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Embodying an Ethic of Care: Dance and the Question of Imprisonment

Lauretta Tarara
Montclair State University

Abstract

Dance is a powerful artform that has been used as an embodied tool for social change and commentary throughout history. Movement and performance has been a vehicle for artists to process and dialogue about the injustices and societal truths around them and continues to be a viable and effective tool for illustrating the point of view of concerned and engaged citizens. Through this medium, artists have been able to bring people together for various causes and movements.

In *(heal)ium*, dance film is used as a vehicle for discourse about alternatives to the carceral state. The film explores the topics of community violence and conflict and how solutions can be found to address harm without removing people from society. At its core, *(heal)ium* is an abolitionist dance work. One of the most pressing questions of today's citizens is how we will improve or remove the Prison Industrial Complex to better facilitate the rehabilitation of people convicted of crimes and integrate them into society as functioning and flourishing citizens. This thesis utilizes dance film to interrogate the efficacy of the Prison Industrial Complex as rehabilitation facilities dedicated to reforming individuals who have committed crimes.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Embodying an Ethic Of Care: Dance and the Question of Imprisonment

by

Lauretta Tarara

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Thesis Committee:

[redacted]

Elizabeth McPherson
Thesis Sponsor

[redacted]

Claire Porter
Committee Member

[redacted]

Karen Love
Committee Member

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Introduction

When I began planning to create this dance project, I knew I wanted to do something that aligned with the reasons I believe art and movement to be so powerful. As an educator, I wanted to create an opportunity for people to engage with challenging topic matter and pose questions in earnest. My intention was to create a dance film that would catalyze discussion and questions to receive thoughtful response and dialogue. In today's climate where people are fearful of asking the wrong questions, there are few opportunities to be exposed to new ways of thinking without being condescended to. In the interest of building a different future, we must open the opportunity for folks to engage with each other to develop support and allies in our cause for a more just world. As a child who grew up involved in the justice system by proxy as a former foster youth, I am intimately aware of how life-altering trials, convictions, and jail time can be for the people who experience them. I have always had empathy for people who are navigating the harsh realities of incarceration and wanted to create a dance work that humanized the individuals facing these truths for people on the outside so that as communities we can begin to establish alternatives to the Prison Industrial Complex.

The concept of Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) Abolitionism has gained prominence in recent years as a response to the systemic issues embedded in the criminal justice system and the 2020 Uprisings. PIC Abolitionism advocates for eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and reimagines justice in a way that prioritizes rehabilitation, restoration, and community support over punishment and retribution. I seek to use dance to support and promote the goals of PIC Abolitionism. Dance has the unique ability to convey emotions, experiences, and messages that words alone cannot. By combining the artistry of dance with the philosophy of

abolitionism, we can engage audiences to reflect on their experiences with harm and healing. I believe that by reckoning with the inefficacy of the Prison Industrial Complex to address harm, we can begin to create and invest in a future that centers on humanization, healing, and rehabilitation. This choreographic work and dance film will illustrate our responsibility to support our fellow community members and interrogate the effectiveness of prison as an anecdote to harm.

I have been advocating for social change since 2014, first entering the world of activism as an advocate for former foster youth in Illinois. During that time, I began to critique the political and social systems that control our lives. Since then, I have supported and studied various social movements from PIC Abolitionism, to Freedom Schools, to labor unions and movements. In 2021, I completed a Master of Education (M.Ed) in Educational Policy and Leadership with an emphasis in Equity and Diversity from the University of Illinois where I studied student and youth movements. I began my studies at Montclair State with a desire to bring together my work in social movements with dance.

Review of Relevant Literature

Throughout American history, our country has been plagued by violence and harm which cyclically repeats itself through the justice system meant to address it. The United States is the world's leader in incarceration; about two million people are in the nation's prisons and jails (Ghandnoosh and Nellis). Despite violent crime having the lowest recidivism rate, the majority of the public believes that the role of the police and prison is to keep violent crime off the streets and out of communities. In Understanding Violent Crime Recidivism, J.J. Prescott of the University of Michigan states, "Compared

to the reoffense rates of individuals released following incarceration for nonviolent crimes, overall recidivism rates are lower among released individuals who have been incarcerated for [violent crime] offenses" (1651). However, our prison system is far more complex than just reducing violent crime and is driven by greed and racism. Twenty-seven states in the US utilize private prisons to provide various corporations with cheap, unregulated labor. According to Criminon, a non-profit dedicated to criminal rehabilitation, as of June 2023 there are 158 private for-profit prisons in the US (Criminon International). As stated by Angela Y. Davis, "Mass imprisonment generates profits as it devours social wealth, and thus reproduces the very conditions that lead people to prison" (16). Convictions often result in difficulty finding work and housing, two cornerstones to productive, meaningful, and safe reintegration into society. In Illinois, the state where my thesis project was developed, a 2021 study found that 46% of formerly incarcerated people were unemployed over the course of the year (Reichert).

Dance Works Within the Prison Industrial Complex

In a world experiencing violence, injustice, and civil unrest, not just in the United States but worldwide, artists must find a way to engage with the world around them in a purposeful and substantial way. Dancers and choreographers have been increasingly using movement as a means of addressing moral and social questions. In his essay, "The Creative Process" (1962), James Baldwin said, "The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate the darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more humane dwelling place." Dancers and choreographers persist in taking to the stage and studio to express their support for or make statements about social movements. From

choreographers Brianna Mims to Suchi Branfman and Dimitri Chamblas, from Kyle Abraham to Donald McKayle, audiences have been given the opportunity to examine the Prison Industrial Complex through dance and choreography. These choreographers utilize their work as a means of commentary on this complex issue plaguing American society, opening up the possibility for dialogue, critique, and the potential to find a solution.

Many may think of prisons as sites of harm, confinement, and a general antithesis of freedom. Some choreographers have spent time creating and dancing in these facilities hoping to provide an outlet for the incarcerated people they collaborate with, as in Branfmans' case; or in Mims' case, simply using an abandoned prison space to generate the mood and feeling of lost years. Both choreographers found themselves creating within prisons but to very different creative ends.

Undanced Dances Through Prison Walls During a Pandemic is a series of Branfman's works created in collaboration with incarcerated men at California Rehabilitation Center as a means to bring attention to the rates of COVID-19 in California Prisons. The piece is part of a ten year choreographic residency program she runs in California Rehabilitation Center in Norco called *Dancing Through Prison Walls*. As part of this program, she leads workshops for the incarcerated men at the prison. *Dancing Through Prison Walls* has also yielded artworks in other disciplines, such as film and poetry. One poem, "I Am You," written by Forrest Reyes, who is currently incarcerated at CRCN was featured in Branfman's work. The dancers recite the words of Reyes' poem aloud for the audience, which Branfman hopes will, "create work that

invites people into understanding that we're not separate from folks who are incarcerated, that we are implicated in their incarceration" (Vargas).

Branfman's methods for creation and collaboration between the incarcerated people at Norco were forced to change in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation and the prison discontinued programming in person to curb the rapid rates of spread. She began implementing a method where participants created written choreographies, letters that the incarcerated men wrote that detailed their intended movement, which Branfman's performers interpreted and shared with the outside world. These works were created between March and May of 2020 and became *Undanced Dances Through Prison Walls During a Pandemic* (suchibranfman.com).

In addition to her inclusion of the incarcerated individuals' artistic contributions, Branfman met her goals by including the audience in the live performances of her abolitionist work. Branfman kept records of the rate of COVID-19 in Norco throughout the pandemic, writing down the numbers on legal pads which she incorporated into the live performance, "Long scrolls hang from the ceiling of the theater, unfurling onto the ground, toward the audience until those watching are confronted visually and auditorily with the numbers of COVID-19 cases" (Vargas). Branfman looks to prompt conversation and action from her audience members but doesn't necessarily articulate how she envisions their next steps. The incarcerated collaborators simply want to communicate their humanity to audiences on the outside.

Akin to this, Brianna Mims seeks to communicate her uncle's experiences in her site-specific work, *Uncle Ronnie's Room*, performed inside Los Angeles' Chuco's Justice Center. Her piece seeks to humanize her Uncle Ronnie who has been

incarcerated for 22 years for a murder he was wrongfully convicted of. The work is set in a former juvenile detention center where Mims has recreated her uncle's childhood bedroom in one of the cells, while another cell serves as an altar space. Mims takes very seriously the recreation and installation of Ronnie's room, as it is accurate to the time period, from the bed sheets to the television to the radio on the shelf. There is an old landline telephone on the nightstand and a saxophone on top of the entertainment center. Adorning the wall across from the bed are aged family portraits, handwritten letters, valentines, and film photos. Packed into the shelf are tape decks and headphones. Each of these thoughtful details are successful in bringing the audience into Ronnie's world, so that they can easily picture a boy living there. All that is missing is Ronnie himself.

There are multiple facets of Uncle Ronnie's Room: the installation, the performance, and the docuseries. Mims collected several artifacts from Ronnie's youth to be utilized in the installation so that audience members could see the items and interact with the space (Doerr). Each element of the construction is deeply personal. The performance includes her grandparents' favorite songs sung by a choir and her grandmother. Mims collaborated with a filmmaker from University of Southern California to create a docuseries shown before the live performance that outlines Ronnie's case and some of the details about how he was sentenced to two life sentences plus 65 years. Her work focuses on what Ronnie could have done with 22 years, and the massive loss it has been not just for Ronnie but for the entire family. Uncle Ronnie's Room concludes with specific calls to action outlined on a website dedicated to the cause: uncleronniesroom.com. The calls to action vary from calling the district attorney

to simply spreading the word on social media, but her goals are clear and the movement, installation, and docuseries all support the family's endeavor to free Ronnie from wrongful imprisonment.

Dimitri Chamblas also utilizes documentary in his work with incarcerated men at high-security California State Prison, where he leads dance workshops with the men there. His partner, Manuela Dalle collaborated with him to create *Dancing in A-Yard* which follows the story of ten men who take part in workshops to create a dance performance despite all of them serving heavy sentencing, including life imprisonment. Throughout the 72 minute film, the men talk about the hardships they faced before imprisonment and how they came to be incarcerated as well as their desire to evolve, reconcile, and redeem themselves. The documentary helps provide for the audience an opportunity to reflect on the assumptions and prejudices many people hold about incarcerated people, their presumed guilt, and whether they have the capacity to change and adapt to a new world post crime. The movement the men perform reflects the realities they faced before sentencing, sometimes collapsing into one another's arms, performing highly physical combative scenes. In addition to dancing, they discuss their experiences with murder and violence, and the grief they feel for the harm they've caused. One dancer laments in the film, "Everyday I carry the shame of what I'm responsible for." Another dancer, in response to what the performance process has given him shares, "I feel free, I feel happy again…I feel like a human" (Dalle). Chamblas' work with these men is more about facilitation than setting a preconceived set of steps. The work of dance making is inherently humanizing, and each of the ten men involved in *A-Yard* demonstrate the power of embodying one's truth and one's

histories by releasing the expectations and limits of hyper masculinity in the prison to bring forth creativity and freedom.

Branfman, Mims, and Chamblas all create dance works with the common thread of blending dance and storytelling within the walls of prisons. Each of these choreographers creates and works differently with individual motivations, but their message is clear: incarcerated people are still people. Their stories are more similar to ours than different, and redemption and truth can be found when the community rallies together to support one another.

Staging Injustice in the Outside World

Donald McKayle and Kyle Abraham have chosen to take their commentary about prison outside of its walls, to the stage. Their work deals with the impact of incarceration on the prisoners as well as their loved ones, families, and friends. As Black American men, they both make their artwork from the perspective of the most incarcerated demographic in the United States: Black men (Carson). The harsh reality of incarceration and hyper policing is faced by Black Americans everywhere in the country and remains a hot button topic in the news, in art, and in the streets. Since the Uprisings of 2020, the nation has become more acutely aware of the gravity of the situation, as people of all ethnic backgrounds took to the streets to protest in the wake of police violence against George Floyd and Breonna Taylor respectively, which resulted in their murders. Despite the recent uptick in conversations about race and police violence, artists such as McKayle and Abraham made their pieces before 2020, though the sentiments shared still sadly apply. The embodiment of this painful content matter is

addressed very differently by each choreographer, but their messages are received all the same.

In *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1959), Donald McKayle personifies grief and freedom in a story that depicts a chain gang of seven men in the American South doing back-breaking work while they aspire to freedom. Freedom arrives in the form of a woman. In McKayle's work the protagonists of the story are all men, who to this day are disproportionately affected by mass incarceration in the United States. According to the US Department of Justice, men made up 93% of all prisoners in the US in 2018 (Carson). According to demographic studies by Jason Robey at Duke University, the odds are astoundingly detrimental for Black men: "Scholars have declared a 'generational shift' in the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for Black men, from a staggering one in three for those born in 1981 to a still troubling one in five for Black men born in 2001" (Robey). These statistics remain salient as the audience watches the men who represented a scary truth in 1959 when the work debuted, and is still applicable today in 2023. *Rainbow Round my Shoulder* has earned a place in the repertory of the highly regarded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, and has been performed by other predominantly Black dance companies as well such as Dayton Contemporary Dance Company. McKayle said in an interview with the *New York Times* that his choice to include the depiction of the chain gang and their swinging angular movement was to help the audience understand the utter physical exhaustion of the experience (Kourlas). He said, "It was very important for the dance to use the actual movement of the laborer picking up the rocks […] you're getting to a point where you can't do it anymore, and then you have to go on with it" (Kourlas). Despite the tireless

laboring, their vision of freedom, joy, memory, and comfort comes into the scene in the form of a woman. She seems to be elusive to them, and a scene takes place where contact is made between one of the men and her, which serves as a symbol for the longing and desire for freedom, care, and gentleness that is denied them in the violent captivity of incarceration. Despite the mirage of feminine care and love, they eventually return to their work sans freedom, and two men meet with death as a result of the sound of gunshots (Kourlas). McKayle's choreographic choice to gender care, love, and respite as feminine is compelling and personifies for the audience the visceral reaction to being held by a loved one. The embraces of a long awaited meeting are viscerally understood by audience members who are familiar with the Department of Corrections and their merciless regulations for contact at visitation. For those affected, it is much more personal.

Kyle Abraham amplifies the voices of those affected literally and figuratively, as audio recordings of incarcerated individuals and those closest to them play in the background of his piece, *Untitled America*. Abraham's choreography embodies the stories of their loved ones in his 2016 work commissioned by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. *Untitled America* is one part of a trilogy depicting the impact of incarceration on Black families in America. Despite the 57 years between *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* and Abraham's work, they are eerily similar, depicting the grief and despair of incarceration and the havoc it has continued to wreak over American society. The work begins with quick gestures and the sound of cells clanging shut, clapping that steadily quickens and elicits the feeling of anxiety in the space. The gestures are repetitive and depict hands behind the back, hands over head, hands behind their

heads. It is melancholy, anxious, and numbing; it sets the tone for the overall work. Throughout the piece, the audience hears the voices of incarcerated individuals and their loved ones, as their stories are woven into the soundscape. Abraham intends to call attention to the damage the prison system has had on Black American family structure. According to an article from *NBC News* Abraham conveyed, “America’s history in relation to violence in the black family and black people across the country and incarceration thereafter are connected to family and isolation in many ways” (Smith). His point in this is made exceptionally clear through the vocal telling of their stories and physicality of his choreography.

Throughout the performance, the audience can hear the voices of incarcerated individuals. Sometimes there are whole sentences and coherent threads of thinking, while at other times it is quiet cries longing for home. Karlton Smith writes for NBC News, “On top of musical scores by pianist Kris Bowers and electronic duo Raime, the audience can hear the audio of the inmates’ haunting words at one point crying, ‘I want to go home’” (Smith). Much like McKayle’s work in *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, there is embrace and collapse present in the choreography. While the embraces in McKayle’s work suggest a longing for comfort and home, Abraham’s choreography of touch reads to some as forgiveness. Brian Seibert writes in his review,“Mr. Abraham mixes in embraces with a hint of forgiveness, and brief, shuddering collapses. His choreography sometimes achieves a delicacy of line that exposes more intense pain. Yet when one of the voices says, ‘My body was inside, but my mind was always outside of prison,’ the words exceed what Mr. Abraham is able to show” (Seibert). This use of a voice from inside the prison walls relates to the impactful work Mims and Branfman made or

performed within the walls of prisons either in part or in full. The desire to be free rings out loudly in each of these works.

A Future Beyond Incarceration

Choreographers have utilized a variety of methods to draw attention to, inspire conversation about, and change outcomes regarding the Prison Industrial Complex. Some have chosen to collaborate with incarcerated individuals to share their stories and experiences while others have utilized the prison itself to ask the audience to humanize the folks inside and imagine a world where time is not lost to separation from society. Others still have depicted the embodiment and gesture of confinement and state violence to illustrate to the audience the ways the Prison Industrial Complex has confined more than people but also our understanding of what can be done to right wrongs beyond separation.

Some choreographers have listed their desired outcomes clearly for audiences: to write to attorneys, to spread the word, to demand more of politicians as in the case of Brianna Mims. Others have sought to elicit conversation, humanization, and open minds as in the case of Suchi Branfman, Kyle Abraham, and Donald Mckayle. And, while it may not result in freed people or changed sentencing, perhaps it frees people from some of the prejudices and assumptions made about individuals serving time. May all the art made to humanize incarcerated people begin to move society toward a world where people amount to more than their darkest moments and gravest mistakes, and may more attention be given to those imprisoned for crimes not even committed.

Methodology

(heal)ium is a dance film in three parts. The first is about systems: how communities are organized, and what kinds of problem-solving that citizens are exposed to and have available to them. The second is an imagined world: where the ethic of care associated with PIC Abolitionism is practiced, and people are supported and able to rise above their past mistakes. The third section is an integration of these principles where support and accountability for one another is prioritized to facilitate healing and rehabilitation.

In creating this work, I sought to implement symbolism through the use of balloon props. The balloons serve as a symbol of human life both in healing or rehabilitation (expanding), harm (popping), and the handling of lives via community or societal structures (contact with balloons). In the first and third sections of the work, the balloons are connected to each person and representative of the American quality of individualism that propels the principles of capitalism and the carceral state born of it, which protects property and places monetary value upon lives. Conversely, in the middle portion of *(heal)ium,* which is based on imagining a new world, the balloons are not limited to being passively connected to one person. Rather, the balloons are in the air, passed between dancers, and part of the dance itself.

This differentiation is symbolic of a PIC Abolitionist ethic of care which prioritizes community and takes care of the people harmed by crime as well as those criminalized. For example, campaigns such as #CareNotCops have been organizing in cities throughout the nation to advocate for a reallocation of funds typically earmarked for policing to be redistributed for mental health care services, homelessness services, and

other community initiatives. In Chicago their campaign is supported by community organizations such as GoodKidsMadCity, Assata's Daughters, and #LetUsBreath Collective – all organizations dedicated to supporting Chicago's youth and community members (CareNotCops).

Throughout *(heal)ium*, the movement motifs and prop come together to embody a throughline story that humanizes criminalized individuals and those they come in contact with throughout their lives.

My Process

(Heal)ium was developed with two separate casts. Though the film is in three parts, the section titled, "Imagining a New World," was developed and choreographed first. The choreography was workshoped with dancers from Echo Modern Dance Collective, an ensemble I work with as a dancer and a choreographer that spends its entire dance season creating dance for film. We each get four two hour rehearsals to set our work and then a two hour film session working with our partner filmmaker, Daniel Williams of Purus Cinema. He serves as the director of photography and allows us to otherwise direct the day as needed. I also worked with Williams to create the rest of the film, after initially thinking I would make the other two sections live performances. After the world making, shot list creating, and cinematic magic I experienced making the middle portion, I knew the vision must continue in film form.

Creating the movement vocabulary consisted of movement sessions playing with the ideas of staccato movements and feelings of release from that. The work of embodying the systems of the Prison Industrial Complex meant exploring bound

movement, while creating an alternative meant embracing support and release. I knew I wanted to implement the props of balloons and asked dancers in rehearsal to improvise with one another and the balloon between them. This helped me develop the motif of shared responsibility for life, symbolized in the film by oversized white balloons. In practice, we created the imagined world shown in section two of the film before we engaged in the "reality" represented in sections one and three.

Sections one and three required some symmetry as to engage the narrative of causing harm, repairing relationships, and eventually healing the community. In order to support a person-first perspective I created a shot list that showed the dancers as themselves or at the very least people with faces and limitations. I sought to show this by creating movement that prioritized a guarded kind of vulnerability, often found in situations where people are reckoning with having been hurt. I accomplished this by creating movement that was physically demanding but called upon moments of suspension and embrace.

Description of the Dance Film

The first section of the film, "Current Systems," begins with dancers outside, in a city park. It is a public park on the south side of Chicago, and non-dancers are occasionally in the background utilizing the public space. The five dancers are dressed in gray, standing in a square formation, with one person in the center. The dancers face away from the person in the middle and each dancer has a white balloon tied to their wrist. Angela Davis' voice is played over the music: "*We have learned how to forget about prisons, even if they are in our own neighborhoods*" ("Angela Davis on Building

Community"). In Chicago, where the film is created, Cook County Corrections Facility is located between two neighborhoods, "Little Village" and "Heart of Chicago." The corrections facility overlooks a soccer field where Chicago Public Schools students play regular games. Incarceration is within the daily landscape for community members. In the dance film, the viewer is then greeted by close shots of each performer's face one by one, while the dancers are still in the original formation. When they begin dancing, they are still facing away from the person in the center. Angela Davis' voice continues, "*The idea is just send them to prison, throw them away, get rid of them. And if we get rid of them, then we don't have to think about them. And if we don't have to think about them, then we don't have to think about the problems that they have*" ("Angela Davis on Building Community"). The movement phrase the dancers perform is repetitive and the dancers in the outside formation never interact with the person in the center. Though the person in the center changes, the phrase repeats indiscriminately. When the person is released from the center, they must jump into the phrase where it is presently, not where it was when they went in. The film cuts to close shots of the dancers' faces, looking sharply, eyes isolated, at the scene around them. In the foreground and background of the dancer's face, chaotic arms are pushing, shoving, slashing, and slapping around them. The arms and hands occasionally make contact with one another, and the overall feeling is unsettling. Each person observes the violence and chaos ensuing around them. As the film continues, there are scenes of interpersonal and internal conflict between the dancers. A duet begins and two women are circling one another, heads together. The connection between them is tense but could be affectionate. At times, they fall back only to be caught by one another. Other dancers

are propelled forward or held back by each other and the relationship between them is tumultuous but human. They come back together, revolving around one another, grasping at their partner's arms. The day-to-day reality of being in community with one another requires both conflict and resolution.

The film opens up to an ensemble in unison, with each dancer fully visible and engaged in an athletic movement phrase that maneuvers from standing, to falling, jumping, turning, and grasping. Their arms are often outstretched, sometimes free and sometimes bound. There is consistent tension in the arms and hands, a consistent energy pulling in different directions. Throughout the unison, the dancers are in phases of upheaval. From standing to moving on the floor, from jumping to swiping, the movement is relentless and the physicality is notable. The systems in which we participate in society are cyclical and seem to continue with no regard for anguish, joy, or need. The people must continually muster the strength to continue in their struggle. The unison phrase ends, and dancers have thrust themselves from facing downward to having legs extended and chests open to the sky, vulnerable.

Transitioning from the vulnerability of the last scene, the viewer is presented a solo dancer, standing still, confronting the camera. She begins to dance and the movement is refined but developing. She shifts from open to close, arms inward and outward, stance narrow and wide. This development is unfurling, and her facing finishes toward the camera where it began, showing continued vulnerability. The next moment shows another soloist, and as the scene begins, his hands are trembling as he walks into the frame. His movement cycles from expansive to staccato and sudden. He threads his leg through his grasp and is shown in a plank position, moving his legs as if

running against the grass. He falls to his forearms and begins again. When he rises from his struggle, he is confronted with another dancer, holding her personal balloon, which symbolizes life. Their conflict is marked by kicking and grasping. Their torsos twist, and their pelvises thrust their legs around themselves. When the male dancer turns to face the female dancer, he then dives toward her balloon, popping it and demonstrating this concept of irreparable harm to the audience. The final scene of that section ends with the ensemble's wrists behind their back, fists full of balloon shreds slowly falling to the ground beneath them. This moment is a symbol for lives shredded by a carceral reaction to conflict and harm.

The second section "Imagining a New World" opens on a new world. The ensemble has changed and so has the space. The imagined world takes place in a blank white room; large windows line the back wall of the space, and light spills into the room. The dancers are wearing various colors and white. The sound of the ensemble blowing up balloons fills the space. They transition to a circular formation of dancers, one person is again standing in the center holding a balloon while the others perform their own movement. It stands in contrast to the standardized movement each dancer did in the first section, because in this section, they are free to move as they choose. Some dancers face the dancer in the center, and others do not. There is more space for expression overall; it diverges from the rigid structure from section one. One dancer in the circle is always mirroring the holding of the balloon from the outside holding their elbow upward beside them, a symbol of empathy and mutual aid. The same dancer will be the one to hold the balloon at center next. There is a quality of hovering in the movement of both the dancer in the center and the one who will be in the center next.

The group is equally involved in handling the balloon symbolizing a person at the center of care. While the first section represented its system in a square, rigid shape; this section chooses a circle intentionally to represent the ongoing work of rehabilitation and healing. Communities that prioritize alternatives to the carceral system must be engaging in active work to meet the needs of its members, as research shows that high rates of crime and harm coincide with high rates of need.

The ensemble performs a unison phrase with motifs that cover and uncover the mouth, they undulate through the spine and roll and unravel across the floor, as though surfing on their torsos, arms and legs suspended. The opening in the chest and arms spread wide continue the theme of vulnerability. Rehabilitation after harm is caused requires the continual vulnerability of taking responsibility for our actions and resolving to remedy relationships in the community. The following section follows the ensemble of dancers from the corner of the performance space. They are dancing in duets holding a large white balloon between each pairing when the balloons are thrust upward, invoking a lift of life. The camera follows the balloons upward and back down to reveal the ensemble of dancers passing balloons, bumping them upward into space, while new balloons are introduced into the frame as well. This section was developed with the intended imagery of mutual aid and care, how in times of trouble it can take many sets of hands to help keep folks afloat, supported, and embraced. The following scene happens in unison and each dancer performs the movement phrase with a balloon, sometimes holding them in hands, sometimes in the crooks of their legs behind their knees. The balloon is a partner to each dancer, suspending and shifting with them as life often does at the mercy of the environment. This thread continues as the viewer

sees the dancers standing in a line in profile, rolling their shoulders, elbows, and arms back in succession while the balloons float, bump, and engage in the space with them.

Again, the viewer sees balloons are supported only by the proximity and closeness of two or more people, reiterating the motif of mutual support. The dancers writhe the balloons from lower on the body to higher until they finally emerge above the dancers and the scene cuts to a swift lift of a dancer overhead. This scene folds in the footage of multiple cast members lifted by hands of cast members below them. The lifted individuals have their hands, arms, feet and legs free to simply float with the sturdy support of those below them. The light from the window illuminates these scenes, lending itself to the dream concept where people rely on and trust those in their community to lift them up. The montage of this imagined world continues, the colorful pops in dancers' costumes complementing the otherwise white space. The viewer sees each dancer standing in the frame, balloons in hand, when they are removed one by one to the trilling of piano keys until one remains. She stands facing the camera, while her balloon deflates – an abrupt return to reality.

The third section of the film, "Rehabilitation," begins with one dancer standing alone in profile. He is the same dancer who popped the balloon at the end of section one, intentionally continuing the narrative of that moment. The cast from section one has also returned, and the park lets the viewer know the imaginary world from section two is a separate space from this reality. Angela Davis' voice begins, "*Nothing I have done, have I done alone. Absolutely nothing. It's always been in community, and so I guess the advice is to build community"* ("Angela Davis on Building Community"). The other cast members file into the scene, to stand behind the dancer, and they undulate

one by one until they all grasp one another to undulate in a chorus of fluid spines. The hands on each other's backs serve as a reminder to hold one another and to grieve for collective loss when harm has been experienced. At the core of rehabilitation and restoration is empathy. Some abolitionists believe that the answer for "*What next, after harm has been done?"* is Restorative Justice, a practice that prioritizes repairing relationships, taking responsibility for harm done, and working to regain good standing in the community. Throughout this section of the work, the theme is fostering healing, community health, and safety, as stated in the "repair" aspect of Restorative Justice's 3 Core Elements: Encounter, Repair, Transform (RestorativeJustice.org).

The dancers run to cling to one another when the scene changes to a long phrase performed by the cast in a canon. The core movement is the same, and performers choose their timing, luxuriating on different points, as we may all experience the same moment differently in life. There are moments of staccato, angular hands and lengthy extensions as well as quick steps and weighted jumps and falls. The scene is edited to show the movement close then interspersed with wide shots so as to accentuate the individual experience of a collective moment. The cast returns to the unison phrase from section one, the motifs of opening the chest, the rolling of shoulders and elbows circling to the back are still present. When the dancers jump, they are suspended for just a moment before returning to the ground, each departure from the ground a great effort to rise in the pursuit of healing and restoration. In this section, the unison phrase pauses in the middle in stillness. When two dancers begin to walk away, the rest of the cast breaks into a run to throw themselves against them, reaching for their community members. They slide off, and the scene cuts to the group in a similar

pulsing embrace as viewed in section two, sans balloons. They grasp one another and shift around each other, offering hands to hold or supportive embraces. This gets increasingly more physical as dancers begin leaving the ground briefly lifted. Eventually this grows into full tilt lifts, each person having a moment skyward. The scene cuts to the dancers with their hands behind their backs, holding limp balloons that inflate as the music slows. The viewer is again greeted with each dancer's face, another personal moment to instill a sense of knowing and belonging, reminding us of the humanity of people who find themselves criminalized. The moment concludes with the cast lifting the dancer who catalyzed the balloon pop, a redemptive moment underscored by Angela Davis' voice, *"I didn't survive because of what I myself as an individual did; I survived because of my community"* ("Angela Davis on Building Community").The scene cuts back to the dancers, their now inflated balloons behind their backs, as they slowly unfurl them to lift their balloon up toward an overcast sky in silence.

Outcomes

(Heal)ium was screened at Hyde Park Art Center, in Hyde Park, Chicago on April 7th, 2024 at 2:30pm. I developed a short anonymous survey to offer to viewers after having seen the film. It began by asking general questions such as, *"What symbols or motifs stood out most to you and why?"* I seek to create a work that is in service to the cause of abolition by creating an opportunity for community reflection. While I believe that the film has a hopeful bent, I also wanted to know if any of the images are unsettling or disquieting to audience members as I believe that disruption can be a catalyst for change. The second question in the survey was, *"Did any moment in the film unsettle or disrupt you? If so, which?"*

In the second section of the survey I focused on the topic material of PIC Abolition. I first defined the term for the viewer, “PIC abolition is a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment,” which is a quote from the website of the abolitionist movement, Critical Resistance (CriticalResistance.org). I asked viewers to describe their attitude toward the Prison Industrial Complex on a scale of 1-5, one being negative attitude and five being positive attitude with three being neutral. The last survey question asked if the viewer had heard of Prison Abolition before today. There was also an opportunity for the viewer to offer any additional comments.

Survey results helped to identify who the audience is and what perspectives they have of the film. The population of viewers who had or had not engaged with the concept of Prison Abolition informed the feedback they offered about symbolism and meaning. Of the survey respondents, 40% of viewers had never heard or considered Prison Abolition before, while 48% had, and just 12% had heard of the concept and read abolitionist writing or theory. 20% of respondents reported that they had a neutral or positive attitude toward the Prison Industrial Complex (inclusive of imprisonment, surveillance, and policing). 80% of respondents reported that they had a somewhat or very negative attitude toward the PIC.

When asked about what symbols or motifs stood out to them, several people noted that the symbol of the balloon was an effective indicator of life, both in its fragility and the actions of inflating, deflating, rising, or popping. One respondent reported that the most effective symbol was, “Balloons, they really beautifully represent the fragility of a life; They’re tossed around throughout the piece, and they’re swept up in the

movements and flow of the dancers (the community the system). These delicate things that just get passed around often without care. Once they're destroyed, there's no bringing it back." This respondent seemed to be particularly impacted by the fragility of the balloon as an object. Another respondent was more impacted by the contact with the balloons. They reported, "The balloon signified life for me. And in the first section it was clearly everyone's responsibility to take care of their own without help or care from community. In the second section it was held, carried, loved and shared between all. When one couldn't carry it someone else did." The distinct differences between qualities was evident to audience members who participated in the survey, as multiple audience members mentioned that they noticed the balloon usage and relationships to the balloons changed throughout the piece.

Viewers indicated in their surveys that in response to what "unsettled them," a number of different elements gave them moments for pause. Some indicated that the costuming differences between the middle section (white costumes with pops of color) and the other two (fully gray costumes) were striking. The lightness in costuming and colors helped create a sense of lift and ease in the middle section that was not present in the first and third. Another respondent wrote the most unsettling moment was, "The crumpled balloons being dropped by wrists that appeared to be stacked by handcuffs." 16% of the participants mentioned that either the blowing up or deflating of the balloons caused them discomfort or to pause and consider; one even went on to say, "[the image of deflating balloons] just leaves me with a little ache." Further still, they wrote about the unsettling nature of the audio of people breathing into the balloons, or the air leaving

them. This visceral reaction to a sensational experience helps to deliver the phenomenological experience I was aiming for.

In seeking to start conversations and create moments for thinking, I created a film rife with symbols and prompts for doing so. Audience members reported that they felt impacted by the work and that the feeling it gave them was lasting and profound. I plan to expand the reach of the film to additional audiences by submitting the project to film festivals both locally and nationally and adding abolitionist advocates to facilitate talk backs. Next month, I plan to collaborate with a local gallery/retail store, Connect Gallery, to show the film in their space as well as with Prison Neighborhood Art Project who is hosting an exhibition in their gallery space dedicated to showing works about incarceration. See Chicago Dance, a local online information source for dance, hosts a virtual film festival that I have submitted the film to as well.

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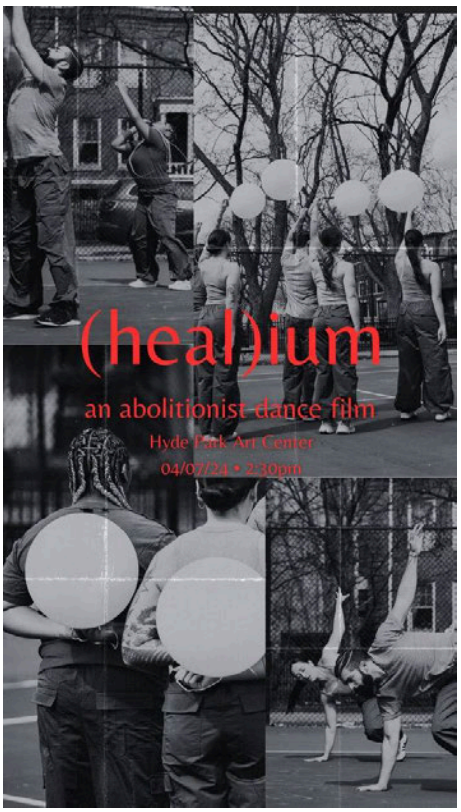
Appendix

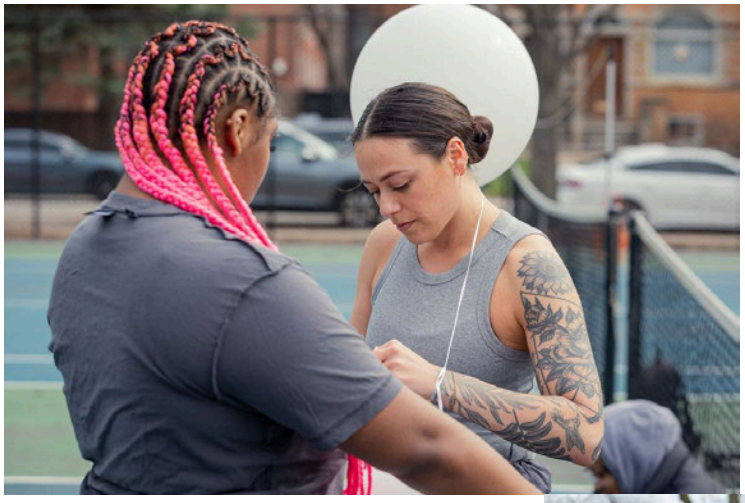


Appendix A: Program for the film screening of (heal)ium.

Appendix B: Audience members gathered at Hyde Park Art Center on April 7th, 2024 for the film screening.

Appendix C: Dancers performing during film day at Kenwood Park in Chicago, IL.

Appendix D. Symbolic Strategies in Film



Balloons were tied to dancers' wrists for section 1 systems, to symbolize the connection of life to each person and its fragility.

Perspective of the camera focused on the dancer in the center in a close shot, while other dancers flailed their arms in front and behind to create a sense of chaos and violence.

Dancers cut a small hole in the balloons to allow them to deflate. In the film, this clip was utilized in reverse to create a sense of growth and healing as they inflated.