

Dance Activism: Choreographic Embodiment for Human Rights

Kate Pope

College of Fine Arts, University of Florida

Inherent in modern dance is revolution. Dancers initiated the form in the 19th century to break away from classical techniques. Aligning with the spirit of the field, I used dance and choreography as a catalyst for critical thinking, dialogue and community engagement for the betterment of society and social change. In this project, the choreographic process served as an embodiment of research on the Prison Industrial Complex and my experiences with incarcerated youth in Alachua Regional Juvenile Justice Center. “Mom plz help me” presents my interpretations of the cycles of oppression in the United States and seeks the means to disrupt these cycles.

In the creation of “Mom plz help me,” I intended to explore the self through expressive arts activities with two populations, UF dance majors and incarcerated youth. I planned to work with each group separately for six months, choreographing movement and drawing self-portraits. To explore commonalities between these disparate populations, I would then connect the two groups’ creative works through my own choreographic expression by creating a dance to be performed for the public.

By the end of the first week, my intentions had shifted. Although I continued the use of expressive arts activities with both groups, my choreographic mission became clear. Using the frame of the performance, I would map out the power relations that shape structural inequalities in America. Informed by the social and historical contexts of literary research and my lived experience within the Alachua Regional Juvenile Justice (ARJJ) facility, I would create a piece to communicate to the audience the reality of the current prison system and the dire need to revolutionize it (Ryan 2006).

EMPOWERING CREATIVITY

Influenced by the spirit of her time, Anna Halprin led dance revolutions by employing her dancers’ life experience as the material in which she made art. In the 1950s, Anna started the San Francisco Dancer Workshop, sourcing everyday life themes for creative exercises to inform and create work. She used the information of those she was working with “as the basis for movement, dance, performance and community ritual” (Halprin 2003). In 1978, Anna and her daughter, Daria, co-founded the Tamalpa Institute, where Daria developed an Expressive Arts Therapy training program. This program, a process that Daria calls “Life-Art,” synthesizes movement, improvisation, performance, witnessing, listening, and reflection to nurture and challenge the individual and/or group.

In June 2012, I traveled to the San Francisco Bay area to study under the 92-year-old dance icon. We spent most of our time outside, exploring the self through drawing and movement rituals on the vast, historic dance deck down a winding flight of stairs from Anna’s home.

For centuries people have utilized art to understand the self in relationship to others and the environment. Halprin states, “Art served as an intrinsic part of individual and group functioning and as a language for communicating with and acknowledging all aspects of life [...] from the ceremonial marking of passages into life and death, marriage, and war to the treatment of disease and the interaction of the forces of nature- as well as a means of prayer and connecting with the divine” (Halprin, 2003). Today, the field of Arts in Health works to transform health and healing through the Arts. A historical inquiry on a leader in the prison abolitionist movement, Angela Davis and the large impact of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) led me to connect the healing power of dance to the needs of a disempowered population. As the final element of the Dance in Healing Certificate program, I decided to implement a creative arts-based program with the girls in ARJJ, a program that would encourage empowerment and creativity by moving our bodies in community with each other.

DANCING WITH JUVENILES

Each day, there are between 25–45 boys and girls between the ages of 8–18 housed in the Alachua Region Detention Center. They remain at the Center for between two weeks and two months, attending school four days per week until 3PM. They spend the rest of their time watching television and sitting in contained spaces, passing the time. By design, the dance class engages the arts to honor the strength and integrity of individuals who may enter the residential setting feeling marginalized and disempowered. Engaging in the arts provides an opportunity for these

youth to address negative experiences associated with incarceration, express anger and frustration, and alleviate feelings of hopelessness about their future.

When I began teaching in ARJJ, I did not know exactly what to expect. From my research I know there were many reasons why a young person could end up in a facility and that rates of recidivism among youth are growing. Honesty and passion propelled me to tell my story of how I arrived to ARJJ teaching dance and why I believed it was so important. I was not always well received, and I was questioned, “Why are you studying dance?” “What will you do with that?” I loved these questions because it opened a discussion about the importance of art and dance. I got to tell the girls, “I’m here for YOU, to dance with YOU, and THIS is my dream job.”

Over time, the girls began to expect me and I was greeted with smiles and stories. Veterans gave rookies my introduction, “This is our dance teacher, it’s kinda weird [the class], but just try it!” Our dance routines and rituals produced their own rewards, and I did not have to keep begging the girls to take a risk and have an open mind. They wanted to dance and create self-portraits—they wanted to tell their story! There were many challenges and days where people could not bring themselves to dance, too depressed or bored or angry or endless other possibilities that I would not know. I always had to keep an open mind and meet challenges with honesty and creativity. The learning never stopped. I planned class, but I planned even more to abandon the lesson plan based on the girls’ energy and desires, the officer who was supervising, etc. Countless profound experiences and poignant exchanges shaped my artistry and activism and the production of “Mom plz help me.”

HOW WE MAKE DANCE: THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

At the University of Florida, Senior BFA dance majors work in a choreographic process from August–October with dancers of their choosing. Each senior is allotted time and space for rehearsing and is required to show progress of the work during the UNshowings. UNshowings are an open forum to be witnessed in artistic discovery by faculty, peers, and the public. The process of showing work is integral to the development of a choreographic process because of the opportunities to give and receive feedback. Also, it supports the idea that new dynamics develop when viewed by an audience. While viewing and performing at the UNshowings I could continuously re-evaluate the work I was producing.

I met once a week for two hours with a cast of eight dancers at UF and three times a week totaling six hours at ARJJ. Coincidentally, my scheduled UF rehearsal times followed my mid-week session at the detention center. The dance class at the detention center offered both technical and creative skill building with untrained participants while

the rehearsal process reflected my personal questions about the research, lived experience at ARJJ, and creative pursuits with trained dancers. In my first rehearsal, we completed movement meditations with gesture and sound. I asked them to draw their first portrait (of many).

The second rehearsal I taught the dancers a phrase that I was teaching at the detention center. Earlier in the day, at the detention center, I had to use the bathroom. When I asked the officer to unlock a cell, one of the girls belted, “Welcome to jaaaaail,” alluding to the fact that using the bathroom would give me a real sense of what she experienced each day. And she was right. The officer handed me some toilet paper and I entered the cell. It was a stainless steel cubicle about twelve feet high. The room was bare and cold. I used this experience as “raw material” for the dance (Halprin 2003).

I clustered the dancers together and they clenched imaginary bars in front of them. Melissa, a senior dancer, led the timing out of the ‘bars’ and slowing released into the phrase. We ended rehearsal, as usual, with drawing self-portraits and sharing our titles.

In the third rehearsal, my body was a messenger of the detainees’ movement. I passed on two solos created at the detention center to the UF dancers. At Tamalpa, I had two intimate and transforming experiences performing a vocal ritual and decided to bring the cacophonous vocal experiment as the next element of the dance.

We sat in a circle with eyes closed. I asked them to begin to open their voice and explore textures and rhythms. As the ritual went on we were able to release and connect to primal rhythms via breath and sound. Collective vocal builds and dissipations gave us a sense of both the intimate and communal.

Themes of oppression and containment were embedded in the rehearsal since the beginning. I searched for how to depict these themes by inquiring about the dancers’ personal experiences with reprimand, punishment and guilt. In both rehearsal #3 and #4, we discussed what it meant to be victimized. According to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, a delinquent youth is defined as “a person who has violated the law before reaching 18 years of age.” In sociological terms, deviance is defined as any social behavior that violates social norms. I directed the first duet to alter their tones and circumstance, dramatizing the experiences in which they acted out together. The second duet moved in the space together with varying catch and release tasks.

By the fifth rehearsal, there were approximately six short sections that needed organization into a larger whole. I outlined six significant moments of my recent life chronologically and matched those with similarly themed sections we had created. I chose to do this as a self-reflective exercise to experiment with a skeletal structure for the final dance piece, knowing that most likely the structure would shift. (See Table 1 for description).

Table 1. Choreographic Experiment (Rehearsal 5)

Significant Personal Moments	Choreographic Translation
Revealing of breast in performance equated to abandonment of family unit, loss of innocence	putting on suit, ritualistically in slow motion (introspection, reflection, shame)
Jump off train: exemplification of intensity, build of anxiety, 'smack in the face of the rest of my life.' Personality beginning to soften. Test of my personal mythology, CHAOS	Vocal ritual build into bump, (Chaos, anxiety, fear)
Ireland: nature, symbols, release, freedom, opportunity, perspective, fortune	Poem, Shelby forward in space
San Francisco: growth, personal mythology, history, ritual, change, autonomy, adventure. Discovery of college as microcosm, <i>I don't have to prove myself to anyone, I dance for me</i>	Phrase work from detention center, exchange of space between Melissa and ensemble
Returning home: resituating habits, defining rules, adjustment. Love, balancing of heart, exploration of stigmas and sexuality, sexual liberation. Empowerment through performance	Defiance and placement of dancers in their social hierarchy- ritual of blunt rolling, rituals around drug use, community in drugs
Exhaustion. How are you? How was your summer? How are you? How are you? How was your summer? How are you?	Large sheet of paper rolled out to cover them, symbolizes burying the unwanted by society
Resolve: reclamation of self and identity through books, planning, organization and clarity in self goals equated to acknowledgement of self worth and effort	Break through paper, destructing and reconstructing, self, ideas, life, order "shedding of self"

During this rehearsal I incorporated costumes: eight bright orange prison jumpsuits. In Alachua County, incarcerated youth wear the orange jumpsuits while in transit or for punishment. At other times, incarcerated youth wear khaki uniforms and collared shirts. I decided to use the jumpsuits to allude to incarceration, literally and metaphorically. I created a solo for Melissa in which she slowly emerges into the jumpsuit (see Figure 1).

The solo marks a passage of time that separates her free life from her life as a prisoner. Unmelodious voices accompanied her sloth-like movements into the suit as a manifestation of her internal landscape. Approximately six minutes pass and she is fully dressed in prison garb as the rest of the cast. The solo explores themes of anxiety and reprimand. I directed her to question, *what do we feel when are punished or punished by someone else? How does society relegate punishment?* For the next section, I chose a piece of music titled "Monopoly" by rapper Danny Brown.

The song is a visceral rap piece that evokes emotion "[...]my nigga u ain't been what I been through if so you would take a pencil through your temple[...]." To conclude, I roll a large roll of butcher paper to cover the dancers in space. It is a first attempt to show how "prisons work much more readily to cover rather than correct" (Templeton 2004). The dancers punch through the paper and continue to de-construct and re-construct the self by ripping and attempting to correct by piecing the paper back together.



Figure 1. "Integration" solo. Photograph by Jordan Albright.

After viewing/performing this section of the work at the UNshowing, I felt unsettled and hyper. I realized I had created images that are often overstated and thrown at us by media. In this form, the dance referenced a sensationalized culture of inmates through rap music and violent phrase work. This was an important development in the process because I could see clearly that it needed to be eliminated. I do not want to display and perpetuate criminalized and racialized characteristics associated with prisoners in movies and media. It was a powerful discovery in understanding my relationship to the prison abolition movement and my intentions display the prisoners as human beings who are denied the right to citizenship. I concluded that I am not telling any one person's story with one ending. Rather, I was attempting to portray a cycle of existence perpetuated by few resources to rehabilitate substance abuse, race and gender bias within society and the justice system, insufficient educational opportunities, and economic and class disparities, and inadequate healthcare (Davis 2003). Witnessing the dance in progress provided clarity to the structural components that were important for the dance's mission. The structure of the dance should mirror society's use of the justice system as a means of social control. The abolition of the prison system

rests not only on the prison as an isolated institution but “also directed at all the societal relations that support the permanence of the prison” (Davis 2003).

Before the rehearsal on Oct. 10, I had a unique experience at the detention center. I witnessed the girls traveling through the facility to get their snacks. They walked hands behind back in a single file line. Through each door, they count themselves as numbers to ensure that no detainee goes unaccounted for during the transition: “1 mam,” or “1 off” “2 mam” “3 mam,” etc. I misheard this as “1 man, 2 man, 3 man, 4 man.” While the counting protocol is considered a safety procedure, I found it demeaning and punitive.

After watching how the young women were herded through the facility, I felt sad and discouraged entering rehearsal. I created a spinning sequence to satisfy my desire to emphasize cycles and the perpetual nature of an institution. After the spinning I asked that the dancers melt slowly to the floor and lie there. As they spun around, I saw the dancers overcome by something larger than themselves and struggling to maintain control. With time, exhaustion and disorientation forced surrender. As they lay on the ground, I had the urge to start piling the trash bags of paper on the dancers to cover them up.

I work interactively as a choreographer and insert myself emotionally and physically into the dance. I honored my urge to bury the prisoners. Running faster and faster to cover them up, I represented society’s attempt to “disappear a problem” (Templeton 2004). The running was frantic and present. In the moments of burying eight people disguised as millions of prisoners, I experienced the art trying to tell me something. By exploring and embodying the research physically and spatially, I could play with power and manipulation to replicate and experience injustice. In the final rehearsals, dedication to the creative process helped me reveal deeper truths in my investigation of social injustice.

When there was nothing left but slivers of orange suits underneath piles of trash, nobody wanted to move. The dancers were content under the paper, comforted, even. In my creation state, I tried to move on and design what happens after the burying. The dancers said they felt that it was the end. I didn’t agree. At the time, I did not realize the beginning was lacking, not the end.

Next rehearsal, I asked the dancers to enter the space with their hands behind their back followed by slowly interlocking with each other (see Figure 2).

The action happens upstage after Melissa’s solo and once more downstage. During this version, I dressed myself in a white paper gown, the same paper that would eventually bury the prisoners. The dance began with them locking themselves into each other and slowly releasing. They guided the audience to a circle surrounding them. I controlled dancers’ continuous spinning through sound cues. I rolled in the pile of trash until my paper dress was lost in the rest of the pile as an attempt to shed societal

constraints. I drug the dancers by their suits into a large pile. This was accompanied by a piece of music title “Djorolen” by Oumou Sangare, a Malian Wassoulou musician. The words of the song translate to “the worried songbird cries out in the forest, the worried songbird, her thoughts go far away” (Sangare, 1996). They lay limp as I cover them. With the removal of the dress, I attempt to separate myself from the society that incarcerates two million. In the United States, the system of justice sends people to prison not only because the crimes they may or may not have committed but because their communities have been criminalized. By living unconsciously about this entrenched societal problem, we are guilty of neglect. I re-evaluated the work again after the fourth UNshowing. I decided that I needed to be more separate from the detainees, an omnipresent figure always around, above, shifting between guard or guardian angel by maintaining stillness. I imagined myself a top of a twelve-foot ladder (see Figure 3 for conceptual design).



Figure 2. “Lock Position.” Photograph by Jordan Albright.



Figure 3. “Envisioning Hierarchy.” Photograph by Jordan Albright.

THE FINAL DANCE, DESIGN AND PERFORMANCE

The piece begins as I, dressed in a white paper gown, carry trash bags full of paper into the center of the space. I leave and enter, carrying with me varying degrees of trash to add to a large pile in the center of the space. This takes approximately ten minutes, and then I ritualistically climb to the top of the orange twelve-foot work ladder and sit. By including the piece's set up as a part of the performance, I allude to the construction of prison throughout history. A voiceover expresses racial divides in America:

Detainee one: "I dont care, I love where I live, I ain't neva wanna live in no white neighborhood, cause like Northwood Pines, like I be feelin' uncomfortable, like when I walk through I feel like I'm being watched."

Detainee two: "WELL YOU ARE."

Officer: "May not be you per say, but look what y'all done, see what I'm saying, so they gon be watchin out for their stuff."

Detainee one: "We just be chillin, we just be walkin around they neighborhood."

The young woman who spoke these words continuously engaged officers and her peers in conversations about institutionalized racism. I found her insight to be profound and necessary in the work. I overlapped her words with "Faluni Chant," a song by a female cappella ensemble, Sweet Honey in the Rock (1994): "The metaphor of sweet honey in the rock, Honey – an ancient substance, sweet and nurturing. Rock – an elemental strength, enduring the winds of time captures completely these African American

women whose repertoire is steeped in the sacred music of the Black church, the clarion calls of the civil rights movement, and songs of the struggle for justice everywhere." The song repeats and builds a chant-like rhythm reminiscent of the vocal exploration earlier in the process. Melissa begins a slow-motion entry into orange jumpsuits. The rest of the cast, already dressed in prison garb, zigzag through the space, single file with their hands behind their backs. After the climax of Melissa's solo, a fit of fear and anger physicalized by thrashing, she is integrated with the rest of the pack. The dancers travel downstage repeating a zigzag pattern, saying "Man 1," "Man 2," etc. each time they turn the corner or "go through the door frame" (inspired by what I witnessed in ARJJ). Once downstage, the dancers braid their bodies together again. Shelby attempts to break free from the chain of locked bodies and the entire line starts to reverberate from her struggle. She manages to escape and falls to the ground. The remaining dancers also collapse. I command from the ladder that they lower to their elbows, a physically daunting task. They hold themselves in plank, and repeat their numbers, "Man 1, Man 2..." The bodies and voices tremble. The dance becomes a race of time and strength. When I decide to end their suffering, I use a one word command, "enough," to signal the dancers to dart back to the large pile of paper. The paper flies into the air; they rip, crumble and put together until exhaustion defeats them (Figure 4). Melissa is the last to die. They lie there silently, complacent in the mess of torn paper. I transcend down from the ladder and use new, large rolls of paper to cover them (Figure 5). When my task is complete, I climb back up to my place on the ladder. Lights fade.



Figure 4. "Deconstruction/Reconstruction of the Self." Photograph by Jordan Albright.



Figure 5. “Burial.” Photograph by Jordan Albright.

Through my contact with the youth of the ARJJ and my intense self-reflection while choreographing and re-choreographing my experiences, I was able to reflect, investigate, and formulate a political manifesto. The dance reflects an entrenched societal problem and seeks to spark critical thinking and dialogue about the world we live in and the world we dream of.

In the process of making the dance, I honored and trusted my senses and the urges of my physical self. I listened during the class at the detention center, to the UF

dancers and to myself. By continually witnessing myself in community with these participants, I moved beyond the stereotypes present in the early drawings of the dance to create an honest work of art reflective of my specific relationship to the youth of the ARJJ and my position as a college student exploring injustice on a systematic level. “Mom plz help me” is dedicated to the people who transformed my idea of beauty and confirmed my desire to dance for the betterment of society and social change in America.

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