ropes, flames, and bees. Participants are asked to follow the guidebook and the prompts provided to consider their conflict while playing a sort of participatory table-top game. Each of the four suits focuses on a different element of the pre-chosen conflict, progressing in what Lam says is a similar order to a “a one-on-one conflict coaching”<sup>93</sup> session. The instructions explain the difference of perspective in each suit of cards:

The suit of brass deals with the objective facts of the conflict, and invites people to remember specific details about the times, places, and people involved. This is a sort of entry point into the conflict. The suit of ropes deals with the process and communication that occurred in the conflict, and how the participant was impacted by those. The suit of flames deals with feelings about the conflict and the people in it. Finally, the suit of bees deals with the future of the conflict and the participant's hope for the future.<sup>94</sup>

When participants flip open the first few pages of the guidebook, they are met with obscured text to introduce the book. Along with instructions, book seems to include marginalia, “scrapbook” clippings about stories of conflict that are both well-known tales and personal scribbles from the Candlemaker. In the bottom corner of the first page for example, there is a handwritten note that says, “no two candles burn alike.”<sup>95</sup> The obscured text in the introduction to the “conflict manual” reads as follows:

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<sup>93</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Show Spine”

<sup>94</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Show Spine”

<sup>95</sup> Richard Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook,” email message to author, May 2 2023.

[The co]ntent of the manual which follows is the current working draft of the best practices manual from the Vienna Institute of Conflict Stu [dies. This material is for I]nternal circulation only and is not meant for public consumption. It is i[n]tended to be refe[rre]d to by the Institute's staff as a framework to guide their ind[iv]idual conflict co[ach]ings, but it serves only as a structure. Practitio[n]ers are advised to re[m]ember that each coa[ching] must play out acc[ord]ing to its own specifics, and that it is impossible to account for all eventua[lities.]<sup>96</sup>

To play the tabletop game, participants draw from cards in order of suit and flip their guidebooks to the entry that corresponds with the card they've drawn. On each entry, participants are asked to consider the conflict they've brought in a certain way and write their thoughts directly on the card that they have drawn. The first two cards that participants draw, "the first cut" and "the second cut" are an obvious invitation to play. They ask, "What is your name? What is their name? Do you want to come find me?"<sup>97</sup> This page is paired with a scrapbook cutting about King Minos and the minotaur, telling the story of Daedalus' labyrinth. In Greek mythology, architect Daedalus was known for his design and building skills, seen as a symbol for wisdom, knowledge, and power.<sup>98</sup> Along with his son Icarus, Daedalus built a maze-link Labyrinth at Knossos as a prison for the Minotaur son of King Minos of Crete. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Daedalus constructed the labyrinth with such complexity that he only barely escaped after he built it.<sup>99</sup> Later, Athenian hero Theseus is challenged to kill the Minotaur in the Labyrinth and escapes with the help of Minos' daughter Ariadne. The Minotaur is slain, Ariadne and Theseus fall in love and Minos, filled with rage, imprisons Daedalus and Icarus in

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<sup>96</sup> Lam, "Candlemaker's Game Guidebook"

<sup>97</sup> Lam, "Candlemaker's Game Guidebook,"

<sup>98</sup> "Daedalus," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 26 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daedalus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daedalus)

<sup>99</sup> "Daedalus," *Wikipedia*

the Labyrinth. To escape, Daedalus builds Icarus a set of wax wings to fly to safety. We all know what happens next. This Greek metaphor is meaningful in an anti-carceral context. Through this metaphor, Lam suggests to his participants that imprisonment multiplies conflict, it doesn't solve it. When conflict occurs, locking that conflict away will not induce healing rather working through it in the moment is more conducive of healing. When imprisonment becomes a feasible option (in this case, the Labyrinth), people in power (in this case, Minos) will use it for their own means.

Players flip the page and are then invited to the “navigate” stage of the game. These final navigation challenges or “turnings” appear at the end of each deck. On each of these challenge pages, participants see an image of a labyrinth. In this first one, they are told to first explore the labyrinth by rolling their dice and adding or subtracting the value of cards. After players have finished orienting themselves on the labyrinth page, they are invited to “break the seal stamped ‘7’.” Then, they are invited to “Bring the broken seal to the wax pot, and cast it in.” After they have melted their first seal, they are asked to pick up the brass deck.

Next, the guidebook introduces participants to the brass deck which examines the more minute details of the conflict. The first page features a scrapbook clipping, a log of some sort. From April 19XX, this note reads “I began my discussions with Mrs. XXXXX at 11:32AM on April 17, 19XX. I began, as procedure would dictate, by asking her to simply describe the facts of the disagreement as she understood them.”<sup>100</sup> The handwritten scribble from the candlemaker reads “usually need something solid on the bottom.” Again, through the productive metaphor of wax, a conflict management principle emerges. In dealing with the heat of both candlemaking and conflict, there needs to be a strong foundation.

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<sup>100</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook,”

The next guidebook instruction says “explore, draw three cards from the suit of brass and answer them. When you’ve answered them, you can navigate.”<sup>101</sup> The questions from the brass deck include:

What was the moment you realized you were in conflict with this person? When did you and the person you were in conflict with first meet? What was your first impression of them? What were the main issues facing you in your life at this time? How were they affecting you? What might have been going on with the other person that had nothing to do with you? What was the most intense moment in the conflict? How did you feel during it?<sup>102</sup>

The brass deck asks participants to consider the context and the facts of the conflict, slightly separated from the emotions that emerged. This deck asks participants to consider simply the many dimensions that swirl around the moment of conflict.

At the end of each deck of suits, participants meet another labyrinth challenge to continue progressing through the game. These turnings resemble a format from classic tabletop role playing games: roll the die and add/subtract the value of the cards they’ve answered to hit a specific number. As players progress through the game, these labyrinth challenges get harder. After participants are successful in the turning, they must “play” their cards by “speaking the answers they have given on their cards to the wax figure of the other person.”<sup>103</sup> Rehearsal. The participant then moves on. Again, players return to the labyrinth to navigate and recite all our answers to break the “12” seal and melt it in the wax pot. If participant players don’t have

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<sup>101</sup>Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>102</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>103</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Show Spine”

enough corresponding points from our answers and our cards, we are invited to pick another card from the deck, respond and add that number to our total.

Next is the ropes deck, which begins with a warning from the Candlemaker. “Be careful.”<sup>104</sup> This deck dives into the communication patterns of the conflict. Participants are then invited to draw three cards from the deck and answer them before moving back to the “navigate” labyrinth challenge at the end of this deck. The ropes deck questions include:

Were you satisfied with the way communication happened during the conflict? Why, or why not? Did you do something in this conflict that had a different effect than you intended? What was it? How early did you address your conflict directly with the other person? Do you think it was addressed at the correct time?<sup>105</sup>

This deck asks participants to consider specifically how communication may have muddied or cleared up some element of the conflict. Separating what happened from the way it was handled presents an abolitionist way of attending to conflict that seeks to move beyond the simple condemnation of villains and wrongdoers and instead focuses on the intricacies of bad communication and mistakes.

After we return to the labyrinth to roll, reread and recite all our cards to break the seal stamped “14”, we move on to the flames, “the feelings,” deck. The first page features a scrapbook cutting of prose poetry that considers shadows within a flame. The candlemaker scribbles “the flame doesn’t cast a shadow, the fuel does.”<sup>106</sup> The flames deck questions include:

What was something the other person did to escalate the conflict? How did it make you feel? What was a moment that you felt harmed in the conflict? Did you communicate that

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<sup>104</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>105</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>106</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

harm to the other person? If yes, how did they receive it? If no, why? What was the moment in this conflict the other person acted their worst? How did it affect you? What do you think their intent was? How do you think this conflict has affected the other person's life? Do they think they carry any harm today? Do you need an apology from the other person for anything that happened? Why do you think an apology feels necessary?<sup>107</sup>

Although this prompt is potentially one-sided, without assuming the other participant in the conflict also requires an apology, we are asked to consider the other side of the story. We are asked to consider the multiplicity of perspectives on this conflict. Now that we have considered what happened and how it was handled, we now attend to how we feel. We again return to the labyrinth to navigate and break seal “16” before we head towards the bees deck. The questions in the bees deck concern the future. The deck asks us to consider the following questions:

Do you have hope that the future of this relationship can be better than the past? Write down any benefits there are to leaving the conflict as it is now. What do you think the worst-case scenario would be if you were to reach out to this person? What would the best-case scenario be? Is there an aspect of the conflict where you still feel the need to blame the other person? Can you release yourself from that need?<sup>108</sup>

By this point, participants are considering the conflict not as a monolith but rather as a nuanced and complex interaction between individuals. Although players are enjoying relative privacy, they are not alone. While the candlemaker pours wax in the centre of the room, everyone is playing the game, having an individual experience, collectively. Both together and alone the players actively work through the conflict. This kind of duality between privacy and community

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<sup>107</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>108</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

is central for Lam. He says, “the content of your exploration is never available to anyone else. You’re all doing the same thing together but you’re doing it alone.”<sup>109</sup>

How is this show a rehearsal? This show allows you to investigate a conflict from your past in a new light, differently. It invites you to restage the conflict in your mind and test out a variety of perspectives and approaches. The prompts in the guidebook insist that the conflict itself is not fixed but rather living and messy and populated, open for interpretation and actively unfolding in and out of our control. Through quiet collectivity, *The Candlemaker’s Game* shows players that we are not alone in this rehearsal. It shows us that role modeling and play is a useful container for working through conflict just for the sake of working through conflict. There is no desired outcome, only measured consideration. Once all four of the suits have been explored and the turnings have been completed, participants play a final card. “Do you want to try to reach out to the other person to try to transform the conflict?”<sup>110</sup> Then, the participant is asked to run through all the cards, speaking to them aloud one final time before the game is over.

*The Candlemaker’s Game* is a transformative justice rehearsal that is made accessible through both tabletop role playing and a malleable theatrical frame. In this case, the theatrical frame is not a thick fourth wall. Through the game’s references to historical moments of conflict and its insistence on autobiographical content from the player, Lam and his team invites a potential for harm-reduction through metaphor and practice, deepening the meaning of the exercise in both historical and person realms. The participatory bent of the game means that the general passivity of theatre spectatorship is made active, as *The Candlemaker’s Game* guidebook tells players, “Remember, it is not enough to merely know the way, you have to Travel it. To

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<sup>109</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

<sup>110</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

Travel the Labyrinth, speak the answers written on the cards you used to Navigate out loud.”<sup>111</sup> Because *The Candlemaker’s Game* does transformative justice, inviting spectators to apply these principles to a conflict in their own lives, the piece is an abolitionist dramaturgy. The piece proposes another way, besides prison, to face conflict head on and release the Minotaur from the Labyrinth.

Although the creators instruct the players not to choose a major conflict, the prompts the cards provide feel useful for abolitionist tactics of more major conflicts. As I read along with the guidebook the first time, I found myself zooming out to apply the prompts to more major conflicts in my life. The performance-game feels like a reflective exercise that is also a preparatory one, one that invites me to consider the past while also offering me tools for managing conflict in the future. The next time I am feeling angry or in conflict with someone, I know I will see a card flash in front of my eyes again. “What were the main issues facing you in your life at this time? How were they affecting you?” “What might have been going on with the other person that had nothing to do with you?”

Like in Griffiths and Campbell’s case, Lam’s personal experience is important in the context of abolitionist dramaturgies. Originally from Vancouver, Richard Lam is a Toronto-based actor, writer, musician and sound designer with both a BA in Political Science and a BFA in Acting. In a conversation with Lam, he described himself to me as a “labour guy,” a key member in unionization of Foodora couriers in Toronto in 2020 and heavily involved in the Canadian Actor’s Equity Association (CAEA) since 2018. Early in his time with CAEA, the union was overwhelmed with the news of Albert Schultz’ violent abuse of women in his tenure at Soulpepper, sparking a new, Toronto-theatre specific dialogue in the #MeToo movement. While

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<sup>111</sup> Lam, “Candlemaker’s Game Guidebook”

CAEA's policies around complaints and reporting were punitive and carceral at the time, providing few resources for the career implications of coming forward to share stories of abuse, Lam noticed a specific policy that stated that restorative justice could be applied in the reporting process. Although alternatives were possible, he witnessed very few people accessing other ways of seeking justice and acknowledging harm. Lam then reached out to Toronto artist-abolitionist Daniel Sarah Karasik who pointed him towards a certificate in Conflict Management and Mediation at the University of Waterloo.

To his surprise, he found that acting was a transferable skill to this program in conflict management. Lam found himself regularly getting to the heart of conflict management work quickly through thinking as an actor. Listening closely to an all-consuming "desire" of a person in conflict is something Lam had practiced before and could offer to others in supporting their conflict resolution. What does my character want? What are the obstacles along that path? How do the desires of other characters challenge my desires? Pulling apart desire from identity is a skill learned by actors that can be repurposed towards transformative justice scenarios. Beyond his experience with actor training, Lam quickly learned that a key pillar of conflict management is storytelling. In wrestling with harm and conflict, people involved may have stories that are not compatible. One person in conflict may have a completely different story than another. In the moment of conflict, it's never clear and concise. Stories that are impossible or hard to remember in detail. Conflict management practices (and acting and dramaturgy) ask facilitators and participators to navigate the psychological reflexes that people may have used to create specific narratives about themselves and the harm they have lived through or perpetrated. Conflict management and transformative justice facilitators guide people through a version of a story

where it is possible for them to get what they want. Four months after he completed this program, he started working on *The Candlemaker's Game*.

*The Candlemaker's Game* is in the past, present and it is preparatory. Where *The Book of Jessica* shows us the rehearsal space ahead of the play (although we're reading in the future), *The Candlemaker's Game* reflects on a conflict that has already happened and prepares us for the next one. Although rehearsals can be theorized as practice, ahead of time, they are also an episode of repetition. An echo, a reflection that can lend itself to new choices in the future. *The Candlemaker's Game* is a preparatory abolitionist conflict-management sim. Through careful reflection of a past conflict, *The Candlemaker's Game* can act as a script where players can try something in their bodies before the thing itself happens. Rehearsals function like a mini theatre in themselves, allowing us "to theorize about our world as if it were another and to test that difference in motion, in time."<sup>112</sup> *The Candlemaker's Game* takes a case from life after it's happened and runs it through the theatrical machine to try a different way of approaching the case and preparing for the next one. Through rehearsing transformative justice behind the frame on a conflict that has already occurred, *The Candlemaker's Game* rehearses us for new behaviours in the conflict.

Defined by Mia Mingus for transformharm.org, transformative justice (TJ) can be understood as a "a political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm and abuse. At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging in harm reduction to lessen the violence."<sup>113</sup> Where carceral justice punishes harm with more harm, TJ is a mode of seeking justice that is collaborative and seeks to reduce harm, to all parties, in the future. Mingus goes on to say that TJ "can be thought of as a way of "making things right,"

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<sup>112</sup> Sack, "Introduction," in *Imagined Theatres*, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Mingus, "Transformative Justice"

getting in “right relation,” or creating justice together.”<sup>114</sup> Through this emphasis on collaboration, transformative justice still requires facilitation but does not rely on the state to enact justice. Much like the exercises that Lam offers in *The Candlemaker’s Game*, Mingus’ definitions of TJ “invites us to not only respond to current incidences of violence, but to also prevent future violence from happening, thereby breaking (generational) cycles of violence.”<sup>115</sup> In *The Candlemaker’s Game*, this rehearsal of justice can be both reflective and preparatory, responding to “immediate needs in a way that moves us closer to what we ultimately long for.”<sup>116</sup> The core question she presents here echoes the conflict management work active in *The Candlemaker’s Game*. Mingus asks, “[h]ow can we respond to violence in ways that not only address the current incident of violence, but also help to transform the conditions that allowed for it to happen?”<sup>117</sup>

This chapter argues that rehearsals have the capacity to hold frameworks of transformative justice. Rife with the quotidian practice in making and unmaking, rehearsals allow for an active and liberatory way of facing justice beyond the institutions of the state. Rehearsal’s experience with both failure and repetition invites iteration and complexity, necessary principles in wrestling with abolitionist conflict management. Rehearsals prepare us for the future while actively manifesting in the present, a key element of abolitionist practice.

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<sup>114</sup> Mingus, “Transformative Justice”

<sup>115</sup> Mingus, “Transformative Justice”

<sup>116</sup> Mingus, “Transformative Justice”

<sup>117</sup> Mingus, “Transformative Justice”

## **Chapter 5: The Chorus**

### **Introduction**

The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provided the resources for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise.

- Saidiya Hartman<sup>1</sup>

According to the World Prison Brief, there were roughly 35 485 people incarcerated in 216 institutions in so-called Canada in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Those serving more than two years are incarcerated in federal institutions (of maximum, medium, and minimum security) and those serving less than two years or who are awaiting further trials are incarcerated in provincial and territorial institutions across the country. These institutions sit in rural and remote communities, in suburban and urban city centres. In Kingston where I write this dissertation, with a population of 172,546 in 2021,<sup>3</sup> there are six prisons within city limits, Collins Bay Medium/Maximum Security, Collins Bay Minimum Security, Millhaven Maximum Security and Regional Treatment Centre, Bath Medium Security and Regional Treatment Centre, Joyceville Medium Security, and

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<sup>1</sup> Saidiya Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. (New York W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 348.

<sup>2</sup> “Canada: World Prison Brief Data,” *World Prison Brief*, accessed June 27 2024, [prisonstudies.org/country/canada](https://prisonstudies.org/country/canada)

<sup>3</sup> “Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population Kingston, ON,” *Statistics Canada*, accessed July 9 2024 [statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=E&topic=1&dguid=2021S0503521](https://statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?lang=E&topic=1&dguid=2021S0503521)

Joyceville Minimum Security (formerly Pittsburgh).<sup>4</sup> In his article for *Medium* in 2021, Josh Martin writes,

If you live in the Kingston area, you're lucky enough to have access to a vehicle, and are up for a 20–30 minute drive, you'll be able to visit the majority of Ontario's Correctional Institutions. The Correctional Service Canada's website itself says that 'With the exception of Beaver Creek, Warkworth Institution and Grand Valley Institution for Women, all [Ontario Region Institutions] are located in the Kingston area.'<sup>5</sup>

The population of incarcerated people in Canada, more than the population of Whitehorse, Yukon, joins the nearly 10.35 million imprisoned people around the globe, with the largest population being the roughly 2 million people in total incarcerated in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Can we consider this collection of incarcerated individuals as a community? Not really. They span across the globe and throughout history, surviving and dying in incredibly different carceral environments. Through the wielding of time as a weapon and principles of finite separability, incarcerated people are intentionally denied aspects of connective community. Separated. The femmes in Kim Senklip Harvey's musical *Break Horizons* remind us of the carceral imperative: "[t]he only way to kill a spirit, the essence of a life is to starve it...Starve it from everything it needs...Cut it off from culture, community, so it can no longer breathe."<sup>7</sup> Although carceral violence tries to deny connectivity, incarcerated people around the world find ways to survive, together. They write letters to each other and to their kin outside. They read each other's poetry and scholarship and discuss with their friends inside and outside. They

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<sup>4</sup> "Kingston's Penitentiaries," Queens University Library, accessed July 9 2024, [guides.library.queensu.ca/kingstons-penitentiaries](https://guides.library.queensu.ca/kingstons-penitentiaries)

<sup>5</sup> Scott Martin, "Kingston's Unspoken Dependence On Prisoners," *Medium*, January 10 2021, [youcaughtscott.medium.com/kingstons-unspoken-dependence-on-prisoners-92bc4b3c3089](https://youcaughtscott.medium.com/kingstons-unspoken-dependence-on-prisoners-92bc4b3c3089)

<sup>6</sup> United States: World Prison Brief Data," *World Prison Brief*, accessed June 27 2024, [prisonstudies.org/country/united-states-america](https://prisonstudies.org/country/united-states-america)

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, *Break Horizons*, 7.

publish their thoughts for their peers and other people outside. Throughout history and geography, they have asserted their collectivity despite carceral separation. They enact riots and hunger strikes to advocate for themselves and each other. They make art. Some of them celebrate Prisoner's Justice Day each year, honouring the loss of people still detained inside institutions. Although policed by the state, this collectivity is both a response and a threat to carceral detainment. This collectivity, if extended beyond the carceral context towards the Black radical tradition can be articulated as a kind of revolutionary collective throughout time and space as articulated by Cedric Robinson in his book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Robinson refers to this revolutionary and liberatory collective as "ontological totality," or the "continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being."<sup>8</sup> Traces of choruses throughout time and space can be heard in liberatory movements like abolition. In other worlds, there are expressions of collectivity in both the abolitionist and carceral landscapes, to both abolitionist and carceral ends. In the Canadian context, juries of people sentence individuals to prison where they join large numbers of people who are already incarcerated, and although these incarcerated people are intentionally separate from their kin, they find ways to assert their togetherness towards liberation.

From the earliest records of theatre, dating back to Classical Greece, choruses, as an expression of collectivity, have served a variety of dramaturgical functions. Choruses can provide commentary, adding colour and exposition to theatrical action happening on or off stage. Choruses are valuable to the visual language of a play, filling out scenography as representative of a city or a collection of witnesses. Choruses can also represent the audience and their feelings,

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<sup>8</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill), 171.

pre-emptively expressing horror or grief when a character makes a choice. Choruses can also pass judgement and communicate the moral messaging of a given play. The theatrical chorus is both a collection of individuals (actors) and a singular gathered group (the chorus). They can be judgmental, like the chorus who scowls upon Oedipus during his messy tragic journey, and they can also be liberatory and multidimensional, like a chorus line in a Drag show.

This chapter examines both carceral and abolitionist collectivities through the lens of the theatrical chorus. This chapter considers that although the chorus has the potential to express carceral judgement and punishment, the chorus has the potential to be both a character and a tactic in an abolitionist project. This chapter thinks through the theatrical chorus based on Saidiya Hartman's understanding of the chorus as "the vehicle for another kind of story."<sup>9</sup> This chapter considers collections and collectives of individuals in both carceral and abolitionist landscapes through the dramaturgy of the chorus. This chapter also considers ways dramaturgy can be a site of rehearsal for the abolitionist chorus.

As discussed in the chapter on theatrical frames, carceral violence depends upon what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls *separability*, or the notion that difference is a danger that must be met with a finite and irrefutable border. Carceral violence is intentionally divisive to the collective, locking people away from their kin outside of prison and maintaining walls between the cellmates inside. Although incarceration attempts to separate individuals from their communities outside, they also force them inside together in an extremely normative, policed, and homogenized environment. When criminalized individuals are arrested, they become a cog in the carceral machine, in many cases reduced to a number and file name. Elements of their individuality are stolen from them; they assume a uniform and a very strict schedule. "Even a

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<sup>9</sup> Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 348.

century later, reading through the materials assembled in the case file and poring over her letters,” Saidiya Hartman says of a woman’s mugshot in her reflections on the chorus in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, “I am prohibited from calling her name, less to protect her than to guarantee her disappearance. The state never releases her but claims forever this part of her past as its property.”<sup>10</sup> In Hartman’s archive but also in prisons today, carceral violence dehumanizes in the way it forces a kind of homogenization upon incarcerated people. An inmate enters a prison with their name and is assigned a number by the institution. The institution dehumanizes the individual by the way it aims to subject individuals to a kind of generic seriality.

However, inside prison, this generic seriality is refused while incarcerated people express solidarity and assert their togetherness to survive. Despite separability in the carceral context, there is a potential for a collectivity to generate within sites of abolition geographies. Rachel Fayter, a doctoral student in Criminology and formerly incarcerated scholar, focuses her current research on “how friendship bonds among incarcerated women help them survive their sentences and even thrive outside the prison walls after serving their time.”<sup>11</sup> I first met Rachel through work with the Prison for Women Memorial Collective, a collective of women working to establish a memorial garden on the grounds of the former Prison for Women. In her book *Abolitionist Intimacies*, poet, scholar and activist El Jones writes about the ways that carceral logic separates and severs community to punish a person. This cutting off of collectivity is a primary weapon of the carceral context and because of this, Jones argues that specifically Black women’s acts of care and intimacy in the face of prison are inherently abolitionist by working

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<sup>10</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 264-5.

<sup>11</sup> “Former inmate taps into her prison experience for 'groundbreaking' PhD research,” *CBC Radio: Ideas*, September 24 2020 [cbc.ca/radio/ideas/former-inmate-taps-into-her-prison-experience-for-groundbreaking-phd-research-1.5736932](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/former-inmate-taps-into-her-prison-experience-for-groundbreaking-phd-research-1.5736932)

against this isolation and the barriers to intimacy. For Jones, this kind of relational intimacy is a core arena for the abolitionist imagination to manifest. She names the phone calls and rides offered and letters written as everyday abolitionist practices that might not seem revolutionary but nonetheless sustain lives and relationships and assert a kind of inseparability. In some ways, Jones' *Abolitionist Intimacies* reads like collective storytelling, featuring words from friends and strangers from her own chorus despite the prison. Abolitionist intimacies are intensely relational. The core of her work is the "ongoing, loving sharing of our lives and experiences between those inside and me on the outside."<sup>12</sup> Intimacy and connection is her methodology. She goes on to say that for her,

Intimacy is both my subject and my research method. I engage ideas of intimacy and their practices through their relationship to state violence at carceral sites including prisons, policing, borders, as well as through purported care institutions such as hospitals and social work...The structure of this book attempts to honour this process of living intimacy by refusing the idea that the "real" work only exists in theoretical writing or university spaces.<sup>13</sup>

As Jones argues, the work of abolition takes place primarily in and through relationships. Jones recollects many moments of blocked intimacy, moments when correctional officers would limit contact or physical human connection. She writes about all the ways that the prison industrial complex assaults "basic human forms of contact and courtesy" as "considered violations of the prison policy,"<sup>14</sup> while she wrestles with the hypocrisy of banning human touch while turning away from violence and assault from correctional officers inside. While "I was being chastised

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<sup>12</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 144.

for hugging women, one of the male guards was raping women in the institution,”<sup>15</sup> she says.

Jones writes,

Perhaps abolition is also the uncovering of our autonomous desires, which have been muffled by capitalism, racism, patriarchy, etc. Perhaps it is as simple as returning to the most basic of needs: food, shelter, companionship. Perhaps in reshaping our wanting, we reshape the world. There is a place for desire in an abolitionist world, at least when desire is pleasure and love and freedom.<sup>16</sup>

Jones asserts this desire for pleasure and love and freedom firmly in the relational arena. These abolitionist intimacies depend on asserted relationality.

Cultural historian Saidyia Hartman acknowledges the tradition of powerful gatherings in Black Feminist practice. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, she considers the dual power and threat of gathering as a methodology and an object of study. When describing the urban alleyways that serve as the setting for her semi-fictionalized history of “wayward” Black women in major American cities immediately following emancipation, she says, “[a] whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with black people shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still *intoxicated with freedom*.”<sup>17</sup> She goes on to say, “The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating. At any moment, the promise of insurrection, the miracle of upheaval: small groups, people *by themselves*, and strangers threaten to become an ensemble, to incite *treason on masse*.”<sup>18</sup> The powerful possibilities in Hartman’s communities in her archive, assembling, gathering, congregated, are exactly the possibilities that carceral violence suppresses to assure the carceral context. There is always power in numbers.

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 8.

Ensembles are an extremely capable organization of individuals. There is a productive tension between both revolution and collectivity and carceral ways of quelling that revolution and collectivity.

This chapter considers the theatrical chorus as a site of rehearsing abolitionist collectives that rail against carceral ones. Although the chorus is wielded as a carceral instrument, in the normalizing gaze of the jury or parole board, but also can be a vehicle for abolition. This chapter examines dramaturgies of chorus in carceral contexts, like manifestations of a judgmental chorus, and abolitionist contexts, like a liberatory relational chorus or an asynchronous group working across distance towards a liberated future. Through the lens of the theatrical chorus, I examine choruses as abolitionist or carceral, empowering or destructive, synchronous or asynchronous, anonymized or protected in collective, as a tension-filled methodological invitation for abolitionist dramaturgy. Abolition is inherently a choral call; we must act in a collective to bring about the abolitionist future. This chapter argues that through dramaturgies of chorus we can abolish carceral choruses and rehearsal abolitionist ones. The prison industrial complex punishes en masse, and abolition insists on liberation in a collective. Through the lens of the theatrical chorus, we can look closely at multiple complex manifestations of collectivity within carceral logic. There is a kind of anonymized violence that exists within the prison industrial complex when isolation and division are yielded as weapons. But we know inside (and outside), solidarity seeps through the bars, connecting incarcerated people to each other despite the violent separation.<sup>19</sup> Carceral structures are designed to disrupt the solidarity that comes from an assemblage, by literally segregating people in cells. But even as the prison industrial complex directly threatens the emergence of creative assemblages by disconnecting people from

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<sup>19</sup> “Former inmate taps into her prison experience for 'groundbreaking' PhD research”

community and pitting them against each other, this very situation in turn invites us to join another kind of chorus oriented towards abolition.

### **History & Function of Chorus (The Greeks, Pavis)**

The chorus is one of theatre's oldest dramaturgical techniques. In his dictionary of theatre, Patrice Pavis defines a chorus as a "device used in Greek theatre...a homogenous group of dancers, singers and narrators who speak collectively to comment on the action in which they are involved in various ways."<sup>20</sup> Ranging in size, the Greek chorus is a character that is also collective. The Greek chorus can be both powerful and powerless, consisting of "non-individualized and often abstract forces (*actants*) that represent high moral or political interests."<sup>21</sup> As opposed to individual actors as distinct characters, the earliest Greek theatres only had a chorus. The first "actor," an individual that performs only a singular character, was defined in opposition to the chorus when in 6th century BCE, "Thespis reputedly became the first true actor when he engaged in dialogue with the chorus leader."<sup>22</sup> Even after the individual actor appeared alone on stage, choral performances dominated until the 5th century BCE when the chorus was reduced significantly in size and Greek playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles leaned more towards actors, dialogue, and plot progression to tell their stories.<sup>23</sup> Pavis argues that, as time went on, "the use of the chorus was restricted to marginal commentary (warnings, advice, supplications.)"<sup>24</sup> The Greek chorus was generally a mass of non-individualized people who would report on the action *not* happening on stage and collectively pass moral judgement. The chorus served this function for both morality and practicality's sake, as the action could have

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<sup>20</sup> Pavis, "Chorus," in *Dictionary of the Theatre, Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Pavis, "Chorus," 53.

<sup>22</sup> "Chorus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed June 27 2024, [britannica.com/art/chorus-theatre](https://www.britannica.com/art/chorus-theatre)

<sup>23</sup> "Chorus," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>24</sup> Pavis, "Chorus," 54.

been deemed either inappropriate or impossible to stage (or both.) The Greek chorus could also offer insight into what the audience should be thinking, thematically. They act, representatively, as the “people,” in whatever manifestation suits the plot and through the way they comment on action and pass moral judgement, they elevate stage action plot to something more universal.

Beyond the Greeks, the choral body takes on various dramaturgical shapes and functions in different contexts throughout Western theatre history. In theatre in Europe during the Middle Ages, the chorus more closely resembled an emcee, “functioning as an epic coordinator of the episodes presented.”<sup>25</sup> In 16th century European theatre, the chorus acted more as transitional entertainment, separating the acts of a performance or “used as musical interlude.”<sup>26</sup> House band! In his dictionary, Pavis then moves to the choruses of 18th century German dramas of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller who used the chorus to induce catharsis as opposed to analysis, elevating the stage action to a poetic and visceral sphere. In other words, these choruses manipulated the frame of the stage action, away from “realness” and towards a kind of more abstracted poetics through the chorus. Bertolt Brecht used the chorus “as an alienation effect,” especially “in musical comedy (as a mystifying and consensual function for the group welded together by artistic expression - dance, song, text.”<sup>27</sup> Brecht’s singing chorus should shock the audience out of the fiction long enough to truly appreciate the commentary Brecht was offering on politics or poverty, for example. With the alienation effect, came a desire to interrogate the illusion of drama towards more actual political action outside the frame. Brecht’s chorus, like Weiss’ in *Marat/Sade*, did not give voice to the normative judgmental power like the Greeks but rather voiced and incited revolutionary change. In this case, Brechtian dramaturgy

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<sup>25</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

<sup>26</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

<sup>27</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

readapted a historically normative theatrical chorus to very different kind of chorus, rehearsing a collective political desire that hopefully spurs actual action acting. Where the Greek chorus tends to represent a judgmental and normalizing voice of the community, the Brechtian chorus stirs up a collective that is both desiring of and capable of political and social transformation. The function of the chorus ranged in global and temporal context, and I acknowledge, I have barely covered the history of the theatrical chorus here. Sometimes the chorus, like an all-seeing all-powerful narrator, offers commentary or necessary exposition for the actions happening beyond the stage. Sometimes they judge the actions of characters. Sometimes, though, they are activated in favour of a revolution.

Pavis offers a list of choral functions that resemble both carceral and abolitionist takes on the theatrical chorus. Pavis distills the functions of the chorus into four specific pillars: the Denial of Reality, Idealization and Generalization, Expression of a Community, Chorus as a Voice of Protest. The denial of reality speaks to the Brechtian notion that chorus was a distancing technique to manifest the illusion, the not-realness of theatre. Pavis describes this function of a chorus as “an epic technique that was often used to create distance, as it set up for the spectator another spectator/judge of the action...”<sup>28</sup> This is carceral in the way that the separation is in service of judgement, resembling a jury of unbiased peers. This is abolitionist in the way it insists upon the fact that showing another world is rehearsal and precedence for another world to happen. This distancing, most obviously seen in Brecht’s Epic Theatre, offers an “epic commentary...used to incarnate on stage the audience and its gaze.”<sup>29</sup> This first function acts as what I understand to be a call to action through an activation of distance: a reminder that what we are watching is theatre and the real world outside these walls needs changing. Although both

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<sup>28</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

<sup>29</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

manipulative distance and proximity, the Greek chorus that passes moral judgement and expresses the desires of Fate, while the Brechtian chorus stirs with a collective call to action. The second function of the chorus according to Pavis is idealization and generalization, where the chorus presents the “deep discourse” of the play, making the transition from "particular to general.”<sup>30</sup> This chorus is a bridge for the audience to access the deeper understandings of the text. The chorus acts as a bridge between the plot and something bigger. This chorus embodies the notion of “put yourself in someone else’s shoes.” This function is carceral in the way that empathy can be used as a normalizing divide that assures separation between the empathizer and the empathized with. This function is abolitionist in the way that the chorus skates between the specific and the general, the immediate needs of being in material solidarity with people side and the more general perspective shifts needed for an abolition of police and prisons.

The third function of the chorus according to Pavis is the expression of community. The chorus is both a collection of characters and individuals and a general mass that represents a larger public. Pavis says, “In order for the real spectator to recognize himself in the “ideal spectator” of the chorus, the values transmitted by the latter must be his own, and total identification must be possible. Accordingly, the chorus has no chance of being accepted by the audience unless that audience is welded together by cult, belief, or ideology.”<sup>31</sup> This function of the chorus also has the potential to be both carceral and abolitionist. If the values and norms of the community represented are violent and judgmental, they resemble a carceral jury or parole board. If the community has collective desires for freedom and safety for all, they are the abolitionist protest. Finally, the potentially most liberatory of functions of Pavis’ chorus, the chorus as a voice of protest. Pavis says, “The essentially ambiguous nature of the chorus - its

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<sup>30</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 54.

<sup>31</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 55.

cathartic and ritual power on the one hand and its distancing force on the other - explains how it survived in times that have lost the belief in great individuals and have not (yet?) experienced the free individual of a society without contradictions.”<sup>32</sup> This chorus is a powerful force positioned towards change, opposing fate and embodying the Foucauldian notion that what can be made can be unmade.

### **Choruses in the Institution and the Archive**

In his work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines institutional punishment from Enlightenment into the 19th century. More specifically, he traces the shift from the sovereign power of spectacular punishment (public executions) to the disciplinary power of surveillance and normalization in prison. Where spectacular punishment punished the individual for their crimes, in public and animatedly violent ways, post-Enlightenment disciplinary power works through the micro-management of individual behavior, through far-reaching technologies of power.

For institutions to enact punishment through carceral logic, discipline and punishment must simply exist as a given when living in a collective. Foucault said of his genealogy of his carceral reality, “Everyone must see punishment not only as natural, but in his own interest; everyone must be able to read it in his own advantage.”<sup>33</sup> Ironically though, much like the Greek chorus who reports on actions occurring off stage, with the end of spectacular pre-Enlightenment punishment, like the dramatic spectacle of the public hanging, punishment is rendered private, behind the closed doors of the institution. “Though the sentence and the reasons for it should be

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<sup>32</sup> Pavis, “Chorus,” 55.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, 109.

known to all, the penalty should be carried out in secret, the public was to intervene neither as a witness, nor as a guarantor of punishment.”<sup>34</sup>

For Foucault, anonymity of a collective is both a function of the prison industrial complex and an act of resistance to it. Scholar Perry Zurn writes about the ways that post-structuralists, like Foucault, relied upon anonymity as a principle to both studying how prison works and how to oppose them. Zurn says that for these post-structuralists, anonymity could be used to “escape the confines of identity, resist the restraints of administrative bureaucracy, and to become someone new or think something else entirely.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, anonymity was used as a tool afforded to the chorus. Zurn highlights the specific kinds of tension between anonymity within this work through looking at Foucault’s activist work with the Prisons Information Group (GIP). Zurn says that “The GIP utilized anonymity as a tactic of resistance against institutionalized forms of naming. But they equally used naming as a tactical resistance against institutionalized forms of anonymity.”<sup>36</sup> Zurn joins the chorus of critiques from “feminists, critical race theorists, and others” against this use of anonymity, arguing that it is another manifestation of privilege.

While Foucault is best known for his critique of normalizing power, some of his genealogical method also seeks to recover the “subjugated knowledges” of those who resist normalization. Although Foucault has been critiqued for not acknowledging the influence of liberatory choruses in the Black radical tradition,<sup>37</sup> in many instances he listens to the chorus of incarcerated individuals throughout history. For example, in “Lives of Infamous Men,” the introductory essay

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<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. 125.

<sup>35</sup> Perry Zurn, “The Politics of Anonymity: Foucault, Feminism, and Gender Non-conforming Prisoners,” *philoSOPHIA* 6, no 1, (Winter 2016): 27.

<sup>36</sup> Zurn, “The Politics of Anonymity,” 32.

<sup>37</sup> Angela Davis, “Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition,” in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, (Blackwell Publishing: Malden, 2006), 360–369. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751640.ch23>.

to a book series *Parallel Lives*,<sup>38</sup> Foucault attends to the colourful and the quotidian voices of those who were targeted for normalization but did not necessarily submit. “This is not a book of history,” Foucault says, “It’s an anthology of existences. Lives of a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures gathered into a handful of words. Brief lives, encountered by chance in books and documents.”<sup>39</sup> The subjects in this prison archive are “Singular lives, transformed into strange poems through who knows what twists of fate - that is what I decided to gather into a kind of herbarium.”<sup>40</sup> Likening his historical record to an archive of dried plants, Foucault is writing the nuance of a collective that is different from the ancient Greek chorus that expresses the norms of the community, and much closer, but not quite, to the chorus that Hartman theorizes in *Wayward Lives*.

He explains why he writes this record as an herbarium-history, citing two records dating from the beginning of the 18th century found in the Bibliothèque Nationale. These records read more like a character study in a classical novel than a record of institutional internment. The first person, Mathurin Milan, was arrested under charges of madness, known to “hide from his family, to lead an obscure life in the country, to have actions at law, to lend usuriously and without security, to lead his feeble mind down unknown paths, and to believe himself capable of the greatest employments.”<sup>41</sup> It’s hard to imagine an official judicial policy against wandering down unknown paths, but this is precisely Foucault’s point of interest. Foucault likens these records of institutional control to “short stories” that are “suddenly emerging from two and a half centuries of silence,” and ultimately “stirring more fibers within” him than what he would have had stirred

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” in *The Essential Foucault*, eds Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose, (The New Press: 2003), 279.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 279.

<sup>40</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 279.

<sup>41</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 279-80.

from reading actual literature.<sup>42</sup> Published closer to the end of his career in 1977, “Lives of Infamous Men” follows Foucault’s desires as an archivist, using different methodology than some of Foucault’s other works of history. “A long time ago I made use of documents like these for a book,” with the goal being “to restore their intensity in an analysis.”<sup>43</sup> Here he refers to his work as a genealogical historian who traces power/knowledge through different practices and institutions, “look[ing] for the reason why people were so zealous to prevent the feebleminded from walking down unknown paths.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, in this essay, Foucault maps the way normalizing power works to bring a plurality of what Hartman will later call “wayward lives” into line with the norms of the community. But this is not all that he does. While *Discipline and Punish* offers an account of how disciplinary power normalizes individuals, in “Lives of Infamous Men,” Foucault chooses to “recapture something like those flash existences, those poem lives” that resist the normalizing panoptic gaze.<sup>45</sup> In light of my own genealogy of the chorus, we could understand the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* as a representative of the normative voice of the community, like the chorus in ancient Greece, while “Lives of Infamous Men” carries with the pleasures and dangers of a different sort of chorus, that begins to resemble Hartman’s revolutionary analysis of the chorus in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

One of his rules for this collection of resistant individual lives is that the people in the record must be relatively unremarkable, obscure. “Nothing would have prepared them for any notoriety,”<sup>46</sup> he says. If they were so obscure, how would these characters then leap out from the multitudes of punished people throughout history? “But in order for some part of them to reach

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<sup>42</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 280.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 280.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 280.

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 280.

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 282.

us, a beam of light had to illuminate them, for a moment at least,”<sup>47</sup> Foucault writes. That light, or at least the institution casting the light, is their entanglement with power and control through the archival record of the institution. “What snatched them from the darkness in which they could, perhaps should, have remained was the encounter with power; without that collision, it’s very unlikely that any word would be there to recall their fleeting trajectory.”<sup>48</sup> Their encounter with internment, with power and discipline manifested through institutions and their records effectively turned the spotlight on their individuality in the record. In other words, the brush with power is like Thespis stepping out from a normalizing chorus...into another more potentially liberatory chorus in Foucault’s record. Once absorbed into the record and the archive, they are again put into a nameless chorus until the history repositions the spotlight or the historian pays attention, notices, and cares about them. The exact spotlight of internment and entanglement with institutions (and history, but also with the care-ful eye of the genealogist) is what both memorialized and forgot these lives. The entanglement with power is what captured their relatively obscure life in both prison and the archive. “Indeed, the most intense point of a life, the point where its energy is concentrated, is where it comes up against power, struggles with it, attempts to use its forces and to evade its traps,”<sup>49</sup> Foucault says. The record represents the “brief and strident words that went back and forth between power and the most inessential existences,” and “doubtless constitute, for the latter, the only monument they have ever been granted: it is what gives them, for the passage through time, the bit of brilliance, the brief flash that carries them to us.”<sup>50</sup> Foucault finds his chorus as a series of infamous lives colourfully articulated through the archive of document-monuments. “In short,” he says, “I wanted to assemble a few

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<sup>47</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 282.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 282.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 282.

<sup>50</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 282.

rudiments for a legend of obscure men, out of the discourse that, in sorrow or in rage, they exchanged with power.”<sup>51</sup> The contradictions of this invisibility and visibility of the carceral and abolitionist choruses are present in both Foucault’s archive and more generally in the contemporary prison industrial complex. Foucault writes, “Lives that are as though they hadn’t been, that survive only from the clash with a power that wished only to annihilate them or at least to obliterate them, lives that come back to use only through the effect of multiple accidents - these are the infamies that I wanted to assemble here in the form of a few remains.”<sup>52</sup> They are captured in all of their colour through the records but in another breath “Their infamy is only a modality of the universal *fama*... they no longer exist except through the terrible words that were destined to render them forever unworthy of the memory of men.”<sup>53</sup>

Later in the essay, Foucault analyzes the ornamental language of these records, comparing it again to rich classical literature. “These texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (especially when compared with the flatness of later administrative and policy documents) display a brilliance, reveal a splendor of phrasing, a vehemence that belies, in our judgment at least, the pettiness of the affair or the rather shameful meanness of intent.”<sup>54</sup> This chorus of individuals reaches beyond their carceral homogenization and towards a kind of abolitionist poetics. “The most pitiful lives are described with the imprecations or emphasis that would seem to suit the most tragic.”<sup>55</sup> He notes the contradiction here, “there is something ludicrous in summoning all the power of words, and through them the supreme power of heaven and earth, around such insignificant disorders or such ordinary woes.”<sup>56</sup> This ornamental

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<sup>51</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 283.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 284.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 284.

<sup>54</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 285.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 285.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 285.

extravagance reminds me of a Classical Greek chorus, punctuating the stage action with tragic commentary and lofty judgements on a liberated and free chorus. In talking about the colourful and dramatically tragic language of the internment records, Foucault writes, “The discourse of power in the Classical age, like the discourses addressed to it, produces monsters. Why this emphatic theater of the quotidian?”<sup>57</sup>

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya Hartman assembles a chorus in the archive with the liberatory treatment they deserve. In her history, she says that the aim of incarcerating “wayward” women in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women was a kind of “civil death”<sup>58</sup> that came with depersonalization. “In the identification photograph found in the case file, the numbers are attached to a plain gingham jumper, transforming a singular life into a statistical profile.”<sup>59</sup> While prison punishes through this homogenization and erasure of identity, the resultant collective also possesses the power of transformation and, as Saidiya Hartman names it, *upheaval*. Collectivities, like rehearsals and manipulations of time, are a dramaturgical reality practiced in both the abolitionist dream and the theatrical machine. There is an inherent kind of collectivity in the suggestion of abolition, relying on the notion that I am so invested in my collective that I am willing to work through harm and conflict with them, no matter how hard it gets. That liberation of incarcerated people ultimately nurtures the liberation of everyone. I am not free until everyone is free.

In her chapter “Riot and Refrain” in *Wayward Lives*, Hartman recounts a “sonic revolt”<sup>60</sup> as an act of Black women’s resistance against conditions at Lowell Cottage at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in New York City in the early twentieth century. As a direct

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<sup>57</sup> Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” 286.

<sup>58</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 264.

<sup>59</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 264.

<sup>60</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 279.

protest to the kind of disciplinary and normalizing power in panoptic and carceral punishment and frustrated with the violent treatment from guards and matrons, the incarcerated women “sought retribution in noise and destruction.”<sup>61</sup> They shouted and screamed, pounding on the walls and iron bars for days, “finding a shared and steady rhythm that they hoped might topple the cottage, make the walls crumble, smash the cots, destroy the reformatory...”<sup>62</sup> They sang and cried through the night, destroying the cottage from the inside out for passersby but also for each other. “Songs and shouts were the instruments of struggle,” Hartman says, and the women found their own voice amplified under the unified cover of the chorus. “Each voice blended with the others in a common tongue.”<sup>63</sup> The common tongue fostered solidarity and protection. Aurel and choral encouragement as an antidote to loneliness. Transformative, the choral protest turned them from “prisoners to strikers.”<sup>64</sup> In this way, the chorus inside Lowell Cottage deliberately acted together to express desires that refuse the normativity of the carceral gaze in the prison and in the historical archive.

In another chapter, “The Beauty of the Chorus,” Hartman tells the story of a young performer, Mabel, who frees herself from her life of post-emancipation servitude by joining a chorus line in Harlem, a chorus line that is both actual in the historical context and metaphysical in the extended community of the Black radical tradition. “Joining the chorus encompassed much more than the sequence of steps or the arrangement of dances on the stage of a music hall or the floor of a cabaret,”<sup>65</sup> Hartman writes. In this chapter, Hartman imagines Mabel’s adventure to the big city, ultimately an act of resistance to the limits placed on her as a Black woman in mid-

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<sup>61</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 279.

<sup>62</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 279.

<sup>63</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 282.

<sup>64</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 283.

<sup>65</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 299.

century America. Joining the chorus was an opportunity to embody what Hartman refers to as “living otherwise...choreography was just another kind of movement for freedom, another opportunity to escape service, another elaboration of the general strike.”<sup>66</sup> In this way, through a kind of collective expression, collective movement became a map towards a freedom. “This was the multitude,” Hartman writes of Mabel encountering Lennox Avenue in New York, “the small players, anonymous members of the ensemble, common folk whose tears and laughter defined the vitality of the Black Belt, the heart and soul of the beautiful and the disappointment that was Harlem.”<sup>67</sup> Mabel found joy in the rush, in being “one among the chorus.”<sup>68</sup> Hartman conjures images of the transformation that occurs when Mabel takes to the stage with her chorus in performances at Coney Island. Beyond “the lights and the velvet costumes and the pulsing rhythms of the latest rag,” Mabel was moved by “the beauty of becoming with seven other girls, which unfolded in public under the pressure and encouragement of the gaze of strangers.”<sup>69</sup> Hartman charts the ways her chorus has the potential to be transformative in its assertion of collectivity. This chorus and its movement are not a manifestation of institutions in the punished body but rather a kind of liberatory choreography. Hartman specifically articulates the chorus as a transformative site of freedom when she writes,

The chorus was transformed from a line of separate dancers into a shared body finding a common rhythm. And this body moved as one, erasing the borders of the bounded self, feeling and moving in concert, and communicating with the audience through the cadence of voices, gestures, variations of movement, and the rhythm of clap and step.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 299.

<sup>67</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 301.

<sup>68</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 301.

<sup>69</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 302.

<sup>70</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 303.

Hartman refers to this transformative collective choreography as finding a “common body.”<sup>71</sup>

This transformation exists in the collective of chorus but also in the individual bodies, as “[t]he dancers also moved independently, orbiting one another like small planets, one body pulling away from the others, yet still connected by force, gravity, and propulsion.”<sup>72</sup> The chorus, in this case, offered a collective choreography of freedom. In the specific case of Mabel, this chorus also offered a choreography for the queer love she finally felt freer to express.

Hartman populates her history of post-Emancipation America with a chorus of wayward lives and beautiful experiments, a collective of revolutionary Black women who wandered and forged their own paths towards liberation. “One girl can stand in for any of them, can serve as the placeholder for the story, recount the history from the beginning, and convey the knowledge of freedom disguised as jargon and nonsense.”<sup>73</sup> Hartman’s chorus, in all its complexities and resistances in the pages of her history, houses secrets of freedom, in both the crowded streets and the archives. They are sites of abolition geography and although historical, can be listened to. Hartman says, “[if] you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance.”<sup>74</sup> Mabel’s chorus, an actual historical chorus, is powerful and they work together to keep each other safe and find liberatory joy in the corners of their reality. This chorus is not entirely free but rather they dare, in collective, to believe that another world, for them, is possible. Together in chorus, they are not “defeated by defeat.”<sup>75</sup>

“The chorus makes a plan, they draft a blueprint: move, escape, rush to the city, quit the job and

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<sup>71</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 303.

<sup>72</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 303.

<sup>73</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 345.

<sup>74</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 345.

<sup>75</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 347.

run away from everything hell-bent on sucking all the life out of them.”<sup>76</sup> Where individuals cannot, “the chorus bears all of it for us.”<sup>77</sup> The chorus is the unit that is capable of transformation and care in its rotating and multi-headed seat of power. The multitudes of Hartman’s chorus make up the complete picture. “All of the details of the nothing special and the extraordinary brutality cohere to produce a picture of the world in all its beauty and death.”<sup>78</sup> Contrasting the brutality and judgement of the Classical Greek chorus, the parole board chorus, and the panoptic observer chorus, Hartman’s chorus illustrates the potential of an abolitionist chorus, one which is capable of collective freedom-seeking transformation.

This chapter focuses specifically on the carceral and abolitionist choruses in three different case studies, Erin Shields’ Classical Greek redux *If We Were Birds*, the Filipino Canadian based-on-a-true-story musical *Prison Dancer*, and Kate McIntosh’s participatory *Worktable*. Erin Shields’ *If We Were Birds* uses a chorus to represent the cyclical and carceral repetition of violence against a chorus of women in war and rehearses abolitionist ways those women, and ultimately all of us, resist. *Prison Dancer* showcases the transformative capacities of the collective through a Queer-led ensemble of incarcerated dancers. While I consider the collectivity of a synchronous chorus through two literary works of drama, with *Worktable* I move towards the labour of participatory theatre as a kind of asynchronous chorus that emphasizes consequences and agency from both audience members and artists. The participatory work that I am analyzing stresses the choral voice and collective energy that is required to manifest both the creative and destructive elements of abolition.

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<sup>76</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 347.

<sup>77</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 347.

<sup>78</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 348.

### Case Study: *If We Were Birds*

At the beginning of *If We Were Birds*, a reimagining of Ovid's story about the tragedy of Athenian princesses Procne and Philomela and Procne's husband Tereus, the king of Thrace, playwright Erin Shields offers this note on the chorus of women that are featured in the play:

These characters are inspired by testimonials of women survivors from the following conflicts: Nanking (1937), Berlin (1945), Bangladesh (1971), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995), and Rwanda (1994). Each character relates to a particular conflict and incorporates details from many stories. It is not my intention for an audience to match the conflict to the character, but rather to experience a diverse chorus of contemporary women who have suffered sexual violence enacted as a weapon of war... Their physicality should be bird-like as the Chorus and human as the Slave Women and Servants.<sup>79</sup>

*If We Were Birds* is gripping adaptation of a Greek myth that heavily features a chorus of women as witnesses to and adversaries against violence. In the play, sisters Procne and Philomela are growing up under the care of their father Pandion, the King of Athens. When Tereus, a Thracian war hero, arrives to Thebes, Pandion promises his eldest daughter, Procne, to be his wife. The two leave Thebes, marry and bear a son, Itys. Philomela, devastated to be left at home in Athens without her sister, convinces her father to let Tereus take her to her sister. On the journey, she is raped and mutilated by Tereus and left to die in the woods. With the help of a chorus of women, Procne finds Philomela in the woods and in her rage, she promises to enact revenge on Tereus for his unimaginably heinous act of raping and mutilating her sister. When she returns home to Tereus, she avenges her sister by murdering their child and feeding it to Tereus. Winner of the 2011 Governor General's Award in Playwriting, Shield's *If We Were Birds* was first performed in

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<sup>79</sup> Erin Shields, "A Note on the Chorus," *If We Were Birds*, (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2011), iii.

2010 at Tarragon Theatre in Toronto and was subsequently nominated for five Dora Awards, winning two.

Existing somewhere between real testimony of actual genocidal violence against women throughout history and the mythical world of sisters Procne and Philomela, their father Pandion, and their suitor Tereus, the women's chorus of *If We Were Birds* are both representational and metaphorical. Beyond representing women who survived these global conflicts, the characters in the chorus, The Young One, The Pregnant One, The Bleeding One, The Pious One, and The One with Dwindling Dignity, are to resemble birds, surviving the tragedy of their lives through omnipresence, constant flight, and an asserted collectivity. While inside the play, they are witnesses (as "slave women" and "servants") to protagonist sisters Procne and Philomela, sometimes they are judge and jury. Sometimes they are interveners and encouragers. Sometimes they are memoirists. "A chorus of ravaged women who have been transformed into birds by the gods,"<sup>80</sup> these women are harbingers of transformation, warning Procne and Philomela from above. When we meet this chorus of women-birds in *If We Were Birds*, they have survived their own trauma and pain but are subject here to witness new horrors in the lives of Philomela and Procne. They are there to help, to warn, to advise. They are individuals with their own unique histories, but they also are bound together in a cycle of war and genocidal violence against women.

At the beginning of the play, when the audience meets Philomela and the chorus in the prologue they are dwelling "in a timeless purgatory of nature. They scavenge and are hunted."<sup>81</sup> In the darkness, the chorus encourages Philomela to initiate the story. "Speak it, speak it, speak

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<sup>80</sup> Shields, "Cast," *If We Were Birds*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Shields, "Cast," *If We Were Birds*, 2.

it, speak,”<sup>82</sup> the chorus says. This choral imperative to speak the truth can be both carceral and abolitionist, resembling a person confessing guilt to a jury or in contrast, a rallying call of abolitionist organizing. As Philomela opens her mouth to share, “blood spills down her chin.”<sup>83</sup> With the encouragement of the chorus, Philomela begins to tell the story of this trauma, reperforming it again for us, the audience. “The gods have sewn my tongue back in. Some sort of mercy for some sort of guilt, and they’ll be wanting some sort of praise. Thanks. Now that it’s back, it covers in the depths of my throat, curled and trembling, remembering the squeeze of pincers so I need to coax it forward to speak, like this.”<sup>84</sup> Who is guilty? Who is merciful? Supported by the solidarity of the chorus, Philomela speaks with a tongue sewn back in so she can “mourn [her] fate with a sweet, sweet song.”<sup>85</sup> The play begins.

After the chorus coaxes Philomela to speak, we travel back to the beginning of the story. We find the two sisters in bathtub. As the girls play and gossip in the water, we learn that Philomela and Procne are worried of their imminent separation, as the girls are marrying age and their father, King Pandion of Athens, has been looking for suitors. While the girls talk nervously about sex, they promise to resist marriage in favour of staying together. The chorus watches on. When we meet King Pandion, he is with Tereus, a great warrior and the King of Thrace who is returning after a successful, and violent, campaign across Greece. As a gift, Tereus offers Pandion a group of slave women (our bird chorus, transformed). Grateful, Pandion gives Tereus his daughter Procne’s hand in marriage. Despite protest from little sister Philomela, it is decided the two will marry and leave Athens the very next day. Procne, Tereus and Pandion leave

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<sup>82</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 3.

Philomela alone with the chorus of birds, as “Slave Women,” who interrogate her feelings on the matter.

Up to this point, the bird chorus behaves most like a Classical Greek chorus. They remark on what is occurring on stage with tragic and ornamental grandeur. Without too much intervention in the action, they offer judgement and opinions about the action onstage. They escalate the emotions of the scene. However, when Procne is promised to Tereus, the women give voice to liberatory and subversive set of norms, opposing the normalizing Classical Greek chorus. They worry for Procne’s safety in the company of a warrior, and they encourage Philomela to be worried too. At one point, The Pious One notices Philomela’s distress about her sister leaving and says, “Can you blame her? Losing her sister to a man like that...A man who breeds war.”<sup>86</sup> By portraying a character who is a victim of genocidal violence while also actively opposing it and railing against that genocidal violence, The Pious One and this chorus oppose the more traditional normalizing judgement doled out by the Greek chorus. Philomela tries to self-soothe through assertions of her own participation in patriarchal violent hegemony, arguing with the bird chorus and justifying Tereus’ position as a warrior. “Everyone he attacks deserves what he gets,” says Philomela. The Pregnant One revolts against this violent patriarchal narrative of war, reminding Philomela’s of the felt realities of genocidal conflict. “Did I deserve what I got?”<sup>87</sup> She proceeds to tell Philomela a gruesome story about her own violence and rape at the hands of warriors. The Bleeding One asks Philomela outright, “Will you send your sister off with a soldier capable of acts like these?”<sup>88</sup> The One with Dwindling Dignity shares her story of trying to keep her children and grandchildren safe from soldiers by hiding under floorboards.

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<sup>86</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 24.

The Young One, tells a third story of another harrowing rape. These stories of wartime violence eventually overwhelm Philomela and she begins to cry as the chorus confronts her in unison. “Is this your glorious war?”<sup>89</sup> In their multiplicities as characters representing victims of genocidal violence throughout history, really, they are asking, in solidarity with each other and against the violent state that breeds war: Are these your glorious wars? When she begins to cry, the chorus nurtures a growing solidarity between Philomela and their group. That solidarity is interrupted when Philomela asserts her individual, and this time cries only for her sister. “My sister will leave tomorrow, and I will be alone.”<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the abolitionist warnings from the chorus that encourage Philomela to mitigate harm by protecting Procne from Tereus and the war he represents, Philomela decides that she must support Procne and help her ready herself for the marriage and the rituals that accompany the event. Procne and Tereus marry, and the chorus again returns to us in their abstracted form as birds, describing Procne and Tereus’ nuptial bed. The Young One says, “I would have wished for one just like it if I hadn’t seen who made it.”<sup>91</sup>

War came alive through the aural storytelling of the Classical Greek chorus, and it does again through the words of the chorus in *If We Were Birds*. While sometimes the chorus reports on violence and sex happening in the action of the play itself, much of the violence they are conjuring through their words are stories of their own experiences of violence as depictions of women who survived wartime and genocidal violence. Through their reiteration of these experiences alongside the tragedy of Procne and Philomela, the chorus embodies the gory repetition of war, linking the chorus of survivors. Through this chorus, Shields is asking audiences to reckon with these stories of gruesome transformation from individuals into

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<sup>89</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 27.

<sup>90</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 32.

representative characters in a chorus (“The Pregnant One,” “The Bleeding One,” etc.) that seem to repeat throughout history. The chorus reminds us that genocidal and gendered violence against women as a form of harm is ongoing and cyclical, in every era, from this Ancient Greek story to contemporary wars that reverberate as I write this paper. Shields, in asking her audience directly to avoid “matching” the genocidal conflict to the chorus characters in the introduction, is manifesting the repeated and repeating nature of rape as a weapon of war, from the mythical Greek cosmos to the realities of genocide in the contemporary world. Harm happens, then more harm happens in retribution for that harm. Women suffer and through violence are transformed – sometimes surviving, sometimes not. In this cyclical repetition as embodied through the chorus, there is a transpersonal and foundational connection between these victims, and perpetrators, of harm and ultimately transformation.

Procne leaves Philomela, and time passes as we learn that Tereus and Procne now have a son, Itys. Procne however is preoccupied with missing her sister Philomela. She tries to convince Tereus to bring Philomela to her, but he insists that he must go on a “campaign to the North”<sup>92</sup> instead. “For a war but not for my sister,”<sup>93</sup> Procne protests. Tereus insists that war is vital to him. “War is not for my amusement,” he says, “I need it like meat, like wine, like you. The battle’s in my blood.”<sup>94</sup> Procne seduces Tereus and while they have sex, the Bleeding One, holding baby Itys in her arms, tells her own brutal story of violence and how those traces of violence, like Tereus’ need to enact it, exist as a core part of her identity now. “Rage is in my blood,”<sup>95</sup> she says. After telling her story, she warns Procne of her future: “Blood is something

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<sup>92</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 39.

<sup>95</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 39.

you can't control...It doesn't distinguish between love and war."<sup>96</sup> This warning falls on untuned ears though, and Procne returns to her husband's bed. The chorus speaks again but this time, rather than recounting their survival, they speak of their vengeance. The Bleeding One says "I am still bleeding now. I can't seem to stop bleeding. But when I do, I'll join the army. I'll go back and kill the ones that killed me, stab them through with bayonets, cut off their pricks and nail them to trees and fences."<sup>97</sup> Each woman speaks her specific dreams of revenge. The Bleeding One speaks another warning to Procne and says, "I will make him pay for everything he has done for everything he is doing for everything he will do. And you, you will do the same."<sup>98</sup> Opposing the hegemonic and patriarchal violence of their own worlds and contexts, this abolitionist bird chorus gives voice to those whose voices are silenced or suppressed in a collective call.

Procne successfully convinces Tereus to go to Athens, and Tereus successfully convinces Pandion to let him bring Philomela back to Thrace to visit her sister. On the trip home, Tereus lusts for Philomela. The bird chorus watches, knowingly. Before bringing her to Procne, Tereus brings Philomela "[d]eep and down and into a private hunting cabin with thick walls and a lock on the door."<sup>99</sup> As predicted and premeditated by the chorus, Tereus is consumed by his blood, overwhelmed in his violent desire for Philomela. He rapes her, blaming not himself but his blood.<sup>100</sup> Philomela, enraged with the cyclical ripples of violence cries, "And what about my blood? What about me? You've dragged us here: my father, my sister, my body, your son, all of us are me scraping my skin into dirt telling everyone of the shames you've forced into me. Why

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<sup>96</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 41.

<sup>97</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 41.

<sup>98</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 52.

didn't you kill me first? Get your blood raged up in murder rather than this. At least then my soul could rest without the knowledge of this."<sup>101</sup> She says, "You will answer for this. The gods watch all evil, and if they are more than names they will see me. See me!...I won't stop screaming. I won't stop saying the words again and again and again. Rape! Rape! Rape!"<sup>102</sup> To stop her from speaking the truth of what violence just occurs, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue and returns to Procne to tell her that Philomela fell in the sea on the journey back to Thrace. Leaving Procne heartbroken, Tereus returns to the cabin to rape Philomela again. The chorus returns but this time, as birds. Together, the chorus says:

At times like these when we are pounded into earth and mush and slime, we look up from where we lay and think: If we were birds we could fly up, Away from this wrenching pain, Away from the shame and the blood and the terror...Up up up we'd go, into clouds where our hearts could beat as loudly as they are.<sup>103</sup>

When Procne finally finds Philomela, she is engulfed in rage and guilt. Overwhelmed with guilt at her inability to protect her sister, Procne rescues Philomela and brings her back to the palace in Thrace. Despite the bird choruses' wise warning against participating in cycles of violence, Procne is engulfed. Vengeful she says, "Nothing but the sword will help us, the sword or something worse, if it can be found, then something worse to punish him for this merciless attack."<sup>104</sup> Navigating the desire for revenge and punishment is a key practice in the abolitionist future. When harm does happen, abolition insists upon other ways of meeting that harm that are not violent carceral punishment and containment. In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, Kaba makes the distinction between punishment and consequences when it comes to addressing harm.

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<sup>101</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 53.

<sup>102</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 53.

<sup>103</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 55.

<sup>104</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 68.

Abolition insists that it “is really critical for people to think about the difference between punishment and consequences. Punishment often is actually not the same as transformation.”<sup>105</sup> This is abolitionist potential of including Tereus and Pandion (and Itys) in the transformational notion of “we could fly up.” This is not the route that Procne takes.

Noticing how much her son Itys resembles her husband Tereus and recognizing his burgeoning manhood, Procne considers her punitive revenge. She grapples with the similarities between her son and her husband, wondering if violence is in Itys’ blood too. “Soon you will be his; all his. Look at you. Your hands already ache to command a weapon, your blood simmers,” she says, “yearning to maim and kill and rape.”<sup>106</sup> Devastatingly, like the Classical Greek scorned wife and mother Medea, Procne kills her child to avenge her sister. She enacts grave punishment and harm perpetuates.

Despite this gruesome and harrowing last act, the play ends impossibly in hopeful metaphor. Philomela says, “At that moment, we were all three suspended. In our terror, in our grief, in our pain, in our longing, in our guilty; stretched out in anguish until...until... until... We were birds.”<sup>107</sup> Abolitionist transformation is still, always possible. Philomela ends the play with this speech:

And it’s awful. It’s brutish and painful and gory and the memories are forever wedged in our thoughts. There is no escape or release. I will always be living the horror of what has been done, of what I have done, but still I continue to fly. Still we continue to fly.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Haymarket Books, 2021, 47.

<sup>106</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 70.

<sup>107</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 76.

<sup>108</sup> Shields, *If We Were Birds*, 77.

I played Procne in a 2015 production of *If We Were Birds* for the DAN School of Drama and Music at Queen's University. Directed by Kim Renders, the production took place in two locations on respective nights, in a studio theatre and in the lobby at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts in Kingston. The first location, a classic black box and the second, a large room with floor to ceiling windows that sits on the shore of Lake Ontario. I write about this production in this dissertation because reflecting upon Kim's staging, I think now it was abolitionist. Kim Renders was a feminist professor and artist in the DAN School of Music and Drama from 2006 to her devastating and sudden death in 2018. A founder of Toronto's feminist theatre company Nightwood Theatre, Kim was well respected by both students and colleagues for her revolutionary spirit. She was also an advocate and educator for incarcerated people in Kingston and led workshops inside prisons across Kingston. In our production, this monologue was central to Kim's understanding of the piece. Her thesis of our production was, "[i]f we were birds, we could fly up" and when this monologue was recited in this production, Tereus and Pandion also stood amongst the chorus. Central to the abolitionist potential of Kim's imagining of *If We Were Birds*, the perpetrators of harm were included in the abolitionist future. They too are tainted by violence, and they too need to be cared for in the wake of genocidal destruction. This doesn't mean that the violence they enacted is forgivable or undermined, rather it is an acknowledgement that both the victims and perpetrators of harm are key pieces in addressing harm. Both Tereus and Philomela are worthy of and deserving of "flying up."

In an interview about the play between Tom Ue and playwright Erin Shields from 2013, Shields explains why she chose "birds" as the core metaphor in the piece. She says:

At the end of Ovid's myth "Procne, Philomela and Tereus," on which the play is based, the gods transform all three eponymous characters into birds. This was the only detail of

the myth that I found truly difficult to grapple with. And yet, because it was part of the original myth, I felt it essential to do so. On first reading of the myth, it seems strange that Tereus gets to become a bird as well. He is about to attack the two women so it would seem an appropriate act of the gods (as they do in other myths by Ovid) to spare the two sisters by turning them into birds leaving Tereus to deal with the tragedy he's brought on himself. But they are all three transformed. For Ovid, a human mind trapped in an animal body was the worst imagined fate one could endure. The inability to communicate, despite the ability to reason, was, for him, the most extreme punishment. Through his lens, becoming a bird was horribly grotesque and painful. That made me think about birds and their relationship to the theme I wanted to explore. I imagined women lying on their backs whilst being raped, looking up at the sky, longing to fly up with the birds. Then after the act, having been transformed by the trauma they had endured, actually flying above reality as birds above the earth. Trauma does transform. A part of the self will always fly above.<sup>109</sup>

In this case, birds represent the transformation that accompanies surviving harm. In vastly different ways, harm touches even the person enacting it and the inclusion of harm-doers is central to the abolitionist process. When Procne, Tereus, and Philomela become birds like the bird chorus, it is representative of how sexual violence has specifically and wholly changed who they are as people. They are different individuals that are forever connected to each other through their mutual suffering under genocidal and punitive conditions for relating to one another. A witness to that act of suffering always. But they are also in a flock with a group of other transformed souls who have also survived suffering. Flying is such an extreme way to

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<sup>109</sup> Tom Ue. "Gender, Violence, and History in *If We Were Birds*: An Interview with Erin Shields." *Journal of Gender Studies* 22 no.1 (2013): 99-100. [doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.734765](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.734765)

move through the world, a stark change in perspective compared to our human habit of walking on two legs. Seeing the world from above is a drastic shift from seeing it from within. “Violence begets violence. Everyone is culpable...” Erin Shields says.

In this way, at the theatre, these carceral and abolitionist chorus of birds is joined by other choruses of birds in the audience and on the creative teams: other witnesses and participants, and sometimes survivors or perpetrators, vulnerable to transformation through harm. Theatre’s potential to gather groups, chorus upon chorus, in an actual assemblage is potentially an abolitionist dramaturgy. It opens a space for the embodied assertion of togetherness despite transformation in the ugliest harm and violence. Beyond the solidarity of just being together, speaking out together further asserts power in collectivity. In the same interview, Shields goes on to say, “I believe the only thing that can make trauma bearable is to tell the story. Again and again and again. The framework of the play is therefore Philomela’s retelling of her trauma. For me this makes a play which is mostly about revenge also about reconciliation. It also gestures to the importance of theatre as a vehicle of storytelling.”<sup>110</sup> In this way, it’s possible that through the theatrical chorus, abolitionist choruses can be rehearsed to contemplate and complicate carceral impulses for revenge and consider different approaches instead.

### **Case Study: *Prison Dancer***

*Prison Dancer* opens on Lola, a beautiful bald trans woman in a DIY bedazzled gown, standing on the outside edge of a proscenium stage in front of menacing metal doors that read “PNDC.” Behind her, the proscenium arch is decked out with fencing that features orange uniforms and garments and garbage and craft decorative elements woven into the chain link. With a full face of glam, Lola addresses the theatre’s captive audience like an emcee. From the

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<sup>110</sup> Ue, “Gender, Violence, and History,” 102

edge of the apron, she welcomes the audience into her theatre, hyping us up for the spectacle that awaits. From the edge of the stage Lola tells us the true story that in the early 2000s, inmates at the maximum-security Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center (CPDRC) in Cebu, Philippines went viral on YouTube as the “Dancing Inmates of Cebu,” performing choreographed routines to pop music in their prison yard.<sup>111</sup>

With almost sixty million views on YouTube as of 2024, the choreography was originally framed by prison officials as part of an exercise and rehabilitation routine. Spearheaded by the prison’s programming advisor Byron Garcia, a former inmate himself, the dancing has been called “humanizing,” and was allegedly inspired by the scene in *Shawshank Redemption* when an opera aria is played over loudspeakers in a prison.<sup>112</sup> In December of 2007, *Time Magazine* ranked CPDRC's choreography to Michael Jackson’s song “Thriller” fifth on its Top 10 most viral videos list, and in 2019, a five part docu-series called *Happy Jail* premiered on Netflix.<sup>113</sup> The inmates at Cebu have facilitated public performances and performed choreography with Michael Jackson’s actual choreographer.

The Filipino Canadian musical *Prison Dancer*, is inspired by, but not based on, the viral YouTube phenomenon.<sup>114</sup> *Prison Dancer* was created and written by Romeo Candido and Carmen De Jesus and notably features an entirely Filipino cast and creative team. Described as “a stage musical and transmedia experience that spans multiple platforms, as an interactive musical web series, a performative cinema experience, and a musical stage production,” *Prison Dancer* premiered in early 2023 at The Citadel Theatre in Edmonton and went on to a limited

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<sup>111</sup> byrongarcia, “‘Thriller’ (original upload),” *YouTube*, July 7 2007, [youtube.com/watch?v=hMnk7lh9M3o&ab\\_channel=byrongarcia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMnk7lh9M3o&ab_channel=byrongarcia)

<sup>112</sup> Elana Nicolauo, “Inside The Viral Craze That Inspired Netflix's Happy Jail,” *Refinery29*, August 15 2019 [refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/240560/dancing-prison-inmates-thriller-cebu-philippines-happy-jail-netflix](https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/240560/dancing-prison-inmates-thriller-cebu-philippines-happy-jail-netflix)

<sup>113</sup> “CPDRC Dancing Inmates,” *Wikipedia*, accessed June 27 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CPDRC\\_Dancing\\_Inmates#cite\\_note-9](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CPDRC_Dancing_Inmates#cite_note-9)

<sup>114</sup> “Homepage,” *Prison Dancer Musical*, accessed June 27, 2024, [prisondancermusical.com/](https://prisondancermusical.com/)

engagement run at the National Arts Centre in November 2023. The similarities are striking and emphasized, but while the subjects of the musical bear some resemblance to inmates at Cebu, they are not direct representations.

After Lola introduces her gathered audience to the “Dancing Inmates,” she ushers us into her life inside the semi-fictionalized Filipino prison PNDC. The metal wall that says PNDC slowly rises behind her to reveal a metal set, divided into cells with bunkbeds and scaffolded stairs. We see a handful of inmates, some men, some femmes, in orange jumpsuits that feature varying levels of creative adaptation. Some wear their jumpsuits as intended, some have cut frays into the trim or turned the uniform shirt into a crop top. We meet Milky and Juicy, two other transfemmes who flank either side of Lola. We are introduced to Lola’s boyfriend Shakes, the clear leader of their friend group, and two other friends named Hookaps and Tondo. When Christian, a new inmate, arrives he is affectionately nicknamed ‘Boylet’ by Lola. Because Christian is detoxing, Lola takes him under her wing, and under the false impression of winning more drugs in an orchestrated fight, Lola invites Christian into her community. He is reluctant but happy not to be alone.

When a package of contraband snacks and makeup is delivered into the cellblock, Lola tries to convince Christian to forget the drugs and instead offers him her own version of therapy, movement. “Move, dance, sweat,” Lola says. As the makeup and snacks are doled out by the group, the space transforms into a club and the inmates transfigure into more vibrant versions of themselves through the modest treats that were delivered. Music erupts. A sparkly decorative star drops from the ceiling. The femmes apply elaborate makeup and Lola walks a runway. Lola sings, “When I was a boy, I didn't have much to turn into treasure. As a girl I always knew I was finally free. As a boy I had to turn all of my pain into pleasure, now I’ve freed the child and

finally found a way to be free...”<sup>115</sup> The group dances together as they sing the chorus together, “Every new day can be a Christmas morning, gotta make the best, the best with what you got. Maybe today will be the day they celebrate your story, don’t worry, everything that you’re not, celebrate.”<sup>116</sup> The femmes, Lola, Milky and Juicy, lead this transformative moment as they joyfully recreate themselves with what is available and dance. “I’m alive with a little help from my friends,” they sing.<sup>117</sup> Through song and collective performance, they contrast the reality of their solitude outside with their companionship inside. Inside, although they are enduring the violence of prison, they find comfort and transformative power in their community. Through building and sustaining collective life in a space that confines them en masse, they transform themselves and each other as an act of survival.

In an interview with CBC about her research into women’s resilience in prisons in so-called Canada, PhD candidate in Criminology and formerly incarcerated academic Rachel Fayter echoes this transformative power of the chorus inside. She says, “[r]elationships are central to surviving prison and trauma...Having the connection and support of people who have been through similar traumas in challenging circumstances, it really gives us strength. It can give our lives meaning and purpose and is a form of healing.”<sup>118</sup> Although carceral violence pervades the institutional space of the prison, *Prison Dancer* echoes Fayter’s assertion that togetherness is a vital piece of survival inside. This choral transformation is supported collectively, producing difference and comforting repetition as new people are welcome into the fold. As the group celebrates themselves through togetherness in the song “Christmas Morning,” Lola invites

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<sup>115</sup> Prison Dancer, “Christmas Morning,” *Spotify*, [open.spotify.com/track/2d23ZNNpK9WfMVrFrSvOU4?si=541242c62aa94f2e](https://open.spotify.com/track/2d23ZNNpK9WfMVrFrSvOU4?si=541242c62aa94f2e)

<sup>116</sup> Prison Dancer, “Christmas Morning”

<sup>117</sup> Prison Dancer, “Christmas Morning”

<sup>118</sup> “Former inmate taps into her prison experience for 'groundbreaking' PhD research,”

Boylet to transform too. She tells him that her rehabilitation routine (dancing, sweating, moving in collective) ushered in her sobriety<sup>119</sup> and it can do the same for him. Specifically framed through the femmes' transformation in togetherness, collective expression inside breeds safety, resilience, and survival. Movement paired with friendship supported Lola and the other femmes in expressing both their femininity and their sobriety. Transformation occurs inside because of the collective support and expression of the chorus.

This emancipatory moment is shattered by the prison's new warden and a group of prison guards who specifically target Lola and the other femmes. Confiscating the contraband, the new warden insists upon a new regime of discipline at the PNDC: no more drugs, makeup or snacks. To combat this expression, the warden insists that the next morning, the entire prison will march. It must not be lost that while movement for Lola and her group is liberatory and transformational, the warden's marching is intentionally disciplinary, seeking to foreclose individual self-expression and to reduce the collective to a mass.

The ordered march is a common form of carceral control on the body. Characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century American prisons, "lockstep" is a specific kind of ordered marching where inmates limbs are chained together so that steps are taken in a kind of collective gesture. Because inmates were attached by the legs, the choreography of lockstep meant a kind of symmetrical in-unison carceral chorus. With ties to the military, lockstep as a form of organizing prisoner bodies is notable because it's designed not to keep carceral bodies apart, but rather to fuse them together, like a chorus line. Although it still aims to control the carceral body, the tactic is a kind of

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<sup>119</sup> In an interview with CBC, *Prison Dancer* creator Romeo Candido tells the story of getting funding to visit Cebu to meet the real dancing inmates. Moved by the materiality of his experience, the weight of his responsibility to these very real inmates at Cebu, Candido was desperate to find the femme that Lola was based on, heavily featured in the original Thriller video. Candido was devastated to learn that she had recently died of a drug overdose. (Eva Zhu, "Romeo Candido tells us how a viral video inspired his new musical *Prison Dancer*," [cbc.ca/arts/q/romeo-candido-tells-us-how-a-viral-video-inspired-his-new-musical-prison-dancer-1.7046113](https://www.cbc.ca/arts/q/romeo-candido-tells-us-how-a-viral-video-inspired-his-new-musical-prison-dancer-1.7046113))

*attached* chorus rather than a separate one. This dramaturgy of a fused chorus, tied together through collective movement, has carceral origins but abolitionist promise.

The next morning, the group marches. The warden, delighted with his new disciplinary routine, films the group to share with his friends in the military. Lola, however, marching in rhythm with her fellow inmates, cannot help herself from dancing. Invited by movement but rejecting the normalizing march she sings, “In time, they try to make you fall in line,”<sup>120</sup> and starts to reimagine the march into a more liberatory choreography. While the group struggles to maintain the even tempo of the military march, Lola disrupts the movement with queer ballroom-style flair. Enticed again by joyful Queer expression, the others join her, dancing inside the off beats of the march, erupting the violent uniformity with emancipatory expression. Like the transformational collectivity expressed when Christian first meets the group, Lola and the group actively transform discipline into expression again. With Queer alchemy and collectivity, the disciplinary tempo of the marching movement is disrupted for something much more liberatory.

The fact that the dancing began not as an invitation from the institution towards self-expression but rather a resistance to punishment is an important nuance in both *Prison Dancer* and the story upon which the play was based. In both contexts, dancing was not ‘given’ by the institution as a tool of expression or even exercise, rather an emancipatory chorus of dancers spontaneously organized itself and emerged from a stifled chorus of marchers. Through collectivity and inspired by the “choreography” of the march, the inmates themselves cast themselves as a chorus and transformed the movement on their own terms. Despite and because of the normalizing fuse of the lockstep march, liberatory choreography emerged for the chorus.

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<sup>120</sup> Prison Dancer, “Lose Your Way,” *Spotify*  
[open.spotify.com/track/40x7Mr38OWeLOObslfw3k4?si=5404fef760154827](https://open.spotify.com/track/40x7Mr38OWeLOObslfw3k4?si=5404fef760154827)

In the musical, while the warden posts his marching-turned-dancing video to YouTube and the video goes viral, Lola is punished for her liberatory transformation with five days in solitary. As the Warden's ego inflates, he decides that these "Dancing Inmates" are his ticket to fame, and he releases Lola from solitary and blackmails her into being a choreographer for the group. She agrees. In this way, the chorus takes on both carceral and abolitionist potential. On one hand, the inmates are finding connection and self-expression through their choral expression but on their other hand, their choral bodies are being exploited for the prison. Within the carceral context, this "freedom" of self-expression is not so easily disentangled from the material reality of carcerality and capitalist exploitation. In this way, *Prison Dancer* stages a complex nuance of the abolitionist chorus stuck inside the carceral landscape.

As the viral videos continue to garner success and recognition for the prison and the warden, the institution's administration starts to invite prominent guests to the prison to take note of the rehabilitation happening through dance. The roots of discipline and punishment persist as the warden struggles to control the transformative potential of the movement. Although the inmates continue to move in a collective as the "Dancing Inmates," their group begins to break down because of Lola's new relationship with prison administration and the warden, separating her from her community. Lola's boyfriend Shakes confronts Lola, calling her a puppet to the prison. Ignited by his own story of trauma and pain, Shakes strangles Lola and the warden steps in and kills him, devastating Lola. Shakes' death results in the prison postponing an important "show," where the group will perform for higher up prison officials in the Philippines. As the group continues to fracture, with Shakes dead and Lola emotionally destroyed, Christian relapses. Lola relapses. Inside the carceral context, the abolitionist chorus feels moments of fragility and exhaustion. In the case of *Prison Dancer*, the chorus transformed disciplinary movement into an

expressive one, but this collective expression is appropriated and exploited by the very disciplinary institution that tried to suppress that transformation. As the play progresses and their group is blown apart through the cycles of carceral violence of Shakes' murder and the ensuing relapses, the inmates are no longer members of a vibrant chorus but rather alone in their suffering.

The collective is resilient in surviving this carceral violence, however. Threatened by the carceral context but never destroyed, Milky and Juicy tend to their chorus by going to Lola and convincing her to dance again, not for the prison but for herself. Lola is convinced to return both to her community and to movement and dances again. This time, the chorus extends beyond the stage and into the audience. Before the last dance number unfolds, we are invited by Lola, Juicy and Milky to stand up in our seats and join in. Much like Brecht's calls to action in his alienation and activation and Kim Senklip Harvey's *Break Horizons*, we are literally called to our feet. The collective on stage teaches the choreography to the collective in the audience and we all dance together. As said by Hartman in the epigraph to this chapter, the chorus of *Prison Dancer* materializes as the "the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provided the resources for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise."<sup>121</sup> Through a dancing chorus, *Prison Dancer* manifests transformation inside the dramatized space of the prison and implicates the audience as an active member of the transformational chorus.

On one hand, *If We Were Birds* tells a story about the use of sexual violence in war is an attempt to serialize the women of an oppressed community. By turning these women into objects

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<sup>121</sup> Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 348.

in the context of violence against women through sexual violence, these women are denied their individual personhood and their collectivities that sustain them. Through sexual wartime violence, they are rendered objects among a series of other objects to be treated en masse as property in the wake of war. This kind of “massifying” violence within violence against women seeks to destroy both the individual and the collective in a way like carceral violence. On the other hand, the chorus is in solidarity with sisters Procne and Philomela, holding them up in the complex and messy journey towards abolition. When the chorus acknowledges both Tereus and Philomela, the harm-doer and the victim of harm, as participants in liberatory future, the chorus begins to resemble an abolitionist one. Where the chorus in *If We Were Birds* resembles a Classical Greek chorus in the way they speak for a community of people, specifically survivors of genocidal violence, they also extend to an abolitionist chorus in the way they invite perpetrators of harm into potential for transformation. Their chorus-ness represents survivors of cyclical violence, a constant growing ensemble of those transformed by harm. *If We Were Birds* materializes the juxtaposed elements of the chorus – the individual and the multiple – without turning them into a homogeneous mass. Importantly, both victims and the perpetrator of harms are included in this chorus. Like *If We Were Birds*, *Prison Dancer* manifests transformation, but through a more direct confrontation with a form of disciplinary institutional violence that seeks to ‘occupy’ and control their movement. While *If We Were Birds* is abolitionist in its potentials for including both victim and perpetrator of harm in the story, *Prison Dancer* takes another step towards abolition through reclaiming the individual through the chorus, in resistance to exploitation by a massifying disciplinary institution.

Importantly, the prison is not abolished because of the reclamation of dancing and joy through *Prison Dancer*, although it is made more bearable through this choral expression.

Armies continue to kill and rape en masse today as genocide continues to be a companion to carcerality and capitalism. And yet it matters that someone bear witness, both to suffering and to resilience. If we call this bearing witness abolitionist, then it seems to be immanent to a world with prisons and armies, rather than only the world that is beyond and after them. In what other ways can dramaturgies be sites of abolitionist choruses, inviting us to practice and prepare for the abolitionist present? How can dramaturgies of the chorus invite the rehearsals of abolition? Is simultaneity and co-presence necessary for an abolitionist chorus? Can we rehearse abolitionist choruses that are ready now to participate in abolishing prisons while they still maintain control? Can a chorus be linked through an asynchronous series of gestures or actions in the present?

### **Case Study: *Worktable***

Participatory theatre has the potential to emphasize consequences and agency in both audience members and artists, through a kind of asynchronous choral work that stresses the choral voice and collective energy that is required to redesign the world from within the world. Abolitionist participatory choruses are nimble and vast, spanning time and space and carceral borders. This final section of this investigation of dramaturgies of chorus offers an extension of the concept into participatory theatre, looking closely at the asynchronous chorus of the participatory audience in Kate McIntosh's installation *Worktable*.

Kate McIntosh's *Worktable* emphasizes the abolitionist notions of both destruction and creation. In *Worktable* participants first work alone to deconstruct an analog object. A clock. A Teddy Bear. A rotary phone. Then, in a room with other people they put someone else's destroyed object back together. I am interested in the asynchronous public and private relations that McIntosh emphasizes through her material staging of both destruction and creation. In the case of participatory theatre, certain power structures that control the theatrical chorus (namely

the playwright and the director) are thrown out in favour of kind of random, but nimble asynchronous chorus. I consider whether participatory theatre liberates the audience as chorus. Does participatory theatre trust the collective with more control over their labour and eventually their own creation of meaning?

Because of this asynchronous choral potential of participatory theatre, *Worktable* materializes an intense kind of relationality that lends itself to abolitionist practice. *Worktable* has the potential to be read as abolitionist metaphor and choral invitation. Groups, separate but also in solidarity, working from a variety of positions inside and around the carceral context taking things apart and putting back together. Recognition of a system to tear down, destruction of that system, and the (re)creation of a new system<sup>122</sup> are processes that require an active participant, like that of the participatory genre. Tying a chorus together through an accretion of gestures over time rather than synchronic liveness (an immediate shared here and now) lends great potential to the world-building project that is abolition. Abolition is distinctly an intergenerational project that must be sustained across time and from a variety of perspectives with a variety of tactics.

After the earthquake, an imaginary figure walks into the city of rubble and picks up a broken brick. What should she do with it? Others join and a discussion ensues – should the bricks be used to rebuild the city as it was, honouring its history? Should the rubble be swept into the sea and a new city designed from scratch? Should everyone just forget this happened, and walk over the mountain to join another city there?

- Kate McIntosh<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. London: Verso, 2019, 224

<sup>123</sup> Kate McIntosh, "Reframed Worktable," *SPIN*, June 6 2020 [spinspin.be/blog/reframed-worktable/](https://spinspin.be/blog/reframed-worktable/)

New Zealand based-artist Kate McIntosh's *Worktable* is a participatory installation that has the potential to make visible the asynchronous effect of the abolitionist chorus, working together across time and space. Framed as a performance-installation, *Worktable* relies on an asynchronous chorus to participate in both the destruction and recreation of everyday objects. *Worktable* emphasizes collective relation through the material impermanence and incompleteness of objects, emphasizing participatory cause and effect in an asynchronous collective of individuals working both together and alone. In *Worktable*, one participant destroys an object for another participant to put it back together.

Here's how it works: audience-participants arrive at the performance space (usually a non-traditional performance space like a storefront or a library) and sign a safety waiver. With intentionally neutral language that avoids words like "break, smash, repair,"<sup>124</sup> hosts invite audience participants to select an object from a gallery of objects to take apart: a phone, a shoe, a watch, a book on gardening, a globe, a pair of eyeglasses.<sup>125</sup> McIntosh describes the objects as "Analog objects, things with moving mechanical parts that you can learn about by taking them apart and putting them together."<sup>126</sup> She insists that the objects must have a "nostalgic feel, nothing dangerously chemical."<sup>127</sup> To avoid the unsettling and cruel feeling of taking apart something that was intentionally homemade, "All objects should be mass-produced, industrially made, culturally owned by everybody, nothing artisan or individualized."<sup>128</sup> Once the object is selected, the host invites the participant into a private cubicle-like space to "take apart, wear to pieces, or dismantle"<sup>129</sup> the object. They offer tools to do so. Globes are smashed and the maps

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<sup>124</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner, April 27 2022.

<sup>125</sup> "Worktable," *SPIN*, accessed June 27 2024, [spinspin.be/kate-mcintosh/worktable/](https://spinspin.be/kate-mcintosh/worktable/)

<sup>126</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>127</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>128</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>129</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

on the surface torn into tiny pieces. Both the casing and the mechanics of phones are taken out and torn apart. Eyeglasses are broken into four or five or six pieces. Tapes are shredded, teddy bears ripped into pieces. The host tells the participant they are invited to spend as much time as they'd like in the room, and then they are instructed to bring their dismantled object in pieces out on a tray. Artist Kate McIntosh told me that it generally takes an hour and a half to move through the entire exercise but can take up to five hours.<sup>130</sup>

Next, the participant takes their tray with the carcass of their object to another room with a long table of other trays by other dismantlers and are instructed to take another tray. This time, rather than moving towards a lonely cubicle for dismantling-object-time, participants are invited to a shared work room with a long communal table of other people putting the pieces back together. This is another manifestation of a chorus, a conveyor belt of collective action. Our actions are both started and finished with the presence of others. They are given similar tools, more obviously reparative. Tape, glue, string. Once participants finish assembling their objects, they are told to take their new objects in their final form, to a display area where the objects are left in a gallery. People sometimes try to put the objects back together the way they imagine they were in the first place. Other people build something entirely new with the pieces they are given.

The objects in *Worktable* are irrelevant to this abolitionist analysis, but rather the labour of destruction and the collective and creative labour of rebuilding is what's at stake. McIntosh says the piece is about "traces of choices made by people"<sup>131</sup> and how they affect one another. *Worktable*, through its light touch from McIntosh and the hosts, invites a kind of authentic invitation to self-organize, trusting the agency of participants on their own and in a collective. They don't even necessarily need to be working together to be working *together*. The project is

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<sup>130</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>131</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

intentionally designed with no right way to take apart or to put the objects back together again. They don't need to do this in concert with one another, but they are welcome to help each other out.

In an article about postmodern wreckage in *Worktable*, scholar Zelda Hannay comments on the different approaches to dismantling. She says, "The strangely transformed items reveal that some people have spent a long time in the installation, while others have lingered only briefly." Hannah notices that some of the objects on display "have been deconstructed and reconstructed gently, violently, playfully, faithfully."<sup>132</sup> Hannay charts this process of creation and disruptions and names it hope, or more specifically "the pragmatic pursuit of hope." She says that "[b]reakage, fragmentation and disintegration, they seem to suggest, are irresistible and unavoidable, but are always set in tension with the human pursuit of coherence and wholeness." *Worktable*, in her theorizing, stages "wreckage as a form of material brokenness that *sets us to work*."<sup>133</sup> The material implications of this invitation to "take apart, put back together" manifests what cultural theorist Raymond Williams refers to as making "hope practical, rather than despair convincing."<sup>134</sup> It is a call to arms to the chorus.

Kaba names hope as "a discipline" in her own world-building work. This abolitionist discipline is the very opposite of disciplinary power in the panopticon; while the latter seeks to foreclose difference and enforce existing norms, abolitionist discipline is grounded in a commitment to show up for one another, no matter how hard it may be. The chorus manifesting this abolitionist discipline, the labour of taking apart of the world as we know it and putting it

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<sup>132</sup> Zelda Hannay, "Postmodern Wreckage in Kate McIntosh's *Worktable* and Peter McMaster's Gold Piece," *Performance Research* 24, no. 5 (2019): 105.

<sup>133</sup> Hannay, "Postmodern Wreckage," 105.

<sup>134</sup> Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, edited by Robin Gayle, (London: Verso, 1989), 118.

back together, need not happen at the same time to express solidarity, but they must channel their labour towards a similar transformative and reparative process.

Although I argue for its abolitionist value, *Worktable* was not necessarily created with revolution in mind, but rather inspired by crisis. Artist McIntosh created the show inspired by the major earthquake in New Zealand in 2011, which she survived with her family. The show presented a way for her to work through her feelings about large-scale destruction without “malice or even human intent.”<sup>135</sup> McIntosh was interested in the ways that things could be “atomized and returned to pieces without violent harmful intent.”<sup>136</sup> For McIntosh the piece is about reckoning with the consequences of our actions, but because of the privacy of the dismantling room and the neutrality of instructions, the dismantling is “subtle, self-reflexive, non-performative, non-meaningful as a public action.”<sup>137</sup> The destruction is about labour. On the other hand, the rebuilding of objects features at least the potential for a collectivity of labourers working together. There is a “Negotiation of what do we rebuild, how, what now,” McIntosh says, it’s a “super social question of what now, what do we do with this material.”<sup>138</sup> Through this abolitionist dramaturgy of asynchronous and choral destruction and rebuilding, McIntosh creates the potential for a “conversation of rebuilding with other people,” that reckons with the “symbolic power of doing this in a room where you have to negotiate for the glue.”<sup>139</sup> Although *Worktable* doesn’t engage with prisons or with interpersonal harm, it certainly manifests the power of destruction and re-creation, in a collective. After a performance of hers was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, McIntosh penned a letter to her would-be

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<sup>135</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>136</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>137</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>138</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

<sup>139</sup> Kate McIntosh, interview with Mariah Horner.

audience on her blog. “I’m thinking about how much suffering a major disruption brings, and with it,” she writes, “the absolute necessity to put things back together differently – in ways that dismantle the oppressions that history has constructed, in ways that refuse to perpetuate them.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Kate McIntosh, “Reframed Worktable”

## The Afterword

### 🔑 SOUTH WALL, THE FORMER KINGSTON PENITENTIARY

A participatory baseball game play about carceral histories and abolitionist futures is about to begin. In the universe of this baseball game play, the City of Kingston is trying to figure out how best to activate what they call the prison district between Rockwood Asylum, Kingston Penitentiary, and the Prison for Women. How can they again use these buildings to stimulate the economy? How can they again use these buildings to spectacularize control?

Because the multi-million-dollar cruise dock at Rockwood Asylum is finally completed in this universe, after they arrive by boat, tourists can take a free shiny red trolley ride to the Kingston Penitentiary. They're greeted by the ghost of my grandfather and the ghosts of all the inmate batters he struck out. Audiences assemble in bleachers facing a baseball diamond that has been haphazardly assembled with mismatched pylons and an old office chair. Beers are \$8.50. The game doesn't end until both teams organize to do so. When the players are in agreement, everyone leaves the theatre. Or the diamond? Or the prison? Or the cemetery?

On the other side of the wall, a cop car sits waiting to catch teenage Kingstonians who try to break into the prison for Instagram pictures. Every day, a baseball goes through the cop car window and shatters it. It's a cold drive home.

### 🔑 AGNES ETHERINGTON ARTS CENTRE, KINGSTON

The first time I met the P4W Memorial Collective, one collective member asked another collective member a question: *Are you in love with anyone right now?*

Not *who are you?* Or *where did you grow up?* Or *what is your research about?*

*Are you in love with anyone right now?*

I remember who asked the question, but I don't remember who answered it. I remember earnestness and awkward laughter. I also remember embarrassment. I can't remember the time of year. I think it was spring, but maybe I'm being idealistic. As the group stood around a curatorial plinth with a soft pink quilt made by formerly incarcerated women, I was moved by how intimate the question was. We leaned over the glass box that held the quilt. It looks soft but I guess I'll never know. I try to remember what happens next and I can't. It doesn't feel long ago but this memory feels like it never happened.

### 🔑 GREENHOUSE FRONT YARD, SKELETON PARK

The first time I met the P4W Memorial Collective, three of us stood barefoot in the front yard of a greenhouse, painting a little free library. We built a box for free books and planted seedlings on top of the library. We slipped laminated abolitionist literature inside. A tapestry with prison art from P4W's *Tightwire* magazine hung like bunting announcing the birth of a baby. I think about asking the question: *are you in love with anyone right now?* This memory happened for sure.

There is still a little free library on that greenhouse lawn even though I don't live there anymore. I walk by. I don't forget. Planted in that now-molding soil are almost-friendships, wobbling like the handmade library, unsteadily in the air. The seeds seem to be forever germinating in the

frosty Kingston weather, waiting for the right moment to pop. Waiting for someone to be in love with them.

## 🔑 GREENHOUSE BACK YARD, SKELETON PARK

The first time I met the P4W Memorial Collective, I was sweating in a sports bra alone in the backyard of the same greenhouse when, over the fence, I saw two faces I recognized but didn't actually know. And didn't know me. I shot up from my workout on the grass to see two friends who were sadly actually strangers. They shouted angrily over my fence. I am confronted for my participation in a collective dreaming scenario that I wasn't formally invited to. Because everyone else lived in Toronto and I was a neighbour, I was a proxy for other members of the collective too. Look, I hold multiples. Should I have gotten permission for dreaming? I'm still undecided.

I think about how surprised these two people were with me. They didn't even recognize me, "Are you Mo?" they asked, two furious floating heads over my fence. I realize that they didn't come for me, they came for their art. I think about how surprised I was with myself, calmly watching the cracks of an idealistic collective dream vanish to reveal a misunderstanding in our own neighbourhood. I was feeling uncertain but definitely sorry. They raised their voices at me, full of hurt. Regardless of what was true, harm was caused, and I had the capacity to be held accountable for it. So, I was. I did.

We kept talking. They were angry, I heard them out. I told them I would take the art down. I didn't ask the others. Through the fence, we looked each other in the eyes. There were moments

of silence. Suddenly they remembered me. “Oh, you’re Mo!” Yes. “I actually need your help with something online, do you have Messenger?”

I keep this recollection on my bookshelf to remind myself that actual confrontation and accountability and heaviness is as much part of this puzzle as the dissertation reading list. The only way through it is through it. When I started teaching inside prisons, a mentor said to me “trust the process.” This is the process. “The only way through it is through it,” another told me.

I think about these two floating heads driving around the neighbourhood in a gold-coloured van looking for art their dead friends drew, furious that we didn’t ask to use it. I imagined them leaving my house, after getting the apology and acknowledgement they wanted, then getting sundaes at McDonalds. And laughing at me.

*Are you in love with anyone right now?*

## 🔑 MY DREAMS

As I conclude this PhD, I still see the horrific ironies of carceral climates everywhere. I spend an hour combing through the Agnes exhibit about incarceration landscapes and quilts and gardens in my town and in my brain. I remember that pink quilt made by formerly incarcerated women that is now (again?) locked in glass box. I put my hands in the soil of the mailbox-garden. I smell my stress-sweat soaked through my sports bra. I drive by an encampment in Cobourg that surrounds an empty, boarded up mansion. I hear about a prison being built in Quebec shaped like an eagle specifically to imprison Indigenous men.

*Are you in love with anyone right now?* This question relieves me. I inhale it like a gust of cold, fresh air. It is so easy for me to be in love. Mourning the collective instead of avoiding the collective's phone calls is refreshing. I still want to hear the answer to that question, even now. I imagine all of us at a picnic, asking every single person in the collective this question while we sat in the grass, tracing maps of our future plans in the air between us, finally meeting each other for the first time.

I imagine myself watering the dreamed-up memorial garden that stretches all the way from the Rockwood Asylum to the Kingston Penitentiary to the Prison for Women. I pause this dream and zoom out to see if the map includes my greenhouse backyard. I wonder if the map was burned or torn or if confrontation was the route to really falling in love. When I think about abundance, abolition, and love I used to think about gardens. Now when I think about gardens, I water my feet with tears. "Trust the process." The tears roll off my feet and onto the soil. Dandelions pop through stubborn cement stones. Angry faces pop over fences. If there is soil, sunlight, and water, anything is possible. Including disaster. And spring.

## 🔑 THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE, OTTAWA

I'm haunted by *Prison Dancer* the musical. I am haunted by the last image of a full house of white Ottawans over sixty clapping and dancing along with Lola, the trans femme who transformed a prison march into a drag show. I am haunted by Lola, the trans femme character who was inspired by an incarcerated trans femme woman in Cebu, Philippines. I am haunted by Lola who died of structural and carceral violence (an overdose in prison), who will certainly

never see the play in Ottawa, Ontario based on her abolitionist transformation. When these artists wrote this musical, Lola was incarcerated. And now as they perform it, Lola is dead. Is this the choreography of memorial? Why are we clapping?

## 🔑 WEST WALL, THE FORMER PRISON FOR WOMEN

In the days following Kingston's Prisoners Justice Day (PJD) on the grounds of the former Prison for Women, some people noticed what looked like a tag from the City of Kingston that deemed the last remaining outer wall that surrounded the prison as a site for public graffiti.

The next day, graffiti appeared on the inside surface of the wall. A memorial for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women surrounded by red handprints. A eulogy to a beloved friend, now gone, is written in black. This is not exactly the garden the mourners had in mind but this is certainly a memorial.

It turned out that the inside surface of the crumbled prison wall was *not* actually deemed a graffiti site by the city. Someone painted an unsanctioned invitation for art and memorial on this former prison wall. The tag was not an invitation for state-approved graffiti, it was...actual graffiti. Thus, so were the abolitionist adornments.

The wall used to act as a fortified border around a prison that no longer exists. With only one wall still standing, it no longer contains anything or keeps anything in. The one remaining wall was supposed to remain invisible as a prison wall, but the graffiti made it visible. Someone reminds me that graffiti is a "punishable offence." Although the fortified wall is essentially

conceptually invisible, the carceral context still dictates what is free and what isn't. We are not free to remember. But we can represent?

### **🔑 MY GARDEN, PORTSMOUTH**

I slunk away from abolitionist organizing, ashamed. I moved away from the greenhouse. I deleted WhatsApp for good and never talked to some of these friends again.

I keep walking by the billboards around Kingston for Art of Survival, a prison art show by the P4W Memorial Collective. I get invited to the opening and can't go but I have been thinking about their garden all summer. I am prompted by duelling billboards advertising the gallery and the redevelopment of the Prison for Women. I hear it's going to become a senior's home. I live closer now to the Prison for Women than I did at the greenhouse; I drive by the prison on my way to school. These days, construction is ripping up the streets surrounding the prison. It feels ominous. What secrets are below? I think about the ghosts, the dead that have been and will continue to be disrespected in the name of what someone in the collective called "big business." "Our suffering is their business," they say to me later that summer as we watch excavators dig up grass and soil in the northeast corner of the plot of land on the P4W.

### **🔑 MY EMAIL INBOX**

Two years after the greenhouse library, I was invited again to support the Prison4Women Memorial Collective on their annual Prisoners Justice Day (PJD) celebration.

Every day I wake up to tangled email threads and a star in my to-do list with a reminder to pick up the phone instead. Each email thread features a slightly different collection of people asking questions and I am again reminded of how bad email sucks. It sucks so bad. It denies intimacy. It denies abolitionist relationships. I feel the strain of being only an email address, not having a face or a voice or breath. Do I dare say that I miss seeing faces over the fence?

To support PJD, I gave people rides, bought them coffee, ensured all their travel and accommodations were booked. Most of these women are in their sixties and seventies now. My job in this situation, being about care, meant I needed to establish relations first. Quickly, fulsomely. It was all about relation. Someone refers to my official job title as “vibe checker.” Where I was once just an email address, I would eventually be a grinning woman smiling with a name on a sign at the train station.

My colleagues suggested phone calls work best to avoid too much conflict and emphasize clarity. Repetition is a way of being an ally to folks who were incarcerated. Patience and repetition. I realize that I have never even been to PJD before.

About a month before PJD, we all met on Zoom. There was still mud under my fingernails from working in my garden. “Mo would know the exact amount, is Mo still here?” She stares deep into her laptop, looking for me. Does she recognize me? I remember, “You’re Mo, right?” I unmute and say the number she’s looking for. Twice, three times. The person sharing her screen keeps flashing back and forth between the budget and another google doc where the line “Mo’s Honorarium” glares back at me as she talks about how she usually pays for most of this event out

of pocket. I feel like I'm under one of those swinging lights in a cop shop. I am booking flights to the prison for seniors who were once confined *in* the prison that deemed "unfit for bears." I am walking through definitions of "per diem" while one collective member insists on housing and feeding everyone herself. It takes a village to raise a child and it takes a chorus to populate a Zoom meeting. Or run a Prisoners Justice Day. I feel sick.

### 🔑 MY EAR

My first phone call with her happened during a thunderstorm. Thunderstorms were a common companion to this work this summer. Along with *this* storm, there was another major one during PJD and another on the day of the Art of Survival show.

During the phone call, I left my house and paced around my neighbourhood while the charged July storm brewed. I could hear distant thunder as I walked so, I didn't go far from my house. I basically just paced around three blocks. We finally *met* during this phone call. She tells me stories about coyotes eating chickens on her farm and her very protective dog. We talked about how we were both sorry it ended so harshly two years ago. She talked about her temper. I apologized for my misguided eagerness. She was embarrassed. So was I. Neither one of us said any shit about anyone else. Just ourselves. She gave me some details about booking trips for people to come to PJD and we hung up just as it started to pour.

### 🔑 THE ELM CAFÉ

Two days later we met for coffee at the Elm Cafe, a much-contested marker of Skeleton Park's gentrification at the corner of Charles and Montreal. Before our meeting I talked to the barista

and looked at the art that was currently on display. Above my head hung art produced by the very same organization that hosted our unwelcome *Tightwire* homage. I wondered if she'd recognize me under the harsh light of being well-meaning. "You're Mo, right?"

She walked in and told me I looked very different, I used to have short hair or different hair. I remember her not even knowing it was me every time that we met in person. I wonder what I look like to her in her head. My face is forgettable, and we weren't friends, I can't blame her. She is very memorable to me, though.

We had coffee. We caught up. We talked about how some people can't get a break and about how many geniuses must have been missed because the school system doesn't have space for them. We talk about how the morning is the best time to do work. We again talk about her dog and her chickens. I notice she has a feather tattooed on her arm and I think about *If We Were Birds*. We talk about how much we both love the piano. She's played since she was a kid but doesn't play anymore because she's too busy advocating for others and ensuring a memorial garden and sending emails. So many fucking emails. I tell her about how lucky I am to watch a six-year-old learn to feel the weight of the piano keys and she totally lights up. I think about her question years ago, *are you in love with anyone right now?* "Yeah, you," I think. She tells me she wants to write a book of short stories and I ask her about starting writing group. We could call each other in the morning and promise to write about something, then we could write it and then we could call each other back and share what we wrote.

## 🔑 THE ISABEL BADER CENTRE

I think about how cold the concrete felt on my feet as I recited “We could fly up.” I think about looking out the window in the lobby at the same lake that laps against the Kingston Penitentiary. I try to conjure Kim to have a coffee with me at the same table at the Elm Café and remind me again how to be brave and run towards conflict. “Trust the process” sounds like something she would say.

She died an abolitionist before I had the word for it, and I find lessons from her at every corner in both my research and my memory. I look through some of her old drawings. I reminisce about her with people that loved her and people who feared her. I imagine myself following in her footsteps, sitting in her office teaching students and incarcerated people and always having a stack of Dad’s oatmeal cookies. I joke about leaving her an empty seat at my PhD defence. My partner suggests it’s likely been done before.

## 🔑 A SACRED FIRE, THE FORMER PRISON FOR WOMEN

At PJD, I learned a lot about patience (everyone was late, all the time) and care (which most of the time looks like a double double from Tim Hortons). I met some powerful elders who survived some unimaginable shit.

We pass a sacred feather around the fire at PJD as all the folks with lived experience share something. Everyone else, without lived experience, say something along the lines of “I’m grateful to be here.” It’s emotional for many, especially as in the background, we hear the violent

din of the tractors digging up a corner of the P4W. Someone says, “this is sacred space, burial space.”

“Oh, hi Mo, wasn’t I at your house one time, causing shit?” I laughed. I complimented her on her sunglasses. She gave them to me. She is anxious and ready to sing. She really wants to get started. We sing together. A chorus, singing for the dead. The thunder shakes us all day long, threatening to open the sky and put out the sacred fire. Or rather, encouraging us to keep singing.

I meet a true mountain of a person at PJD. They turn their entire body to look you square in your eye and they are very committed to teaching their teachings. They talk a lot. They drink a lot of coffee. They laugh a lot. They smoke and drum a lot. They find a lot of beauty and meaning in their immediate life. They speak truth to power. They take time, they don’t rush. They are unafraid to speak their mind and it’s very important for them that people are “real.” During PJD, they are a playful storyteller and a mighty agitator, encouraging the people to sing louder and treat the fire with respect. They throw up the middle finger on the steps of the P4W, taking us all on a tour of the outside of the building and pointing out where their ghosts still live. They tell a story about two women falling out a second story window. They point out a fence and then someone climbs it. They walk up to the front steps with “Prison for Women, 1934” etched into the doorway. “This was pretty much the only door we didn’t go through here,” they say to me. Now it’s locked from the outside.

On PJD, the whole day seems undecided, nuanced, two sides of a coin. It starts out gorgeously sunny, warm in its late August humidity. Later in the day, the heaviest rainfall I’ve ever

witnessed in my life pours down. I was out doing a coffee run and while I was waiting in line at Tim Hortons, the sky opens. I drive back to the P4W, soaked, coffees in hand. Someone tells me about thunderbirds, about how according to their teachings, thunderbirds are grandfathers. I think about the cage for eagles in Quebec. I think about how the crack of thunder sometimes sounds like a baseball bat making contact.

Everyone left the rained-out fire, so I bring the fire keeper back to her house and she spills the wet ashes in the back of my car. Turns out she's married to a friend of mine, the man who cleaned the bar that I used to bartend at. I used to bring him Timmies coffee then too.

In my soggy jeans with my wet ashy backseat, I realized a fundamental truth about why I believe in prison abolition, and I yell, alone in my car in a thunderstorm. There is collective consciousness that tells us that murdering and assault and interpersonal violence is bad. This is not up for debate. So-called justice for so-called crimes is an inevitable story so deeply baked into the collective consciousness that there is already plenty of pain and shame in just taking accountability for doing something wrong. There is no collective consciousness that tells us prison is bad. There is no collective consciousness that insists upon a memorial for women who lost their lives to state violence in prison. There is no collective consciousness that insists we care about our locked-up neighbours inside. I must argue for the effectiveness of abolition when I submit articles to peer-reviewed theatre journals. We must argue for the importance of a garden for dead friends. The former asylum is going to serve soft serve ice cream to tourists on massive cruise ships. I hold carefully the protective demeanour of a 65-year-old woman who survived torture and just wants a garden for her friends who didn't survive, who are buried somewhere

that no one knows. In 1994, during my lifetime, six women (only a few still with us) were tortured ten minutes from my house. This was endorsed by not only the prison itself and Correctional Services Canada, but also the collective consciousness. Today, developers are planning to erect not a memorial, but a condominium in their honour. I cry into my garden and will it to extend by the roots and overtake the tractors at the P4W. The tears and the rain keep falling. The garden grows.

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