

GOING UP (AND DOWN) THE RIVER: THE GEOGRAPHIES OF ART, AGENCY,
AND RESISTANCE WITHIN, ACROSS, AND BEYOND CARCERAL SPACE

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the geographical circumstances in carceral environments that affect the construction of artistic practice. This work is contextualized within the framework of both agency and resistance and seeks to qualify how the geographies of art – i.e., the creative expressions that are performed and expressed in space – function as tactics of agency and/or resistance, and how geographical circumstances affect the performance of these geographies. In evaluating these matters, the project investigates a variety of art forms and art programs that exist in prison spaces within which incarcerated individuals and groups (hereinafter carceral artists, or CAs) participate. I examine these questions through a mix of participant observation and interview-based methods in evaluating a mixed set of music, visual arts, and theater/drama programs in different prisons in the US. I argue that while all artistic resistance is agency, agency is not always resistance, in that CAs demonstrate varying degrees, qualities and motivations behind their artistic pursuits. This is to say that while agency and/or resistance may be either material and/or discursive, this is defined by certain qualities of aesthetic intentionality germane to artistic pursuits that lead CAs to engage in resistance over agency alone. The purpose of this work is to shed light on how

and why creative expression as a form of agency and resistance is accessed within micro-artistic spaces by subaltern populations, and to foreground the narratives and discourses articulated by CAs by virtue of their artistic mediums. These discourses can assist in providing greater clarity as to why incarceration exists in the United States, the inequalities it preys upon, and the inequalities it further perpetuates. Additionally, the research shows us how art in carceral environments is not conducted as purely an end in itself; for CAs, the arts are a tactic that has a purpose and application for navigating and negotiating everyday life within and beyond carceral space.

Keywords: agency, resistance, power, art, self, cultural geography, incarceration, prison

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the geographies of agency and resistance, the geographical circumstances within which such geographies are communicated, articulated, and performed, and why these geographies are worthy of our attention. My discussion of the geographies of resistance here is conceptualized through the performance and conception of art by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals and groups. This conversation broaches the subject of art itself, as it is both formally and informally conceived, and seeks to ascertain and outline the many artistic mediums and aesthetic contexts that are taken advantage of by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated peoples. This project reveals the nuances of creativity as they are accessed by the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, and how the eclectic nature of these discourses and practices constitutes agency and/or resistance in space.

My objective is to evaluate the discursive and imagined elements of artistic creation, production, and performance, as well as the tangible embodied and material presence that artistic creativity has in and beyond prison environments for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The sociospatial meanings of both agency and resistance are interrogated in an effort to tease out the differences between these two phenomena within this empirical context. While I contend that resistance inherently incorporates agency into its manifestations, discursive and material performances of agency may not fall into the framework of resistance. Whether artistic tactics are conjured as agency or resistance is a function of what I consider to be the *carceral-artistic continuum*, or the spatial arrangements and circumstances that produce the

performance of carceral artists' creative expression(s). Thus, there is a need to examine intentionality as it relates to resistance and agency within these creative discourses and practices and to explore to what extent, under what conditions, or in what contexts these individuals and groups actively conduct art with certain critical motivations versus entertain more passive objectives and reactions in their aesthetic engagements.

The geographies of agency and resistance are implicitly interwoven with power. While power is of course not necessarily inevitable, as Foucault stipulates power is everywhere and has an expansive reach that strives to accomplish its goals, where any and all behaviors are a product of the presence of power relations. As Foucault states, power may not always operate in a top-down manner, as it is diffused throughout all levels of society (1977, p. 40). While this may be the case, Foucault does generally consider the origin point of power to be the sovereign state, where the state constructs legal codes, procedures and apparatuses as regulatory mechanisms that determine what is socially acceptable versus unacceptable behavior (p. 55). Should an individual go against sovereign apparatuses and violate the social and behavioral norms as laid down by the sovereign, then the state is able to exercise its authority of sanctioning or punishing the individual. Depending upon the severity of the violation – as determined by the state – the sovereign reserves the ability to remove the individual and their body from public life and isolate them in a space of confinement (p. 57). It is then the carceral state – the subsequent disciplinary bureaucracies and lower-level institutional arms of the sovereign – that carry out the work of criminalizing and geographically containing incarcerated bodies (p. 74).

As such, bodies become concentrated in carceral space. The carceral state, as

Foucault suggests, represents its containment of bodies with a certain discourse to justify its motivations in confining bodies. This functions within the realm of spectacle, where the state believes that citizens will or should see the threat of incarceration as a force that will encourage them to obey the sovereign and not go against its legal codes (p. 49-50). But additionally, Foucault argues that the sovereign represents itself as existing to train people as “docile bodies” (p. 170-71) in order to demonstrate to what is appropriate behavior and therefore impose order by ‘correcting’ behavior (p. 74, 127), therefore purging from public life “internal dangers” which threaten the overall population (p. 90).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault is focused on making a broader point, that surveillance mechanisms that exist within prison and other similar institutional space (the asylum, the school, the barracks, the hospital) were and are a model for how the sovereign has enacted power relations across public life in general in the western world (p. 202-205). While this may arguably be true, my focus here is that the carceral state uses these procedures and discursive representations and legitimations to construct the institutional space of the prison itself. Everyday life in carceral space is defined by the panopticon, or panopticism, more specifically – a technology of power whereby the prison watches and monitors incarcerated individuals (p. 201). One objective of this is to establish a series of repetitive, regimented, and classificatory routines, such as when and how long one should eat, sleep, work, or remain in one’s cell (p. 203). The carceral state’s purpose with this particular style of surveillance is to construct ‘corrective’ behavior that then encourages a form of self-monitoring as “an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms” (p. 204) with “power of mind over mind” (p. 206). This is how docile bodies are produced, a structure that functions to encourage a behavior of

compliance amongst confined individuals, thus diffusing power from a top-down power structure. Through this technique of social and behavioral reductionism – that is, the carceral state using mundane procedures to replace incarcerated persons’ former identities – the carceral state aims to produce newly compliant ‘corrected’ identities (p. 206).

Thus, for individuals to exist in carceral space is to be directed and managed by the carceral state in such a way that the institution aspires for an individual’s personal identity and sense of self to be disciplined, where the state attempts to remove and replace one’s identity. But while the carceral state may be at work in trying to operationalize this discipline, the reduction of incarcerated people’s identities within the prison is not as neatly totalizing as all this. As I discuss in this dissertation, agency and resistance appear and occur in (and beyond) carceral space in the presence of disciplinary power. As I demonstrate, agency and resistance become arranged by incarcerated persons as a *response* to power (Cheliotis 2012, p. 3) as it is imposed upon them as vulnerable populations. In this sense agency and resistance occur in opposition to power and are asserted as sociocultural formations whereby the subaltern navigates and negotiates the presence of power (Bosworth 1996, p. 6, 7; Williams 2012, p. 241). Being of a subaltern nature, the geographies of agency and resistance take place within localized scales, in this case within prison space(s), or post-carceral spaces with individual and/or community dimensions of participation, often in relation to the public. Agency and resistance may of course be imagined and performed at scales beyond the local-carceral scale (see literature review), which are concerned with contending against power within the prison and at times at greater scales; however, what we are concerned with here are activities that are

conjured locally, and the spatial dynamics that produce these thoughts and actions.

As such, while a multiplicity of approaches and tactics exist in the struggle for agency and resistance in the presence of power, my focus here is to evaluate the *geographical circumstances* that permit and/or dis-enable artistic performances in these spaces as a form of contention in the face of carceral power and its effects. In other words, geographical circumstances are those contingent spatio-temporal opportunities that are accessed and discovered by agency and resistance, which are often uneven in their accessibility. At certain select moments and under certain conditions in space, agency and resistance have the potential to adopt or assume moments of creative expression. Geographical circumstances are defined by scarcity, as a lack of time and space creates conditions of inaccessibility. Contention between scales of power is also present here, as the carceral-artistic continuum is constantly in a struggle for space¹. The artistic geographies of agency and resistance in carceral space are thus continually in conflict as they negotiate and navigate space, in the process opening up more geographical circumstances that work in their interests.

This dissertation draws on the results of empirical research to consider socio-theoretical and paradigmatic transgressions, but this is not necessarily an end in itself. The larger focus of this dissertation is incarceration in the United States, with specific emphasis on the effects that its multiplicitous structures have on the social lives of the population(s) it predatorily incarcerates. In doing so, I seek to emphasize the ways these

¹ There are often differences across carceral-institutional settings – within state prison systems and between different state prison systems, for example – relative to the material circumstances that define geographical access to the arts. This is an outcome of how some prison systems will have more opportunities to engage with the arts with more volunteer organizations, or how much physical space or arts supplies is allocated to incarcerated artists. While this is important to be aware of, comparing/contrasting facilities in terms of what materialities are or are not provided in and of themselves is not the main thrust of this dissertation.

carceral populations and formerly incarcerated populations respond to their incarceration in navigating the structural inequalities that have been imposed upon them. While there of course may be others, my discussion and data indicate that the arts are one such response to incarceration. In this dissertation art is defined in both broad and narrow terms; of course, certain definitive parameters are necessary for discussing the phenomenon, but art, as it is conceived and performed, is an implicitly nuanced construction, and cannot be thought of as a purely conventional concept. This is to say that we cannot take art in carceral environments at face value in terms of whether something is ‘art’ or not - it is the programming, teaching artists, and ultimately the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated artists themselves that construct what they see as forms of creative expression.

I define *artistic geographies* as creative expressions that are articulated, communicated, shared and performed in space by individuals and/or groups, which may take on discursive and/or material forms. Artistic geographies are practiced, acted out, acted upon and consumed. Such geographies are enactments which may depend on linguistic functions, but may also occur non-representationally, and attempt to fill the lacuna of some spatial absence. In essence, artistic geographies are creative actions or thoughts that assert access, and intend to open up, reinvent, restore or create space that did not exist before, as well as collapse unwanted or seemingly unnecessary space. And while many geographers argue that the geographies of resistance are defined by a radical material restructuring of space and its social relations, where power is not only subverted but effectively collapsed (see literature review), the anticipated acme of artistic geographies may not occur with these *exact* qualities; alternately, artistic geographies

become agency and/or resistance as they incorporate imaginaries of transformation, transgression and spatial subversion in such a way such that spatial creation serves the artists' needs and desires to struggle for and/or through space in and on their own terms.

Research Questions

My overall goal is to explore a) what geographical circumstances affect carceral artists' efforts to access, enable, discover, conduct and perform art in and beyond the carceral landscape? And b), in what ways do these artistic geographies manifest and exist as geographies of agency and/or as geographies of resistance? These research questions interrogate the factors that influence the outcomes of the conduct and construction of agency and resistance via artistic engagement in carceral space, i.e. the ways in which carceral artists may transform, redefine and claim space through creative expression. By introducing the term *geographical circumstances*, I am suggesting that there are spatial structures, materialities, and imagined and discursive mechanisms that allow and/or inhibit geographies of art to come into being, within and beyond carceral space for carceral artists. I use the word 'affect' here because geographical circumstances may either be enabling or disabling; this is to say that there may or may not be greater or lesser access to artistic engagement. For incarcerated artists, permutations within the carceral-artistic continuum are the norm in everyday life in prison. Furthermore, the disruption of access to artistic space and the deficit or absence of power available to CAs compounded by a scarcity of artistic technologies may function as an affective and generative force in the social construction of art at the localized carceral scale.

In proceeding with my secondary question, I consider the ways in which these geographies and the geographical circumstances that produce them result in geographies

of agency or resistance. By considering both these terms, I suggest that agency and resistance are distinct as imaginaries and/or practices, and that artistic intentionality, interest, and involvement is nuanced in terms of the ways in which art is used as a response to power. This is to say that there is a distinction between agency and resistance, that is, while resistance invokes agency, discourses and materialities that constitute agency may not necessarily operate as resistance (Crewe 2007, p. 257; McEvoy 2000, p. 38, 188). I view artistic agency here as the *capacity* (Moisio 2015, p. 223) for CAs to possess motivation and interest in some form of creative expression and assert the ability to enact those expressions; resistance, in my conceptualization here, goes further than this, where active *intentionality* of agency (Hollander & Einwohner 2004, p. 538, 542; Lugones 2008, p. 86, 87; Tyner 2015, p. 120) merges into a framework where artistic practice seeks to discursively contest, question or better illustrate the oppressive power of incarceration. Resistance therefore is an act that occurs *in opposition* to, or perhaps even in defiance of something else (Hollander & Einwohner 2004, p. 539-540). As to whether these geographies of artistic practice in carceral space are constructed agency or resistance is a function of the CAs' discursive motivations and approaches as artists regarding what they aim for their practice to discursively contest or elucidate.

Considering these research questions, with this particular set of terminology, is important for several reasons. Speaking on the question of resistance in carceral environments is a logical response to the systematic procedures of mass and hyper incarceration in America that have become expansive over the last half-century. Notably, the number of individuals incarcerated in both state prison and federal prison facilities in the United States began increasing dramatically in the early 1970s, peaking in 2009 (Pew

Research Center 2021). This number as well as the rate of incarceration has declined slightly over the past decade (Sentencing Project 2019; Vera Institute 2021), yet incarcerated people who are Black and Hispanic continue to make up a larger percentage of the US prison population than incarcerated white people (Pew Research Center 2019). Additionally, as The Sentencing Project shows in the graph below, if decarceration rates continue to increase as slowly as they have been in state and federal facilities, it will take until the year 2091 for the US prison population to be cut in half (2019).

These disparities have received a significant amount of attention over the last two decades in the social sciences. Akin to Foucault's point that the economy of illegality was constructed along with the development of capitalist society in the 19th century, where unequal distributions of wealth resulted in criminality (1977, p. 87), this too has been the

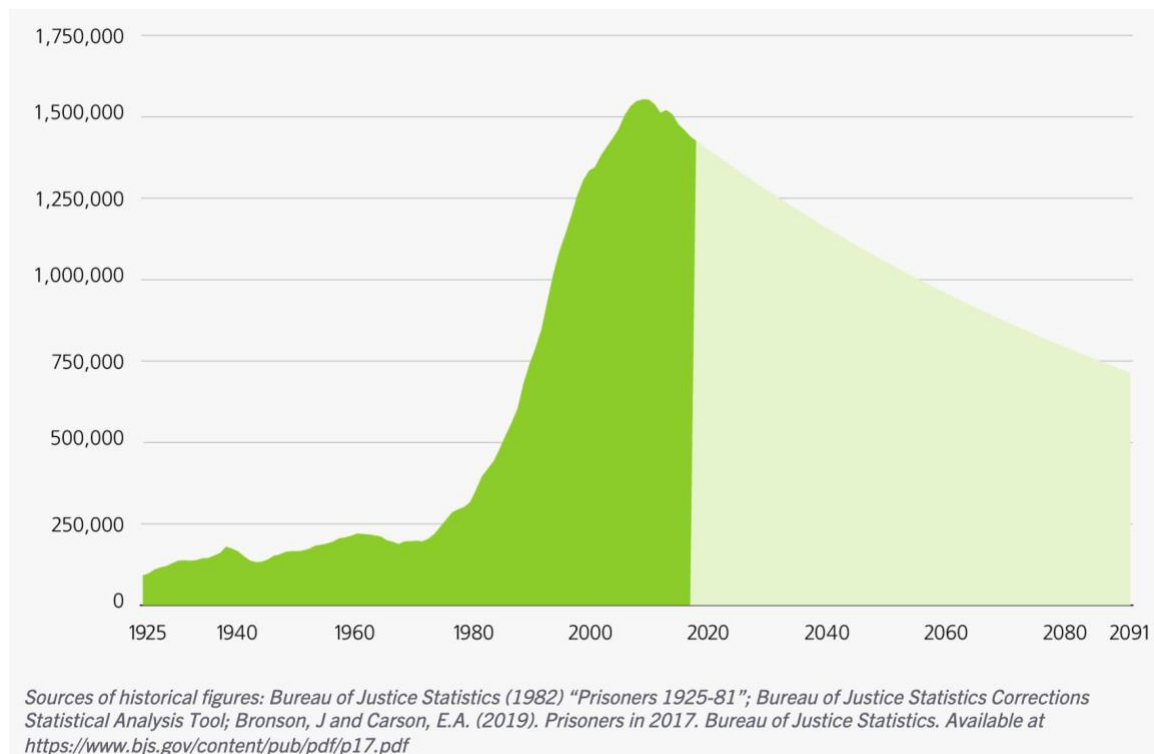


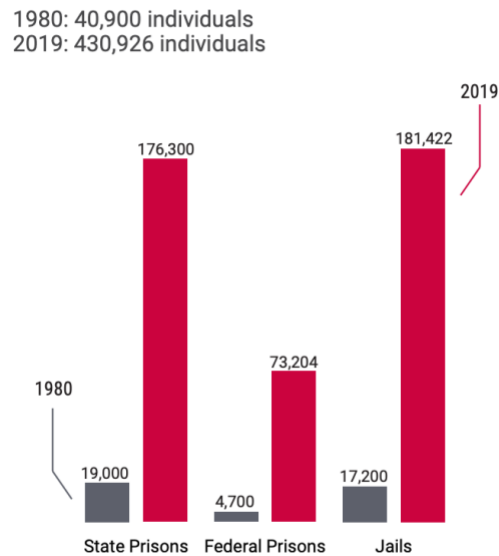
Figure 1: Fluctuations in Number of Incarcerated Individuals in the United States

case in the neoliberal era. This literature has significantly been an investigation of the rapidly rising number of people incarcerated within the United States since the early 1980s and the neoliberal infrastructures and placements of capital facilitating this process (Gilmore 2007). Other scholars have examined these social and political realities through the role of deindustrialization's replacement of Keynesianism with neoliberalism, and how this process affects urban populations. This strand of research highlights the abandonment of working-class people, often of color, by geographically relocating them from urban to carceral space as they become stripped of employment opportunities, a process referred to as "deproletarianization" (Wacquant 2009). Other accounts have acknowledged the simultaneous role of the state in establishing legal structures and policing apparatuses that predatorily target those vulnerable populations, resulting in the working classes and people of color experiencing more frequent arrests and convictions, lengthier sentences, as well as social and political disenfranchisement that complicates their return to public life within the infamous War on Drugs (Alexander 2020), as indicated in Figures 2 and 3 below, showing the disproportionate number of people incarcerated in the United States today for these types of convictions (Sentencing Project 2019). Members of these groups find themselves in a cyclical system of continuous arrest, incarceration, parole and/or release, followed by arrest and incarceration (Alexander 2020, Wacquant 2009). These realities are relevant because they affect the production of artistic tactics in and beyond prison.

As we can see, multiple studies point to the structural causation of contemporary incarceration in the United States today, but we must further consider the effects these technologies of power have in constituting social life within (and perhaps beyond)

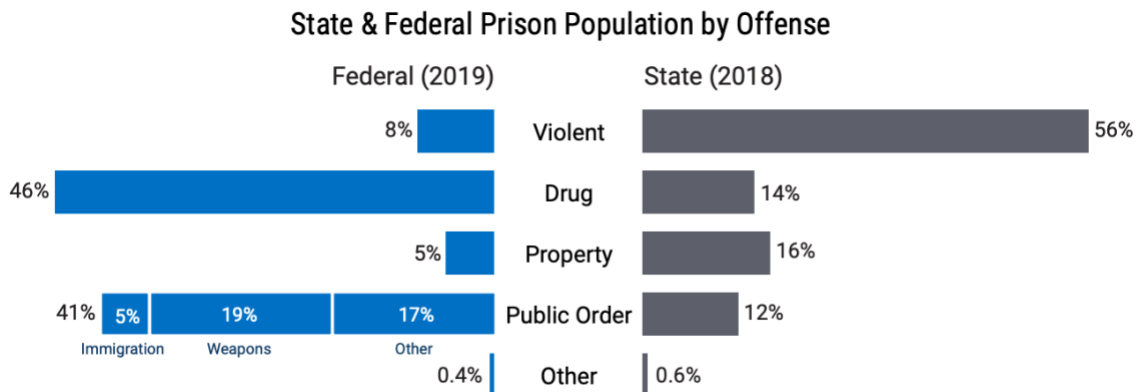
carceral space. The aforementioned policies as constructed by capital and governance lead to the concentration of bodies in spaces of confinement, yet while these affected individuals and groups are victims of these apparatuses, in their disappearance they often enact agency and resistance in navigating the carceral state. These enactments are

Number of People in Prisons and Jails for Drug Offenses, 1980 and 2019



Sources: Carson, E.A. (2021). *Prisoners in 2019*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics; James, D.J. (2004). *Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Zeng, Z. (2020). *Jail Inmates in 2018*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Figure 2: Number of People in Prisons/Jails for Drug Offenses, 1980 & 2019



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Prisoners Series.

Figure 3: State & Federal Prison Population by Offense

assertions of the self, whereby incarcerated populations aim to construct presence out of marginalization and destitution. One such notable enactment is artistic thought and practice, as the arts are one of few opportunities available under the mechanisms of discipline in carceral space that incarcerated individuals and groups – in this case, carceral artists – may employ for themselves in performing agency and/or resistance.

An additionally important, yet slightly more marginal element of the conduct of artistic agency and resistance in carceral space, is the element of place and place-making. As CAs assert themselves aesthetically and engage in the arts, they do so by creating meaning within the micro-artistic spaces where they enact creative expression. As CAs construct and perform aesthetic skills and abilities, either as agency or resistance, they imbue their spaces with meaning, converting them, to a degree, into place. Geographers have of course long-considered place as being defined by an individual or group's cultural attachment to a site based on its inhabitants' locational perceptions or "sense of place" (Pred 1984, p. 292; Tuan 1977, p. 3), where embodied experiences are built on emotional connections between individuals and their environments (Jones & Evans 2012, p. 2136; Tuan 1977, p. 16). This conversation *is* relevant to a certain extent for understanding carceral space in certain ways, because as I will show here, as CAs participate in the arts, they gain, acquire, and illustrate meaning in doing so within and in being affected by their respective spaces in the prison where they do their art (i.e., their micro-artistic spaces).

Yet, while this may occur, the perceptual imaginary of the construction of place as geographers have conceptualized it is somewhat divergent when analyzing the realities of prison. CAs *do* take place with them to a certain extent, such as when they leave a

workshop environment and return to their cell, for example, or leave a theatrical production wherein participating in the play has constructed meaning for cast members. But at the same time, CAs are mainly interested in holding onto the sense of community, emotion, and creativity that came about for them as individuals and as members of the group. As I emphasize at different points in the dissertation, there is not nostalgia for prison space, even if maintenance of creative and friendly relationships is a product of the construction of place through aesthetic creativity. The temporal permanence often associated within the possibilities of place-making (Dyck 2005, p. 239; Tuan 1997, p. 18) does not *necessarily* transpire in carceral environments as it does in more public ones, nor does place have the material fluidity that Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, that is, the notion that place is an object that can always be carried with you (1977, p. 12). If and when place is created through artistic agency and resistance in prison – either in collaboration with others or independently – place easily evaporates when artistic activities cease, when TAs depart for the week, or when CAs leave the music room, the performance venue or the workshop. Given the restrictions and limitations imposed by prison’s geographical circumstances, CAs develop a sense of place out of wanting to be there doing art, although it is not always one of desired attachment in a fundamental sense. CAs’ sense of place is defined by an awareness of what is possible and what is not. In finding moments and techniques for enacting tactics, individuals give meaning to a space, which they may take with them in their imagination, and perhaps with the physical, tangible artistry that they create, but it is important to acknowledge that there is an element of impermanence and “nonplace”, i.e., non-portability (Cohen 2000, p. 284) enveloped within these activities as well, which can in turn influence creativity. I return to this question of place

and place-making in the conclusion.

In recognition of these impacts of the carceral state, artistic responses of and by the self to the apparatuses of the carceral state are worthy of our attention as scholars and geographers. To put this in broader perspective, disciplinary and biopolitical technologies operate in such a way that the self becomes situated in a site of social war (Foucault, 2004); incarceration in America today is a case in point. The social, cultural, and political continuity of the self is often compromised and put into jeopardy in prisons, as the time and space necessary to affirm personal identities is scarce. As is discussed through the theory section below and literature review in chapter 2, it is the imperative of the state to manage and regulate bodies in the ways that it does – vulnerable populations, including those that are and/or become CAs therefore are treated by the state so that they may be incarcerated. There is a certain destitution of the quotidian that is thus produced, and the consequent loss of the self within the panopticon is a condition of temporal and spatial estrangement from civil society and public life over which the incarcerated have little to no control. But while liberty may be out of direct reach, freedom in the manifestation of tactics is possible. In other words, in an environment of scarcity, incarcerated individuals and groups make tools and opportunities available to themselves through which they may enact the self and assert identity. Artistic tactics are one such of these vehicles, technologies of power that are claimed, upheld, and defended by the subaltern. As such, these effects of and responses to carceral environments deserve examination. We can gain greater insight into the complexities of the carceral state and the social life it produces by recognizing the efforts made by CAs, who are driven by their lived experiences prior to and within the social life of incarceration to creatively express their

thoughts, emotions, and ideas through artistic mediums.

To further recognize the aesthetic skills and abilities of incarcerated individuals and groups is, in itself, an intervention against stigmatization of the incarcerated and can operate as an abolition strategy; while this may appear as a largely a softer and more discursive approach, multiple CAs in my observations and interviews stated that they believe this type of artistic work to be abolitionist work. Theatrical and dramatic performances, musical compositions, visual art and other forms of creative expression in prison tell stories and are a product of stories, often speaking to and reflective of larger social, cultural, political and economic problems in our society. Deconstructing the meanings behind these discourses and constructions – and the messages embedded within them – assists us in answering the question of why prison exists, and why it exists in the ways that it does in the sovereign United States. As will be illustrated in this dissertation, circumstances that lead to a prisoner's interest in playing a certain character in a theatrical production, choosing a particular musical style to write a song, or creating an abstract painting or drawing are regularly influenced by and are a product of social inequalities that CAs experience in and before prison.

Simultaneously, however, we are cautioned by the slippery-slope aspect of thinking about agency and resistance in that such concepts can easily be fetishized or romanticized. In speaking about her work in Sudan on how children negotiate the localized impacts of state and market-led economic restructuring, Cindi Katz tells us that those mechanisms that she observed children using to navigate such social problems were more complicated than just calling those actions 'resistance' (2004, p. 237). Indeed, in this context we are discussing everyday approaches that the subaltern use as a response to

power, but we also must be mindful of the need to avoid glorifying these acts as agency or resistance (Sparke 2008, p. 423). In examining the arts as agency or resistance, we must recognize that the arts are harnessed by incarcerated people because it is a technology that seeks to give them something else, that is, the carceral arts operating as agency and resistance is not an end in itself; rather, for incarcerated people this mechanism has an applied purpose and functions *as a tool for* navigating prison life, establishing identity where power makes it scarce, and serves for some as a method of commenting on these situations and circumstances.

Yet, while the arts can be used as a vehicle for agency and resistance as incarcerated people navigate spaces of confinement, it is my opinion that art in and of itself as it is expressed and presented cannot, in its independent existence, overthrow the prison industrial complex. Carceral art may operate to transform or reclaim carceral space in some capacity and/or provide a medium of communication for the CA, even if these transformations are subjective to the creator (and we are not here to *judge* those shades of intentionality *per se*). The US prison system is rooted in an eclectic entanglement of discourse, ideology and capital, and its structure and organization are certainly inspiration for CAs and comprises the statements that are made through their artistic performances. Yet while these discourses have the potential to operate as critiques of these structures, these artistic constructions, stories, and backgrounds as they are presented are limited in their power to independently alter space in any fundamental way, such that the carceral system is foundationally reimaged by the state and discursively and materially replaced with something more equitable. Furthermore, we unfortunately do not live in a society where art writ large is sufficiently recognized, nor do we necessarily live in a society

where most policymakers and many within the electorate *want* to be inspired by the aesthetic creativity that is a product of social unrest – arguably a product of Marxist alienation in the most classical sense (Harvey 2018). That being said, this does not invalidate the work of CAs, nor does it invalidate our efforts to expose the mediums which show the impact of incarceration in US society.

Methodology

The Justice Arts Coalition estimates that there are 249 prison arts programs operating within the United States (Justice Arts Coalition 2022). Regarding my research, I have established a representative sample by collecting data on about three or four of these. To gather the data needed to address my questions, I began firstly by conducting semi-structured interviews. This approach put me in a position to effectively pursue additional methodological avenues. This is to say that other methods were opened up through connections and the rapport I established with my interviewees. Within this method I sought to acquire data from three different subject populations. Firstly, I conducted interviews with directors of several prison arts programs. These included program directors, operations directors as well as executive directors. Secondly, I interviewed teaching artists (hereinafter TAs) who function as facilitators of the arts programs that I examined. This group was integral in helping to facilitate the space that CAs seek to be able to access and construct; moreover, this is the subject population that was able to assist with snowball sampling, as members of that population were able to connect me with CAs who are no longer incarcerated, my third subject group. Thus, developing rapport with TAs was part of the process, even if novel data was not necessarily discovered in interviewing a critical mass of TAs after a certain point.

Regarding the formerly incarcerated artists, many are known to the public due to press coverage and public dissemination from the arts programs themselves, and as such connecting with these individuals was able to happen directly without anyone else introducing me. Nonetheless, this approach proved rather challenging at times because I was unknown to these individuals; reaching out to gatekeepers (in this case usually the TAs) played a key role in building rapport between myself and the CAs who have returned home. A certain quantity and quality of trust and awareness was established by connecting with the TAs initially as intermediaries, for the purpose of learning more about the program structure, its objectives, and pedagogical organization to glean the appropriate knowledge to be able to prepare to learn from the CAs upon speaking to them.

Conducting these interviews with CAs themselves was of course essential to the project. The research questions inquire as to the geographical circumstances that they, the (formerly) incarcerated individuals and groups have had to negotiate in accessing and producing creative expression. As such, the processes, procedures, environments, penal physicalities and scales of power that prisoners must navigate are best investigated through communicating with those who are *actually enacting* their art within the actual carceral context of varying degrees of spatial access and limitations.

The third group with whom I conducted interviews was program/organization staff. These are the individuals who are responsible for the operations and oversight of the programs, such as program founders, program and operations directors, teaching supervisors, and executive directors. Some of these people are or have worked as TAs also, but the majority in this subject group are those who function in an administrative

capacity. These individuals were sometimes gatekeepers who allowed me to contact their TAs, although this particular strategy was often ineffective (program staff saying they would connect me to others over email, but never following through, or telling me that they could not ‘share personal information’ without the consent of the TAs, and expectedly not being interested in doing this work on my behalf). The ironic aspect of all of this was that many arts-in-prison programs have profiles of their TAs on their program websites, and while contact information is not listed, use of the internet allows discovery of other professional virtual spaces where contact information is available for these people, thus allowing me to use certain tactics of my own in the research process. Some program staff were skeptical and defensive when I approached them for interviews, although most who responded to my inquiries were willing to speak to me, and the majority did in fact respond. Indeed, most TAs were enthusiastic about speaking to me, although some were skeptical and defensive, requiring a certain conversational approach to explain and reassure them about my research goals and purpose.

My secondary method, which straddles the line of method versus analytic, as well as participant observation (discussed in greater detail below) was grounded in visual and acoustic circumstances. Many of the genres of artistic performance that I evaluated were accessible for research purposes because of a visual or auditory record that was made by the arts organizations and/or the (formerly) incarcerated artists themselves, mainly for public consumption. This included visual and musical pieces written and performed by people who are or were incarcerated, as well as video and visual documentation of past theatrical and musical performances. These sources were available on program websites, and/or were made available/linked to me by TAs or CAs themselves. Examples of these

appear in the dissertation and are thus analyzed as data in answering my research questions. However, these methods were only able to be conducted after learning from subjects mentioned above in my semi-structured interviews – mostly TAs and their formerly incarcerated students – who were willing to share or direct me to where I might find examples of their work that is available to the public. Seeing, hearing, and absorbing these visual and auditory sources permitted me to become more familiar with CAs’ work, and then use that knowledge to prepare for interviews with TAs and CAs.

My third method involved participant observation. As certain limitations were imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, I was not able to take part in nearly as much participant observation as I had intended. Nevertheless, some virtual observational opportunities were available to me beginning in late 2020, as well as some in-person observation in late 2021. It was during this period that I was able to see performances of formerly incarcerated women, and also had the opportunity to attend a retreat of formerly incarcerated men in the mountains of upstate New York. There I participated in a variety of workshops organized by the men themselves and TAs that had worked with the men while inside. Being present at this multi-day event allowed me to hear conversations amongst the men, talk to them candidly about their experiences, and contribute to the conversation on many levels. I was also able to use my own musical abilities to play alongside the men and the TAs in these workshops, which permitted me to learn about the techniques of their performance in greater depth. Overall, being a participant observer when it was possible was very beneficial in the sense that it permitted a deeper analysis of the visual and acoustic nature of CAs’ artistic engagement and was supportive of informing my research questions regarding the geographical circumstances that affected

their artistic production. Directly experiencing these events in real time allowed me to collect field notes on the technicalities of the art form and the performance, and then assisted me in making connections and conducting further direct interviews with the performers later. The data from field notes helped to generate interview questions unique to that observation.

An additional source of data came from an organization known as JAC. In 2020 a national network focused on the carceral arts made up of formerly incarcerated artists, TAs, and others – called the Justice Arts Coalition (hereinafter JAC) – began holding weekly Zoom meetings that presented CAs’ work to an audience of 20-30 people. With the support of JAC, CAs would call in from prison to explicate their paintings and drawings and talk about becoming an artist in prison and their influences. Formerly incarcerated artists would also be scheduled to discuss their work in a similar format. On certain occasions formerly incarcerated artists would lead workshops during these meetings over Zoom, where they would direct attendees to draw or visualize something on paper to try to convey how they go about creating. These images as well as pieces done by CAs were shared and deconstructed by the whole group in the Zoom call. Suffice it to say that, in attending these meetings, I was able to be a participant observer by posing questions and hearing from CAs themselves when it otherwise would have been impossible to make such a connection.

In regard to the demographics of my interviews, I conducted six interviews with program/operations staff, eighteen interviews with TAs, and eighteen interviews with formerly incarcerated artists (three of whom I spoke to twice). About 50% of TAs and program directors were men and 50% were women. Additionally, a significant majority

of TAs that I interviewed and interacted with in my observations were white. While I reached out to many TAs and program directors who are Black or people of color, only one of them was accessible for an interview. Of all my formerly incarcerated research subjects – between both semi-structured interviews and participant observations – about 60% of the individuals in those methodological categories were Black or people of color and about 40% were white. While people incarcerated in men’s prisons in the United States are proportionally greater than people incarcerated in women’s prisons, this was perhaps not the only reason for this disparity. What I discovered from TAs is that it is much more difficult for women to be involved in arts programs after leaving prison than men (see chapter 6 for a bit more context). Additionally, I also learned that formerly incarcerated artists who were confined within women’s facilities are often over-asked by organizations and the public to represent their work or speak on their own behalf. As such, women’s voices have an overall smaller presence here, although they are highlighted in chapter 6.

In terms of CAs’ incarcerated locations, many but not all the research subjects were involved in arts programs in New York state prison facilities. I also interviewed formerly incarcerated artists from Connecticut, Oregon and one from the state of Georgia. Outside of identifying a state where a research subject was incarcerated, in the interests of confidentiality and for the purposes of this dissertation I do not name any exact prison facilities where any individual was previously incarcerated. Additionally, names of individuals were redacted in all transcripts following destruction of interview audio files. I am certainly aware of who each individual is in my examples and quotations and where they were incarcerated; however, I do not mention any of this detail in any of my

chapters, as this was also a stipulation included in my IRB documentation. While one might prefer to see the geographical distribution of artistic activity, that in and of itself is not the main purpose of this research; rather, I am evaluating phenomena as it occurs. Other locations and facilities may of course see a vast difference in artistic culture than that which I will explicate here; yet as a social scientist my goal is to appreciate the possibilities of what I have discovered, rather than to make purist claims in an overly generalizable sense.

All interview transcripts, field notes, digital pictures of drawings and paintings, musical files, as well as notes on audio, video and live performance were all uploaded into MAXQDA, the data analysis software program I used for this project. In building my dataset I was able to organize everything I had acquired in one location in an interface that allowed me to analyze my data on several levels. My analysis was largely a mixture of coding and discourse analysis/content analysis. In reading transcripts and fieldnotes from participant observations, and in watching and listening to visual and acoustic materials, I was able to highlight words, phrases, and sections of text and label them with a thematic code in order to indicate a broader social pattern that I was noticing. By the end of my period of coding, I had created over twenty-five codes/themes that commonly appeared in the data. Content analysis was helpful in giving myself greater depth on the frequency of the themes and in identifying common patterns. Identifying themes this way was a useful means for relating my data back to my research questions, as it helped demonstrate where discourse analysis was most needed. Discourse analysis focused on the CAs' themselves, mainly with the goal of interpreting or understanding artistic pieces. although there were some TA interviews that required this level of examination.

Theoretical Foundation

This dissertation does not ignore the presence of the structural power relations of the carceral state. Neoliberalism, austerity, shifting flows of capital, reappropriations of physical infrastructure, discursive imaginaries and the relationships amongst these forces have all played a role in establishing the contemporary US prison system. One of the goals of this work is to illustrate, through examination of carceral artistic performance, some of the impacts and causes of these forces. While this strand of literature excoriating these neoliberal-carceral transformations is acknowledged in the literature review in chapter 2, this dissertation's focus is moreover on agency and resistance conducted in the face of and as response to such deterministic power relations within the disciplinary space of the prison. As such, I employed certain poststructural strategies to conduct this investigation. If one is curious, as I am, about the geographical circumstances that affect engaging with creative expression in carceral space, then the theoretical tools that will be helpful are those that discuss agency and its possible geographies. The framing for this dissertation thus draws upon the theoretical contributions of Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Erving Goffman, as these philosophers and social scientists speak to theories of the self, agency, practice, and localized formations of power. A synthetic exegesis of these concepts proves fruitful in providing a foundation to assist in answering my research questions.

Michel Foucault's work focused largely on state power, categorizing those technologies of power, and considering them in and of themselves as analyzers of power relations (Foucault 2015, p. 12). Foucault outlined how compliant identity is manufactured by state-driven institutions (such as carceral environments) through

individuated discipline, and later argued that these state-constructed “technologies of power” (Foucault 1988; 17-18) eventually gave rise in the western world to a more collective, population-management style of power, or biopolitics (Foucault 2003; Foucault 1988; Lemke 2011). Foucault later began breaking from his analysis of state power and more deeply considering the question of the self (Elden 2017). This theoretical strand of the technologies of the self is that which I am mainly concerned with here.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s Foucault began considering how individuals and groups may exert agency despite arbitrary institutional structures. Foucault states that, overall, his whole project is to sketch a history of how humans in our culture develop knowledge about themselves; these sciences he says are “truth-games” related to specific tactics people use, through the admitted presence of institutions, to understand themselves. In simpler terms, individuals’ and groups’ discursive production and construction of expert knowledge are permitted by power to understand themselves (Foucault 1988; Besley 2005, p. 77). While institutional presence may remain, individuals and groups still may exert power despite state technologies. Foucault describes this mechanism of power as:

“...technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988; 18).

This way of thinking represents a decisive break from what had become Foucault’s dominant paradigm. In acknowledging this, Foucault continues to state that his project has perhaps placed too much emphasis on the technologies of power:

“Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon (them)self, in the technology of the self” (Foucault 1988; 19).

Foucault is arguing that the investigation of the self requires more attention. Foucault’s interest is in understanding the ontologies and epistemologies of occupying yourself with yourself (Foucault 1983; Kelly 2013, p. 512). These technologies of the self are, as Lois McNay paraphrases, the

“certain number of practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion their own identities. Such an idea permits Foucault to explain how individuals may escape the homogenizing tendencies of power in modern society through the assertion of their autonomy” (McNay 1992, p. 3).

At the same time Foucault avoids essentializing the possible realization of the self’s potential as an autonomous actor, for he still contends that the pragmatics of how one constructs oneself continue to be constituted by social context (McNay 1992). This is to suggest that agency may be exerted and performed within and across disciplinary and biopolitical scales, structures, practices, and spaces; however, Foucault pertinently acknowledges that there continues to be a given social structure and order present, which continues to direct and influence why and how individual and group agency is articulated and exerted. The goal, Foucault argues, is to “pay attention to oneself and to the technologies through which those relations have been shaped”, and to then determine how, in practice, we may integrate our behavior into “general strategies” (Foucault 1983), that is, power’s mechanisms. As such, in relation to this social context, one may still actively constitute oneself, as one fashions oneself in response to power (Crewe 2007, p.

265).

On this subject Foucault states that his role, “is to show people that they are much freer than they feel” (Foucault 1988; 10). He goes on to say that “All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made” (1988; p. 10). Unfortunately, this new epistemological direction was cut short by Foucault’s death in June 1984. This concept of the technologies of the self is taken up in greater detail, albeit on his own terms, by Michel de Certeau.

Michel de Certeau, in his text *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), lays out a framework for understanding the self’s agency within the context of the mundane. De Certeau adopts a similar approach to Foucault’s technologies of the self, focusing on individuated agency within and across the social and political spaces and scales of everyday public social life as his unit of analysis. De Certeau accepts Foucault’s analysis of the institutional structures that construct discipline (1984, p. 45-46); however, in the tradition of Foucault’s technologies of the self, de Certeau provides greater elaboration and seeks to go further in attempting to develop a theory of praxis for negotiating technologies of power:

“If it is true that the grid of “discipline” is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what “ways of operating” form the counterpart, on the consumer’s (or the “dominees”?) side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of the

socioeconomic order” (de Certeau 1984, p. xiv).

As we can see, de Certeau’s objective is to discover and evaluate the variety of practices present in everyday (albeit public) life that are harnessed by individuals in order to divert power, space and scale to other means outside of the presupposed utilities as established by technologies of power. These practices, he says, constitute an “art of making” (1984, p. xv) and functionally become “tactics” (p. xix), whereby subaltern users reappropriate space for their own sociocultural ends. These practices are carried out in opposition to “strategies”, which are the calculus of force-relationships enacted by institutional power (p. xix). Tactics are not always planned, and are moreover opportunities that are, temporally speaking “seized on the wing” – these include such mundane tasks as talking, reading, cooking, and moving about the city. These tasks introduce the “plural mobility of goals and desires – an art of manipulating and enjoying” (p. xxii). To engage in tactics is to, therefore, metamorphose space established by institutional power – or the “proper”, de Certeau’s words – to encourage the dominant order in space to function in a more subaltern register, within which individuals both accept and manipulate the prevailing social order (Kallio 2008, p. 286).

De Certeau explains that tactical practices are the operations of the other, arguing that practices can work towards a functional re-claiming of space by and of the other. Furthermore, what is also germane for understanding tactics is the proper’s “triumph of place over time...It is a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place” (p. 36). As de Certeau elaborates: “Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time – to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation...” (p. 38). So, as we can see, in de

Certeau's vision there is an integral relationship between time and space in the performance of tactics. Place is created by power for its motives and interests; however, it is the objective and even the responsibility of tactical actors to be clever in seeking out the key periods and moments for their acquisition of operational opportunities.

Successive moments and the potential intersections of tactical rhythms happening at certain junctures are pertinent to changing the organization of space, which *may* be, in effect, political interventions and opportunities for agency and resistance.

De Certeau is interested in providing a framework for how individuals operate within but also somewhat outside the repressive and dominating structures of modern (public) social life. This is and can be accomplished by tactics which, while they are affected by institutional strategies, seize creative opportunities at appropriate and available temporalities within and across “proper” places to navigate and negotiate subjugation. These *tactical technologies of the self* (emphasis mine) at subaltern scales, i.e., the praxis-oriented harnessing of the mundane as agency and resistance, is the theoretical foundation directing this research. These tactical technologies thus become subaltern *geographies of possibility*, creating and recreating space where tactics are conventionally expected to be expunged from the landscape entirely.

And while de Certeau often discusses tactical behaviors deployed by the individual in public space, as a transgression I seek to conceptualize this in terms of not just public life, but in terms of restricted spaces as well. It is not evident that de Certeau considered the acquisition of tactics in non-public spaces of detention, confinement, and incarceration; yet I argue that this conceptualization is just as applicable – if not even more applicable – in confined spaces. If tactics are meant to be ‘seized on the wing’ as de

Certeau says, then it is their presence which should be made more visible, and as such the non-public – the places which are removed and isolated from the public gaze – demands much more investigation with this theoretical foundation. Additionally, tactics are not just performed by disconnected individuals, as de Certeau theorizes; rather they may be articulated in group settings as well, giving rise to collective potential.

Broadly speaking, social scientists have often stated disagreement with this idea of everyday actions – or these quieter, softer, more dispersed techniques (Vinhagen & Johansson 2013, p. 4) – as not being constitutive of resistance (Hollander & Einwohner 2004, p. 541). Indeed, in the case of geography, some have criticized de Certeau for not being a radical (Dittmer & Bos 2019, p.31-32; Massey 2005, p. 45-46; Pile 1997, p. 15), and being more interested in ‘eluding’ power rather than ‘facing’ it (Thrift 1997, p. 125). However, agency and resistance are not inextricably disconnected from conducting such “miniscule” tactics – there is a certain social quality of organizational sophistication which is deployed and enhanced as individuals and groups access modes of agency and resistance beyond themselves to varying degrees. As such, while there are individual and group identities present in tactical performance, which speaks to formations of agency and/or resistance at their respective scales, there are moments and spaces during and within which the individual self and the group self cannot be separated, wherein we can also acknowledge the discovering, access, and performance of unique geographies of possibility.

As de Certeau seeks to theorize agency and its conceivable constructions, the relationship between space and agency is further considered by Erving Goffman. Goffman’s ideas generally focus on power relations from a top-down perspective, which

is not the main epistemological direction of this dissertation; yet Goffman can help us situate the self and the question of agency within more institutional and carceral settings and assists us in theorizing agency and resistance relative to the geographical circumstances that influence artistic practices in prison environments.

In his landmark text *Asylums*, Goffman coins the classic term ‘total institution’ as the encompassing or ‘total’ character of an institution, which, according to Goffman “is symbolized by the barriers to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant”, by which Goffman refers to an institution’s subsequent limitations of personal thought and physical movement due to its design and architecture (1961, p. 4). Being forced to occupy institutional space, Goffman suggests that “the individual has to engage in activity whose symbolic implications are incompatible with his conception of self” (1961, p. 23). This is to say that the constitution of the individual’s self and self-identity is put into jeopardy in these environments. Moreover, Goffman states that boundaries are violated between individuals and their surroundings, what he terms “the territories of the self” (1961, p. 23), and it is with the suppression of these boundaries wherein the self is profaned and ‘curtailed’ (1961, p. 46). Goffman does acknowledge the possibility of agency in these settings with what he calls “secondary adjustments, that is “practices which do not directly challenge staff management but which allow inmates to obtain disallowed satisfactions or allowed ones by disallowed means” (1961, p. 54). While this may go one, however, he suggests that the activities in which individuals engage under these totalizing structures are ‘contaminating’ – meaning they inherently alienate the self from the self. This, Goffman says, is due to the disciplinary apparatus inhibiting one from insulating oneself from this

suspension of access to identity (1961, p. 23-24, 35).

Goffman conceptualizes the lack of individual autonomy and the intentional disempowerment of individuals confined within these ‘total’ spaces; however, this is in part a problematic articulation. Firstly, while disciplinary, carceral roles perpetuate for individuals in institutional settings, a purely reductionist approach prevents us from seeing alternatives to this notion of ‘contamination’. Such alternatives include the thoughts and activities within certain environmental arrangements that are circumvented by individuals. While individuals are acted upon by power relations, this does not mean that agency in the form of “secondary adjustments” cannot be done consciously or creatively; on the contrary, the individual may respond to power in such a way that the self is productively (even if with restriction) reconstituted for and by the self. As such, ‘curtailment of the self’ is not as clean-cut as Goffman sets it out to be. Individuals in institutional settings may corroborate themselves through discovery and application of practices that, while they do not dramatically transform structural power, may transform their own respective spaces at certain scales. This act of creating such “territories of the self” operates by *altering* the conventional social norms of a room, a cell, a chapel, a stage, a classroom, a converted studio, the presence of the body in any of the spaces, or, just as importantly, by transforming the space of the self’s imagination.

To summarize, Foucault’s technologies of the self, de Certeau’s tactics and Goffman’s territories of the self/secondary adjustments are useful foundations on which to build an analysis of art as a form of prisoner agency and resistance that is shaped by, and that shapes, space under certain conditions and circumstances, within and beyond carceral environments. What is unique about using such a framework of agency and

resistance is that we do not forget about the presence of top-down power relations, while socially constructing space reflective of both the individual and group selves – at more localized scales.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is structured as follows: in chapter 2 I review literature from several different fields and subfields. I firstly examine the geographies of resistance, followed by artistic geographies, arts in prison literature in general, and prison and agency/resistance. The review reveals both a gap in understanding of the nature and significance of localized resistance relative to the arts across and at times beyond carceral space, and the relevance of a Foucauldian and de Certeauian perspective to addressing that gap.

Chapter 3 engages with the theme of the workshop model and how space for artistic tactics is made possible through these geographical circumstances. I argue that the formal workshop model is largely responsible for the facilitation of tactics and emphasize this by showing how artistic objectives compare between TAs and CAs. The purpose of this investigation is to better comprehend the learning goals behind aesthetic developments, what agency different constituents in the carceral art-making scene seek to invoke and contrive, and the geographical circumstances that affect this artistic access. While a certain continuity of objectives is illustrated between both groups, what is revealed is how CAs direct themselves within the expectations and programs of study outlined for them by TAs and programs, as CAs become more interested in devising their own methods and techniques in the process of artistic creation with space opened up by TAs. Through examining this data we are able to see how agency and/or resistance is

invented and constructed through some frame of reference provided to CAs, where carceral space is created by different constituent groups through different aesthetic mechanisms.

Chapter 4 discusses the question of leadership in the accessing and experiencing of artistic expression, and how this social process seeks to create space where space may not formerly exist. This discussion assists us in seeing how geographical circumstances are negotiated when CAs find opportunities both temporally and spatially in prison to take the lead in putting together a piece in a given artistic medium. Leadership in this context is conceptualized within the context of group leadership as well as the leadership of the self. This discussion assists us in investigating how certain individual CAs navigate geographical circumstances to reclaim space or shift space's meaning in a group setting at certain moments, and how and why they choose *those* moments to work through certain geographical restrictions, turning them into creative opportunities.

Chapter 5 introduces the presence of what I refer to as *spectacle* in the manifestation of creative expressions in carceral space. Spectacle is defined here as how CAs wish to be seen artistically by TAs, program directors, the public, others within the prison population, as well as how CAs see themselves in prison as aesthetic individuals and as members of wider CA groups. This chapter investigates the role of the audience, and how CAs consider how their work is received and consumed by others in prison. Here I illustrate how CAs often desire to use and construct a spectacle of themselves with which others in prison can connect through presentation of theater, music and visual arts. These attempts to construct a certain subjective spectacle may operate within both individual and group contexts. I also discuss here that, depending on the geographical

circumstances, the ways in which CAs engage with spectacle may be defined either as agency or resistance depending upon what CAs are trying to express with their work.

Chapter 6 focuses on the geographical circumstances that influence and direct CAs who are no longer in prison. Here I investigate how and why CAs continue to create artistic work after returning home, and why certain former CAs do not. When geographical circumstances change dramatically for CAs after leaving prison environments, many CAs continue to shape space at home or through an alumni community of CAs. While many are interested in participating after they go home to maintain community, I also discuss how CAs engage in post-carceral artistic endeavors to make sense of their carceral past. I also discuss the reasons as to why some CAs do not end up doing this or are no longer interested in continuing their craft, and the geographical circumstances affecting this.

The concluding chapter 7 provides a summative overview of how certain geographical circumstances give rise to agency and/or resistance in the performance of creative expression in and across carceral space. I discuss what the study reveals about how and why the geographically constrained possibilities for agency and resistance affect how CAs produce creative aesthetics in and beyond prison environments, and why these questions and the story of this phenomena deserve attention. I conclude here by suggesting that the difference between agency and resistance within the arts in prison is defined by CAs' subject imaginations of themselves relative to their aesthetic practice, that is how a CA or CAs plural will interpret the motivations behind what creative expressions they produce and why. Whereas agency is defined by CAs conceptualizing their practices as more of a coping strategy, resistance is defined more by CAs actively

believing that the arts are vehicles to manufacture social commentary through their respective artistic mediums and, in doing so, potentially critiquing the carceral structures that define CAs' everyday carceral (and post-carceral) lives. We are also reminded that resistance occurs through subtleties, and if we are indeed the CAs' audience, then we have a certain social responsibility to consume others' creative expressions effectively. This may matter to some CAs more than others, but in a system where bodies become predatorily sequestered by power into and within spaces of confinement, recognizing these realities told through art is necessary for acquiring a deeper clarity about institutional structures that continue to damage certain groups and individuals.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

As I outlined in the previous chapter, Foucault's technologies of the self, de Certeau's tactics as well as Goffman's notion of the territories of the self are useful theoretical foundations from which to build an analysis of art as a form of prisoner agency and resistance within and beyond carceral space. As such, in this chapter I review relevant literature that helps inform my research questions and general research epistemology. I review literature that directly speaks to the geographies of resistance, investigations from other disciplines that have engaged with the arts in carceral settings, and literature directly speaking to agency and resistance in prison settings. In doing this we are able to see that there is a literature relating to the context of arts and resistance within and beyond carceral space, which has not yet been evaluated in terms of tactical practices, and that a synthesis of Foucault, de Certeau and Goffman can help direct this investigation.

Geographies of Resistance

The theme of resistance was first directly approached by geographers in the late 1990s. Resistance was conceived with broad emphasis as a social formation organized to contest power, and that these two respective social formations were scalarly opposed. Pile and Keith argue that "...resistance becomes a mode through which the symptoms of different power relations are diagnosed, and ways are sought to get around them, or live through them, or change them" (1997, p. 3). In other words, resistant geographies are interested in altering social relations and changing space. Paul Routledge further states that resistance is any "action" that strives to "challenge, change, or retain particular

circumstances relating to societal relations, processes and/or institutions” (Routledge 1997, p. 69). According to Routledge, these geographies of resistance may be conceptualized as involving everyday practices of social reproduction (2017), as well as practices of symbolic performance, social networks, physical settings, or bodily processes (1997).

Geographic literature that has empirically examined resistance has often focused on themes of resistance from a place-based perspective. In particular, Michael Watts emphasizes the relationships between the scale of the mobilization of state violence against ethnic groups in Nigeria, paying particular interest to how certain ethnic groups constructed local communities by creating new religious identities in opposition to the Nigerian Federation (1997, p. 37). Paul Routledge discusses how space and power have been contested through the organization of underground movements in Nepal’s political revolution, notably through temporal and spatial movements in city streets in Kathmandu and the publishing of underground media (1997, p. 68). Routledge also investigates discursive resistance – defined by slogans, songs, poems, and peasant testimonials – against neoliberal energy development in northern India (2003, p. 263-64), as well as how urban residents organize based on their “defensive identities” against tourism development in Goa (2001, p. 229). For Routledge, cultural attachment to place is a significant factor affecting and influencing how and why certain resistance measures are organized and articulated (1994, p. 575). Additionally, Jane M. Jacobs analyzes the construction of ‘Aboriginal’ artistically arranged walking trails in the city of Melbourne and how this discursive “reconciliation” produces refusals and resistances by non-Aboriginals (1997, p. 205). The key in this resistant geographies literature is an emphasis

on how geographies of resistance emerge and operate as very direct social and political contestations against power and the state. Thus, within the basis of discourse, resistance in geography has typically been defined as being a *radical response* to political or economic unevenness (Routledge 2017, p. 15), thus often concerned with using discursive means in countering material inequalities or violence in an effort to alter the norms and practices of the social order.

With this research I aim to go in a slightly different direction than this theorization, as I am particularly interested in how space is reclaimed and how social relations are contested and articulated by subaltern groups by perhaps ‘softer’ means. Nigel Thrift argues that certain enactments, such as dance, do not constitute resistance because dance’s non-representational embodiment provides us with more of a facade of resistance; according to Thrift, this does not qualify as resistance because it only ‘eludes’ power and does not ‘face’ it (1997, p. 150); however, I believe that this analysis is not entirely correct. This category of operations may not fall into the radical camp as geographers have predominantly theorized, at least in terms of ‘action’ in the street like Routledge and others define it, as with the destruction and replacement of the social order as its goal. I employ a slightly different epistemology, more akin to Gillian Rose’s notion that art can function as radical cultural politics (1997, p. 184), in that art as resistance is often a performance that is reflexive – either for oneself or for others in relation to the self. This is to say that the concerted social construction of discourses and practices that deflect power and step aside from it do indeed constitute resistance. Interestingly, Jacobs’ work on urban murals – indeed, an artistic example – is one such uncommon example in this strand of literature of how resistance functions in softer ways; resistance occurs, she

says, as a response to a history of colonial violence (1997, p. 205). For Jacobs, these murals are historically and geographically produced by both discursive and material means, yet this is a soft-power response to this history, and in real time is meant to operate nonrepresentationally with a variety of discursive effects for the art's public audience (p. 205).

Black and Queer Geographies of Agency and Resistance

Recent emerging fields within geography have more directly applied these notions of agency and resistance that are not oriented purely towards the radical and structural transformation of space. Where this has been applied as of late has notably been in the subfields of Black and Queer geographies. Allen et al (2009) emphasize that black geographies seek to actively highlight black agency in the production of space through recognizing “black geographic visions of society” (p. 1002), thus the imagination of possibility is germane to agency. Further theoretical focus on agency and resistance in this subfield can be traced to Katherine McKittrick in her work *Demonic Grounds* (2006), where she explains that while human hierarchies are unjustly organized in place, the rules governing these power relations can change. McKittrick specifically discusses black women's geographies as having to function in opposition to race, class, and gender, but because of their unique positionality black women are able to derive a sense of place that can push back against these relations and create agency (p. xii; Bledsoe 2013, p. 51; Mahtani 2014, p. 361). Bledsoe (2017) also adopts these ideas in discussing marronage in the United States and Brazil as sites where maroon communities historically (have) functioned in a constant state of warfare to construct to rebuild communities safe from chattel slavery. As Bledsoe tells us, these community spaces incorporated quotidian acts

which constituted everyday resistance, as these groups in these locations sought to establish security through their survival (2017). As Bailey and Shabazz further state, resistance is and should be acknowledged as acts of black struggle, where sheer survival in an everyday, mundane sense is a component of resistance. These authors suggest that “alternative spatial landscapes” (2013, p. 449) are created when confronted by and in navigating marginalization through quotidian acts as simple as social performances of community, desire, love, support, and pleasure (2013). This perspective is adopted by bell hooks, who argues that the “homeplace”, or the domestic domain, is a site of resistance because it permits greater choice of gender and sexual roles for black people, rather than having those roles assigned in more public environments where one has less control² (1999).

Case studies in Black geographies have further applied these conceptualizations of mundane or oppositional acts as agency and resistance. Daché et al identify certain neighborhoods and city districts in and around Ferguson, Missouri that blur the binary between urban and suburban where sites of protest and demonstration have occurred, which they define as sites of black resistant geography. The authors argue that these sites are resistant because of what they symbolically represent and because of how they are historically memorialized (2022). Additionally, Erica Williams discusses the sex work industry in Salvador, Brazil regarding how urban governance excludes and racializes sex workers. As Williams suggests, black sex workers actively reclaim their agency by refusing to relinquish their right to public space (2013). McGlotten (2014) and Livermon

² This has been criticized as being an incomplete analysis, in that the homeplace can simultaneously work to maintain and reconstitute heteropatriarchal arrangements of gender and sexuality (see Bailey and Shabazz 2013).

(2014) make similar investigations regarding the reclaiming of public space through sex work in Austin, Texas, and the queer reclamation of nightlife in post-apartheid South Africa, respectively. These authors contextualize these practices as social formations of black agency as these groups attempt to produce and enable new freedoms and possibilities in urban space (Livermon 2014; McGlotten 2014). In an examination of the claiming of black queer space in Toronto, Rosenberg shows how homeless Black queer and trans youth counter whiteness and anti-black racism in their neighborhoods (2021). Rosenberg considers these encounters as examples of everyday resistance, where black queer youth engage in mundane practices such as contending for affirmation in parades, dance parties, and through establishing memory through photographing meaningful places (2021, p. 1403, 1406).

Thus, drawing on black and queer geographies, I seek to view artistic geographies in carceral space as tactics and technologies that incorporate these softer, more micro-scale everyday practices and imaginaries. These tactics provide temporal and spatial accessibility for enacting subaltern power in a different register, one that permits geographies of *possibility* – drawing further on black geographies of agency and resistance – that can operate within the institutional power relations of confinement in an everyday framework. The arts have a certain role in creating an agentic or resistant presence in space, and I believe they are a tactic that should be conceptualized in this manner. As such, below I review the geographies of art literature to demonstrate how and where this synthesis can further be made.

Artistic Geographies

Within the field of geography, there has been engagement with the theme of art in

different subfields, with the concentrations being within urban and cultural geography. In terms of specific artistic themes, the emphasis has focused on music and visual art within these subfields, as well the wide-encompassing subfield of street art and graffiti in urban environments. Contrary to much of the geographies of resistance literature, this body of work considers art to be a radical mode of operation in space.

In review of artistic geographies, Hawkins (2013) suggests that art and politics are relational, and that geographers need to appreciate how art builds community and place, and how it contributes to radical politics. Art must also be seen within the complex experience of the body as a whole, with reference to elements of geopoetics such as sensory experience, visual representation, and imagery of the body (p. 63). Hawkins encourages us to examine creative geographies that destabilize any sense of landscape as timeless, fixed and static. Overall, she argues, we need more disciplinary nuances and more acceptance of interdisciplinarity to understand art's relation to geography (p. 53, 55). In consideration of the context of resistance here, the notion of creative geographies as implicitly involving the process of becoming and transformation is essential for contextualizing how resistance develops and operates in space.

Wood and Duffy (2007) explore the ways in which engagement with music makes place. They argue that music has nonrepresentational, creative, evanescent qualities as components of its practice. In their view, music functions as a becoming, that is, music as creativity being made and always in the process of making. In effect they acknowledge that power relations can be involved in the organization and production of music in space, encouraging us to consider how musical space is created and managed. In their words, "...musicking is an emotional process that builds identities, creates spaces of

community and belonging, and has the potential to challenge paradigms and empower agency" (885). Thus, certain artistic mediums have a quality of social and collective association in the process of their manifestation and can occur within a subaltern context.

Zebracki (2012) argues that we must ask how much public engagement exists in the distribution and performance of art in public space. Regarding architecture and design, Zebracki suggests that more focus is needed here on micro-scale public artistic interventions and participation within urban social life. Additionally, relative to art in urban space, Cassie Donish (2012) examines creative geographies as a mode of navigating gentrification in San Francisco's mission district, specifically discussing how art can function as a method of empowerment to individuals and groups in mitigating the process of gentrification of San Francisco's mission district.

Zebracki and Palmer (2018) elaborate upon these themes, articulating that there should be greater evaluation of how the public is involved in the production of that artistic urban landscape. Their essential question concerns in what ways artwork and space are mutually constituted. The authors consider how much "co-production" occurs, how active creators/engagers place both thought and labor into the conception, manufacturing, or execution of public artwork. Co-production, as they call it, is ontologically multifaceted on social, spatial, and material grounds (2018, p. 3). Of critical consideration for them is how co-productive art can trigger social changes that are then brought to (urban) environments and communities. They argue that it is useful to examine intersections of (public) art, race, and class to interrogate this question, and that ethnographic epistemologies can promote understanding of the co-production of art in public space.

To this end, there is a substantial literature (which I sample here with these salient examples) cutting across the fields of geography, architecture and urban studies that speaks to the role and presence of street art and graffiti in urban environments. These discussions frequently pertain to how the social production of street art and its visual illustrations function as agency for urban residents, as a method of voicing their presence in space, claiming territory, and asserting belonging. Schacter argues that urban street images are defined and advanced by the fact that graffiti has performative elements (2008, p. 41), and it is the organic character of this particular artistic medium itself which enables and encourages agency (p. 43). Schacter suggests that this art form is a product of antagonisms in the city over spatial belonging, symbolic territoriality, and a right to the city. Thus, street art inherently is a form of agency because its discourses and practices are bound up in conflict (p. 38).

In recognizing this perspective with several of the many case studies that have adopted these frameworks, Klein (2016) contextualizes mural art in Barcelona and Montevideo as constructing cities as places of resistance due to how space becomes marked and delineated by creative human activity. For Klein, these symbolic, sociohistorical traces are a product of local, group participation, being born out of urban conflicts (p. 9, 13). Additionally, street art may engage with topics pertaining to consciousness of social justice by inscribing the representation of ideas upon the urban landscape (Ulmer 2017). For example, through photographic cartography Ulmer contextualizes art placed by urban residents in doorways, windows, lampposts, alleys, and dumpsters in east Detroit as visual protests against unsuccessful urban renewal policies in the city (p. 498-499). Additionally, Tunic (2017) examines the role of street

art in Belgrade, Serbia in terms of its potential role in encouraging conversations about environmental issues. By considering the artists' intentions, Tunic asks as to consider whether these engagements illustrating animal and plant motifs can contribute to ecological awareness, or if they operate more as aesthetic statements (p. 75).

While much of this work understands street art as a mode of agency relative to symbolic expression and territorial acquisition, other work in these subfields examines how power can use art against urban communities. Burbeck (2021) explains how the public construction of public murals becomes a cause of gentrification in Denver, CO. Burbeck outlines how ethnic Chicana/o presence and authenticity is replaced by different visual aesthetics in the city, which erases and displaces working-class people of color (p. 5). In this vein Campos and Sequeira also discuss the “touristification” of public art in Lisbon, Portugal (2020), qualitatively analyzing documented commitments by bureaucratic governance for supporting street art projects to promote a tourist image (p. 185). Schacter (2014) comments on this phenomenon as well, discussing how across the urban-cultural landscape art has been commandeered by the Creative City (p. 162), shedding public urban art of any radicality or discursively resistant capabilities (p. 162-163). Similarly, Andron (2018) investigates urban tours of publicly commissioned street art in London, UK as a strategy of hiding undisclosed local expression. Andron argues that this functions as a cultural product of the creative city, a branding strategy that encourages tourists and effectively enables gentrification and minimizes non-publicly commissioned art (p. 1047).

As we can see, there is a call to examine artistic geographies in terms of their localized-scale engagement and impact. While it has been observed that most urban art

has been appropriated by and for the interests of governance and capital in the urban realm, we see other examples of where the subaltern may function as participants in and producers of art in and across space. Indeed, the street art literature contextualizes the idea of the local as being both a demographic and an activity, i.e., those actors working and creating (visual) aesthetics to represent space but striving – and at times struggling – to shape space in doing so. While the emphasis in much of this literature is on urban landscapes, I suggest that these agentic epistemologies – that is, the approaches individuals and groups use to assert their own social or creative capabilities – may be extended to carceral landscapes as well. As such, I adopt this idea of the local here in considering resistance, a form of navigating power which happens at the localized scale of CAs in prison environments. The question of art’s audience is also considered in this subfield, as this literature considers the extent(s) to which certain discourses exist that street art hopes to represent and communicate when the public views and visually consumes art in the urban environment. As we can see – where creative agency *does* happen – some street art hopes to offer ideas and be critical voices on many societal inequalities, while other artists are more interested in aesthetic engagement on their own personal terms. Thus, the question of the significance of the self in comparison to the group in the consumption of art is problematized, where the desired interpretive importance of this art varies by artist and artistic demographic.

Arts in Prison

The prison literature outside of geography across the social sciences is understandably substantial. Here I provide a review of the relevant prison art literature that informs this research. There is a gap in this literature relative to seeing art as an art as

an intervention of agency and resistance, which this research in part seeks to fill.

At a certain level, prison art discussion originates within the criminological literature. Studies in this vein fall into the so-called ‘evidence-based’ genre, in which statistical and quantitative analyses are drawn largely to promote and justify certain programs (Gardner 2020: 199) in order to gain greater public credibility and to access greater funding in individual states. These discussions focus upon the effects of incarcerated persons’ artistic participation based on emotions, self-esteem, self-confidence, communication and social skills of incarcerated people, and the validity of establishing these as a component of prison infrastructure (Wilson et al 2008). Often considered to be a pioneering study is Brewster’s cost-benefit analysis of arts programs in California prisons, and his subsequent follow-up quantitative studies on arts’ impact on prisoner behavior (1983; 2014). Similarly, Heard et al (2013) examine how social support networks were established through the organization of and participation in prison theater in Queensland, Australia. Taking a similar approach, Barak and Stebbins (2017) discuss “creative arts therapies”, and how prisoners in Illinois construct dialogues through their art with “witness” groups with whom they wish to communicate a message through their work. The authors explain how lack of access to these witness groups can limit the effectiveness of creative arts therapies (p. 55). Invoking similar epistemologies, Moller investigates how theater participation at Sing Sing prison results in less frequent behavioral infractions by prisoners during and after drama involvement (2011, p. 21).

In more qualitative review, Forte (2008) and Alexander (2010) both discuss the Michigan Creative Arts Project, stating how positive social relationships are built between prisoners and prison officials, and between prisoners themselves through theater

programs. Elsila (1998) follows a similar epistemology, emphasizing the appropriate pedagogy for engaging prisoners with music, also in Michigan. Abrahams et al (2012) demonstrate how musical instruction is an outlet for the prisoners to express themselves and to be in touch with their innate creativity, encouraging pride in artistry (p. 70). Lucas (2013) discusses the act of doing creative writing and music in a North Carolina women's prison, and how women in this facility build community by moving away from the "confessional" element of describing their incarceration in their creativity and focusing more on building community (p. 136), a format of arts programming in prisons that can mediate the stigma of imprisonment on incarcerated artists. Cohen and Padilofsky (2013) investigate the history, purposes, benefits, challenges, and outcomes of collaborations between the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Fabulous Females program of Storycatchers Theatre, an organization that has established connections with a women's facility in Warrenville, Illinois. The authors explain how the Storycatchers Theater program encourages young incarcerated women to share their personal stories and put them into musical form to develop a feeling of empowerment (p. 165).

A further strand of literature is that of the historical and ethnomusicological. Dougan (1999) tells the history of the Prisonaires, a prison singing group formed at Tennessee State Penitentiary in the early 1950s who recorded the hit record "Just Walkin' in the Rain" for Sam Phillips at Sun Records in Memphis. Dougan contextualizes this phenomenon of music-making as a form of survival and political resistance, enabled by access to this form of cultural representation (p. 454). Shankar (2013) provides a historical, ethnomusicological analysis of women's blues music at Parchman Farm prison in the Mississippi Delta in the 1930s, explaining that emphasis is too often placed on

male blues and the experience it unfolds, but not the female carceral experience, which uses the blues to express gendered carceral inequalities (p. 183). Similarly, folklorist and archivist Alan Lomax provides an ethnographic overview of how segregation and debt peonage spawned the birth of blues music, beginning in southern agricultural prisons in the early to mid-20th century, and how the physical act of labor in part manufactured rhythm as a mode of resistance against the racial state in the southern US (1993). Additionally, while he does not focus purely on carceral contexts, Clyde Woods takes these topics further in conceptualizing the vernacular of expression present in blues music in the Mississippi Delta region that has operated as a theory of social and economic change, or the “blues epistemology” (1998, p. 20). In Woods’ view, the blues functions as a discursive and creative approach because it embodies a certain formation of agency that critiques plantation culture and its legacy of socioeconomic disenfranchisement for the Black population in the Delta (p. 20).

Much of this literature is very top-down, however, and aims to illustrate structures that lead to artistic responses. Yet while this may be true, the question of resistance is not overtly discussed. Interestingly, however, Buzz Alexander does suggest that the arts can and should function as practices of resistance against the prison-industrial complex (2010, p. 151). This is a *potentially* radical statement, although Alexander does not deeply tease out the exact intricacies of how this the arts might be organized, coordinates and structured within such a framework. As we will see below, this greater question is further informed by literature that directly speaks to art in conjunction with the meaning of prisoner agency and resistance and how these acts are imagined, conjured, and performed.

Prisoner Arts + Agency & Prison Resistance

While arts-in-prison literature only occasionally states its relevance for conceptualizing agency, others have engaged with these themes overtly. Here I seek to epistemologically follow Goffman's perspective on how prisoners put distance between themselves and the institution to create a certain margin of freedom (1961, p. 189), where the prison is not a pure and sole monolith in space and time (Jewkes 2013, p. 127). This element of performed agency is notable across disciplines.

In this vein, Trounstein (2007; 2008) contextualizes the Shakespeare Behind Bars program as representing an opportunity for prisoners to express power through their own vernacular in analyzing character language. She states that "Institutions resist change, but despite that, people have power", focusing on how prisoners construct their own agency personally in a group setting (2008: 677). Focusing on resistance and prison arts, Gauntlett discusses how certain self-crafted instruments were used for accompanying 'rebetika' songs in Greek prisons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which incorporated the anti-authoritarian spirit of musical genre (2012, p.159). Also, regarding music, Mary Cohen evaluates the formation and practice of prison choirs in the US, and as an opportunity for prisoners to change public perceptions about incarcerated people (2012, p. 228). Similarly, McWatters discusses how prison is actively shaped and represented by prisoners through poetry and creative writing (2013, p. 199). Johnson also contextualizes the agentic possibilities of creative writing as a tactic of reclaiming autonomy and overcoming a sense of powerlessness (2012, p. 168). Additionally, focusing more on creative tactics as opposed to formal art, Dardel defines prisoner agency and resistance as conducted through modes of alternative communication and

avoiding mandatory clothing within the oppressiveness of the Colombia prison system (2013, p. 185). Marek invokes a related outlook in examining cookbooks written by incarcerated persons, which are opportunities for incarcerated people to resist the state by using scarce resources (2022, p. 82). In looking at artistic designs, photographs, and types of food articulated in recipes written by incarcerated food writers, Marek says that these individuals engage in resistance through this form of “culinary discourse” (p. 82, 98).

Other prison resistance literature that has a less artistic focus engages a more material, action-oriented approach, akin to the epistemologies of the geographies of resistance. Conlon evaluates how migrant detainees’ hunger strikes in the Republic of Ireland take control of their bodies, seeking to claim rights and simultaneously restore ontological security (2013, p. 135-36). On a related subject, Morse analyzes the social organization of hunger strike resistance at the prison at the Guantánamo Bay naval station and in the California prison system, highlighting how unique cultural hierarchies and power relations are implicit in social movement organization (2016). Norman (2017) also investigates resistance in terms of embodied physicalities, specifically relative to the function of sports as they function as a mode of resistance in carceral space within the Canadian prison system. Norman suggests that while prison administrations utilize sports as a strategy of control, incarcerated people adopt sports as a form of resistance and subversion through their own imaginations and practices (p. 600, 605).

Perhaps most akin to the themes and epistemologies that this dissertation employs is the work of The ACE Steering Committee (2020), Nicole Fleetwood (2020) and Ben Harbert (2013). Harbert investigates singing in women’s prisons in Louisiana, and how this is often conducted informally due to lack of investment in music programming.

Harbert argues that these female prisoners navigate musical scarcity by using mostly their own vocal abilities due to a lack of other musical materials (p. 218-219). While not a geographical study per se, Harbert's investigation is an examination of how certain geographical circumstances affect artistic creativity, and how such limitations in effect produce social and cultural space through more embodied musical-vocal means (p. 232-233). Additionally, Fleetwood takes a deep dive in examining the production of (predominantly visual and fine) art in prison in the United States. Fleetwood's discussion is significantly spatial, acknowledging what she defines as "penal matter, penal space and penal time" as the chief factors affecting aesthetic creativity (p. 25). Using analytical approaches, Fleetwood breaks down the meaning of prisoners' visual pieces and the significance these prisoners seek to communicate with their work, such as how color in painting and abstract design of fine art symbolizes power relations (p. 83). Fleetwood also recognizes artists who take random physical materials from around the prison to build something, which often depends on clandestine acquisition (p. 59-60). Of the many pieces and artists that she investigates, she pays attention to prisoners' artistic influences, whether they are drawn from carceral social life, prison infrastructure, lived experience or artistic exposure prior to incarceration.

The ACE Steering Committee³ (2020) examines the role of the cell as a "palimpsest", where prisoners as cell occupants enact concerted practices to claim their cells as their space in an imbalanced power relationship. In this sense, these authors contextualize the cell as a constantly evolving space of domestication, where incarcerated individuals invent certain forms of agency to seek autonomy within their cells. The

³ This is one professor and a group of incarcerated individuals in Oregon who authored this piece together.

authors discuss how the arrangement of personal items in the cell – such as papers, files or even artwork (155) – becomes an expression of self and helps to construct a sense of home and belonging. This is an important element of agency, as prisoners are disparately connected to traditional domestic and public life (150-151). And while these micro-spaces in the prison are confining, they also provide a sense of emotional safety, where one can sequester oneself away from others and guards, spatially speaking, providing a feeling of autonomy and security (152-153). Other practices include cell cooking, either having access to microwaves in a day room, or using hot water in the cell (156), another tactic of domestication. Thus, agency and intentionality coincide within the practices of personal domestication in carceral space, which we can further conceptualize as forms of everyday resistance.

As we can see, within literature on prisoner arts + agency, some scholars explicate that agency functions within a social movement register, whereas others consider agency to be enveloped within softer creative means, where there is observable participation in group aesthetics. In considering agency and resistance, I suggest that we contextualize these creative, social formulations through a variety of what we might call *informal* mechanisms, where individuals in carceral space are organic in their agentic endeavors, taking advantage of the microgeographies of spare materials, random acoustics, and scarce living space. This may merge with something more *formal*, the geographical circumstances embedded in carceral power structures that permit or allow access to creative workspaces, provide materials, or facilitate workshops or artistic instruction. In combining these perspectives, we can consider agency and resistance in prison as a mix of everyday tactics that function as a contestation of institutional power.

Personal Geographies

Where agency and resistance become differentiated is slightly more complex. I suggest that any creative discourse or practice is a manifestation of agency; as I emphasize in chapter 1, where this qualitatively differs from resistance is when creative expression is performed with or as stated overt social commentary. The performance of creative expression in space as either agency or resistance may occur at the same or different social scales; this is to say that art that occurs at the scale of the individual as opposed to the group are not mutually exclusive, and resistance can be located in any of these places. As such, I review the (brief) geographic literature on personal geographies, as it is within and through personal geographies that artistic geographies are conducted. While this strand of literature to date is rather limited in scope and does not always explicitly outline or define its own terminology, it provides us with a basis to further consider how artistic production and performance occurs discursively and pragmatically with nuanced potential for agency and resistance.

Davidson and Biondi (2004a) as well as Davidson and Milligan (2004b) frame personal geographies as the embodied emotional geographies that shape and are shaped by our interactions with people, places, and power (2004a; 2004b). More specifically, in his reading of war letters from military movements, Cartwright (2007) invokes the term personal geographies to emphasize the lived experiences of individuals moving into battle and their unique reflections of conflict. Cartwright also discusses data recorded through mobile mapping of a person's own individual movements within and across space, and their time spent in different locations, focusing on the phenomenological nuances of why people record their own location data where they do. Through this examination Cartwright emphasizes an individual's personal abilities and challenges in

negotiating space (2007, p. 457).

Catling (2005) is less descriptive and engages more with the relationship between agency and personal geographies, discussing children's personal geographies as the translocations children have in moving about from home to school to playground. Catling emphasizes how these teaching and learning sites are experiential examples of how student movements in everyday life can be discussed as geographic education in school, i.e., the geographies that the children experience themselves (2005, p. 326). Kitchen (2010) also discusses personal geographies as having an educational context in suggesting that, pedagogically, video cameras would be a useful strategy of helping students learn about their own personal geographies, allowing us to recognize how personal geographies are unique and individuated (p. 110).

Regarding the more embodied, internalized nature of personal geographies, Willis et al examine how violence, trauma, and sexual abuse as experienced by women impact their personal geographies on a temporal scale (2016). For these authors, these women's personal geographies are defined by their struggle to remain in the same workplace and maintain social partnerships in the space of the home. In thinking through these examples as personal geographies shows us how the individual's efforts to remain in one place, work, or home, is a geographical accomplishment, both externally and internally (p. 210). Valentine also examines the empirical context of sexual harassment in terms of personal geographies, relative to how one must navigate persona, professional and public space under threats of violations of safety (1998).

Milligan utilizes a similar conceptualization of the emotional in her discussion of the rise of residential homecare of family members due to neoliberal restructuring in the

UK (2000). With fewer institutional and state-based supports available in providing medical care, Milligan argues that the onus on family members to fill the absence of appropriate support systems has emotional implications for the personal geographies of informal caregivers, in terms of loss of income, personal time and social freedoms (p. 51). Ciobanu et al further discuss the personal geographies of immobility in space through their discussion of Romanian older migrants in Switzerland, deciding to return or not return following the collapse of the Soviet Union (2020). The authors define the term as capturing the complex variety of (im)mobilities, imagined/symbolic mobilities, shifting outlooks on home and social life, and place-based attachment/detachment to and from their homeland in deciding to return to Romania or remain in Switzerland (p. 11).

As a more contemporary example, Gallagher et al (2020) ethnographically investigate youth drama students in Toronto by asking what people “are discovering with their personal geographies...and who they are in those sites” (p. 640). Gallagher et al are interested in how, in transitioning to doing drama virtually during COVID-19, these drama students develop their dramatic aesthetics as a function of their everyday being in the world a la their senses, experiences and expressions as a response to the global pandemic, as they focus on navigating an impractical set of socio-spatial circumstances (p. 640). Similarly, Davidson and Smith (2009) evaluate published autobiographical accounts of individuals with ASD, and through these accounts contextualize these individuals’ emotional relation to nature and place as personal geographies, specifically defining personal geographies as “...rich, rewarding, meaningful relationships with the wider more than human world”, which allows this demographic to be social at that level (p. 899).

While this is the extent to which personal geographies have been invoked, and despite its lack of a deep elaboration in its own terminological applications to date, geographers have used personal geographies to illustrate how individuals may become directed to feel or to act based on outside structures, technologies of power, and external apparatuses beyond the immediate control of the individual. These emotional responses are seen as connected to some practical response, where individuals and groups, in consideration of their phenomenological contexts and lived experiences, seek out agency in space. Thus, the presence of personal geographies inherently invites tactics, and an individual or group's interest in discovering tactical actions, whether they be imagined or material, becomes essential to navigating power and its effects.

Summation

As we can see, conceptualizations between art and space are epistemologically oriented around the art-geography nexus. Power operates on individuals and groups, and as such art is created as a medium of translation of the self with which power and its operations in space *become contested*. It is the process of artistic production which seeks to at least circumvent and *potentially* problematize, question, and critique power. Within the localized scales of personal artistic geographies in carceral environments, the scales of the group and the individual invoke agency and resistance as *geographies of possibility*, asserting some semblance of control over the limits that presented by geographical circumstances.

Synthetically, I consider CAs as conductors of these contestations and tactics, claiming the creative process and space simultaneously, where both practice and space are inextricable and depend upon one another. This is to emphasize that tactics of agency and resistance become manifested within the carceral-artistic continuum, as efforts to

create space where space does not exist, to work around and through geographical circumstances, but also to momentarily overcome and sway them. Art may function as a vehicle for these purposes, occurring within and beyond carceral space for CAs. We therefore must think of art as an evolving and narrative mode, a technique of the self that carceral populations utilize for themselves.

Where resistance is concerned relative to carceral arts, this may be operationalized either *directly*, when CAs conduct their artistic practice as an expression of imagination and purpose with the intent to generate a form of critique, subversion, or social commentary. Agency may occur more *indirectly*, when efforts are made to claim and access space, but may operate more as a coping mechanism, without any necessary critical *intentionality* behind these artistic endeavors. That being said, the social constructs of resistance and agency in and beyond carceral space are not limited to group or individual scales. Agency can manifest at the scale of the group, and resistance may occur within the personal geographies of the individual. Within the empirical chapters that follow, I explicate how and why agency and resistance, respectively, as tactics and techniques of the self, are performed in and beyond carceral environments by CAs. I examine this in terms of how these are enacted through workshop space, leadership responsibilities, the role of spectacle, and how formerly incarcerated CAs imagine and perform artistic tactics. I pay close attention to the nuances, technicalities, practices, and conditions which lead to agency and resistance in the performance of art in these spaces. Through this approach I seek to reveal the causes and effects of the geographical circumstances that produce and use art as tactics in circumventing and/or challenging the social order of incarceration.

CHAPTER III

ARTISTIC INCEPTION, DISCOVERY, AND OBJECTIVES IN CARCERAL SPACE: CARCERAL ARTISTS, TEACHING ARTISTS, AND PROGRAMS

Facilitation of the Arts

CAs and TAs have both similar and dissimilar objectives regarding experiential artistic engagement in prison space, yet as I learned from my interviews and observations, it is in part through the TAs' facilitation that CAs devise and construct tactics – that is, the ability and practice of exerting agency (de Certeau 1984, p. xix) – through their own participation. Such tactics, either as agency and/or resistance, are initially affected by geographical circumstances pertaining to the question of access – that is, the spatial arrangements and circumstances that affect the possibilities of creative expression for CAs – which are constructed by numerous factors. Geographical access in the conduct and performance of the arts in carceral space is of course materially a function of top-down power structures. This is to say that prison authorities' management of CAs in no small way establishes geographical circumstances that CAs must navigate. Such limitations include permission for movement throughout the prison (i.e., 'call-outs'); subsequent prison regulations in different areas of a given facility, such as limits on when one can be in school buildings, classrooms, the chapel – what we might call *micro-artistic spaces* – and additional permissions for social contact with TAs and arts programs at the times when and where workshops and activities occur. Negotiating these spatial factors in carceral space is naturally challenging (Bosworth 1996) for many CAs whose engagement with the arts is often precarious in terms of access and inclusion. As the data from my interviews and observations demonstrate, performance of aesthetic agency and/or resistance is in part driven by the ways in which access is navigated at this

level; beyond this however, CAs discover their own attraction to art forms most frequently through how TAs' objectives and goals make artistic space available to CAs. With some unique exceptions, this discursive frame of reference produced by TAs implicitly constructs the possibilities of CAs' performances of agency and/or resistance.

In conducting interviews and observations with CAs, TAs and program directors, I observed that most CAs develop their creativity through facilitation led by professional artists that come into prison spaces from the outside. As such, an art programs' leadership and subsequent artistic instruction provided to CAs is most often responsible for facilitating the aesthetic agency that CAs develop, hone and very frequently master. This is due to several factors. Firstly, as my interviews and observations revealed, most CAs who engage in the diverse fields of visual art, creative writing, drama/theater and music have rarely participated in such endeavors prior to becoming incarcerated and are thus drawn towards the lived experience of aesthetic inclusion, that is, the interest and desire to be socially involved in an art program. Secondly, the presence of time combined with scarcity of social, cultural, and material space in a CAs' living and working environment also contributes to how an art program's approaches and instruction facilitates creative agency. I explain this further below.

Carceral Artists & Aesthetic Discovery

CAs frequently report that they hardly ever had any artistic engagement as younger people when they were in school, nor did they have much exposure to any similar cultural pursuits or interests in any other social environment during their entire lives up until they were in prison. Formerly incarcerated artists would often tell me that their preclusion from artistic access was defined by growing up in foster homes, moving

around and living with different family members, and in general experiencing housing precarity in their youth. Many of these CAs emphasized to me that they experienced dysfunctional or non-existent family lives, and therefore had limited exposure to the arts within the nuclear family. In my interviews when I asked CAs about the availability or presence of arts classes or opportunities during their primary or adolescent years in school, most explained that there was nothing or hardly anything offered in the realm of the arts. Furthermore, many in this demographic expressed that they were not deeply engaged in school as adolescents, and that their skills as actors or as composers were completely unknown to them until they were involved with a program after they were in prison. A woman who runs a program serving CAs in New York State commented on this reality, specifically regarding the role the arts play in providing beneficial skills that help get CAs back home: “We don’t say re-enter; they do re-enter, but they don’t reintegrate, as those people of color in the New York State prison system are never integrated to begin with. They’re re-entering, they’re *not* re-integrating.”⁴ Due to the forces of urban austerity, neoliberalism and the construction of social dispossession, this is a common reality for those in this demographic.

Despite this, the arts occasionally do manage to slip through the cracks. Some CAs shared that they had had *some* exposure prior to being incarcerated, sometimes with visual art, music or story-telling. Much of this was rather casual, such as singing traditional music with extended family members or viewing public art in urban space. One Latino CA who was previously incarcerated in a state facility in Oregon, who

⁴ While this factor is common with CAs who are people of color, white CAs emphasized just as frequently that artistic opportunities were non-existent for them in public school.

became a proficient drawer and painter while in confinement, explained to me that his father would take him to see Latin murals and street art as a child in San Diego. When asking if his parents did any visual art on their own at home, this man's response was "No, that's something that wouldn't have enabled their survival". Thus, there was a common theme of individuated discipline (Foucault 2003, p. 242, 243) in being culturally and socioeconomically disassociated from the artistic world as younger people. When one is forced to focus on navigating everyday economic precarity the cultural presence and value of art may seem tangential. My data indicated that this element of alienation from artistic interest and discovery is common in people who later become incarcerated.

CAs of course may or may not engage in creative expressions in prison landscapes simply because they are formally affiliated with an organized art program. While they are in the minority, some CAs do emerge independently of art programs and without much facilitation in discovering and devising a craft or creative skills. One currently incarcerated drummer who spoke to me over the phone from prison in New York State explained to me that some of his friends and acquaintances were taking a creative writing course, which encouraged him independently to start writing his own poetry. As this CA stated, his engagement with writing would not have come about, however, without the social encouragement of his incarcerated and formerly incarcerated peers and their exposure to poetry. This CA was also of course already a performer in a different artistic genre, and his familiarity with creative expression already contributed to his ease in working with a newer and different art form.

Similarly, a woman who was incarcerated in Connecticut became interested in narrating her carceral experiences through song based on the geographical circumstances

of being housed in a particular program in an isolated wing of the facility where she was incarcerated. This woman already had the skill to compose songs in part because she uniquely had had experience as a songwriter for many years before being in prison. This woman explained to me that she was housed in a specialized residential program within her facility with eighty other women, which she described as being very cramped and overcrowded, where the women had to sleep in a barracks-style room, completely lacking privacy. As this woman was older than the other women present – or the “elder” as she referred to herself – she carried a certain responsibility of being a liaison between the other incarcerated women and the COs, the latter of whom wanted her to “rat on everything”, which this woman explained that she was never going to do, putting her in a seriously dangerous position. To better make sense of this fear and confusion, this woman wrote a song on her own titled “Dragonfly, You’re Gonna Die”, that lyrically spoke to this woman’s sense of vulnerability:

...(the song) is about how you get by in jail. They were re-doing so much on the east side, tearing down buildings, so many things were not...they weren’t up to code. So a bunch of bats had come out at night, and they were eating the dragonflies. But *I* was one of the dragonflies, the dragonflies were kind of what we were. So it *is* a metaphor.

Below are the lyrics to the song, reproduced here with the same capitalization, grammar, and punctuation that this CA shared with me:

DRAGONFLY YOU’RE GONNA DIE
IM HANGIN HERE WITH MY CARE BEAR
HER SKIN IS GRAY AS GRAMMAS HAIR
AND THE RAZORS NOT TO SHAVE DOWN THERE

DRAGONFLY YOU'RE GONNA DIE
I CAN'T TAKE ANOTHER LIE
I'M TAKING ALL YOUR CANDY PLEASE
I'M GONNA EAT YOUR CHOP HALL PEAS

HELP ME FIND MY WAY BACK HOME
I'M SITTING HERE SO ALL ALONE
AND THERE'S NO MONEY ON THE PHONE
AND NO ONE HERE I WANNA BONE

DRAGONFLY YOU'RE GONNA DIE
WHAT ARE MINDFUL MOMENTS FOR
I CAN'T TAKE THIS SHIT NO MORE
WHEN I'M SURROUNDED BY THESE WHORES

DRAGONFLY YOU'RE GONNA DIE
DON'T EVER LET THEM SEE YOU CRY
WHY DO I GET SUCH BAD LOOKS
WHEN I GOT MONEY ON MY BOOKS?????

There are many others who engage in artistic pursuits even less formally than the aforementioned examples. This demographic will take spare items and materials available to them in the facility or around their cell to design small items, such as roses or flowers made from bathroom tissue, colored with red ink or other colors. But at times

there is a complete absence of physical art-making materials, and CAs therefore depend on their minds and their bodies in order to articulate their creativity. In this regard the same woman quoted above explained how at another point during her incarceration she also wrote a punk/rock song while kept in administrative segregation (solitary confinement), or ‘seg’. The darkness and the solitude led her to write, in her head, what she called “The Seg Song”, describing her experience getting sent to and being in seg. Not having any paper or writing utensils, this woman wrote the song in her head and sang it to herself to learn the words and melody⁵.

Some of those that *do* enter prison with additional creative skills are those that work with their hands, doing craftwork – such as jewelry or clocks – which is often more labor-oriented than purely an artistic creation. As such, these participants have been organized through the prison administration itself versus an outside program. These CAs informed me that their skill level was limited when they began this activity and that there was a very rapid and intensive learning process that went on to manufacture and produce certain pieces in a shop environment. Thus, while it was semi-voluntary to do craft work, this was creativity that one had to master as it was being done for the prison itself, not solely for *oneself*. The patterns for these crafts were not always designed by the men doing this work but rather by the prison; that being said, this demographic did very overtly identify their work through an artistic lens, as this required them to think in a creative way about successful and quality production in this context⁶.

While these instances are not insignificant in their presence, they are ultimately

⁵ See chapter 4 on leadership for greater detail on this song.

⁶ This phenomenon is a key element of *spectacle*, discussed in chapter 5.

rarer than CAs that participate in arts classes or workshops. As such, my sampling required a non-random approach of speaking to people who have formally engaged in creative expression through the facilitation provided by a program. These engagements were uncovered in some interviews, but only through a discussion that asked about engaging with art more formally.

Program & Teaching Artist Facilitation of Carceral Artist Agency

While art programs differ to a certain extent in their pedagogies, and while CAs' objectives may sometimes be differentiated from what a given program's goals are, most of the art programs that I examined have a shared paradigm in how they deliver their instruction. Their main directive is not to create artists out of incarcerated people. On the contrary, program directors and TAs very adamantly reported to me that they are there to provide tools and opportunities to carceral populations that they can use to navigate the social life of incarceration, and to provide skills that will help get people home, such as simply having a portfolio or resume of work to show a parole board how a CA has spent their time, or the ability to speak and express oneself to a parole board in order to be able to advocate for themselves. As they often think in terms of art functioning to provide these "life skills", some program directors and TAs softly put down the idea that CAs should consider an artist career once they make it home. This was not to say that their program's CAs should not continue to create once they are no longer incarcerated; rather, programs do not want to promote the idea that this is or should be a realistic mentality for a CA's occupation given the host of other responsibilities CAs must deal with upon returning home⁷.

⁷ See chapter 6 for more detail on this.

This was interesting because program directors and *some* TAs seemed to be slightly disconnected at times from how CAs who are participants in their programs see themselves, artistically speaking. This is emphasized by a statement a program director made to me, that her organization “...has never been about the art form for the sake of the art form. It's been about using the art form as a vehicle to teach critical life skills”. While this statement perhaps has an air of sounding conventionally logical, I later found this to be an odd conceptualization, given that so many CAs expressed to me that they emerged with that exact perspective about the purpose of art – that thinking about and practicing art for art's sake in carceral space in fact led them to develop other skills that helped them negotiate carceral and post-carceral life. Suffice it to say that someone who engages in acting, visual arts, creative writing or music may not necessarily imagine themselves as an ‘artist’, although some do adopt this identity. Even if CAs as I define them do not discursively imagine themselves as ‘artists’, they still employ(ed) a creative sense of self, and thus an *aesthetic* if not *artistic* identity, through their creative endeavors during their confinement. The ways in which art programs and prisoners produce these identities is, in effect, agency, as it is a product of the social and material scarcity of prison. CAs strive to fill this socio-spatial void through the presence of art programs and access to TAs as it is made available to CAs.

The Workshop Model

Regarding the programs that I examined, many theater, music and visual art programs are structured in a similar way, mainly organized through the workshop model. In this context, a workshop is a small group of CAs who are assigned to work with a TA when TAs go into a facility. On the days that they occur, workshops range in duration,

but usually last for a morning or afternoon timespan, perhaps 2-3 hours. This can of course be limited by COs who impact the time-sensitive entry of TAs into the facility to begin their programs, thus limiting the time CAs might have during their workshop. These limitations can put strains on the creative process, such as preventing directors and workshop leaders from being able to spend the full amount of allotted time with their CAs, with such restraints influencing the aesthetic product of what the CAs and TAs are working on together and can be an impediment to the creative validation and dignity that TAs seek to give CAs about their creative capabilities. This can occur with theater productions, when play rehearsals become rushed and there is a struggle to maintain the organization of activity (these challenges are discussed in greater detail in chapter 4).

In order to participate in workshops at all, one barrier to entry that must be overcome is access to and acquisition of artistic materials, if they are necessary for participation. Some CAs, as mentioned above, acquire random raw materials that are left around the facility. For example, in one virtual observation and CA talk-back with visual artists who were formerly incarcerated in Pennsylvania, one CA reported seeing a plank of pine wood sitting in a hallway, and he waited to tactically *seize the right moment* (de Certeau 1984, p. 38-39) to take it so he could use it in the workshop; if he had been noticed there would have been repercussions for doing this, but he had requested wood to work with for some time and had not been able to order anything for himself due to restrictions. This man knew that no one would miss this piece of wood, and that once he cut it to specifications, no CO would know where it came from or what it was.

Most of this, however, occurs in a less clandestine fashion. Some CAs who have support from family or friends outside prison are able to receive items such as musical

instruments, composition sheets, guitar or violin strings, or, in the case of visual arts, brushes, pencils, pastels, paints, paper, or canvas for drawing and painting. Many if not most CAs do *not* have these support networks, however. As such, once an incarcerated person moves off a waiting list and gets into a program, the program will typically provide those materials to the artist.

But regarding the structure of workshop sessions, in the theater, music and visual art programs I studied in New York State, TAs lead workshops typically once a week between September and June. In the case of drama, workshops are normally held separately from a full-scale theater production, whose preparation can take six months or a whole season. The structure of the workshop, however, is typically organized around on-going skill development. This is to say that the TA, for example in the case of music or visual art, will intentionally *not* determine that there will be a particular theme, skill, topic, genre, or style that they think the CAs should engage with or practice. While TAs may bring new ideas into the fold from time to time, workshops usually function in a more evolving, organic fashion, where CAs work on what they are interested in with the TA. While some workshop modules oriented around a particular theme or skill are offered for maybe 6-8 weeks at a time before shifting, this is less common. If this does happen, it is because the CAs in the program have advocated for themselves and collectively request that a certain workshop be organized. This is in a sense a formulation of social pressure on the organization, but in these cases by asking for certain workshops the CAs enact agency through the range of interests that they have, whether it be keyboard instruction, introductory hip hop, dance, or any other type of workshop. In these cases TAs and art programs will provide a frame of reference for what CAs can

request given what qualified TAs can be hired to lead and facilitate such workshops, but it is the CAs who express interests regarding what they wish to do with their time, inspired by what they have and have not done to date (this phenomenon of leadership in determining artistic options is investigated further in chapter 4).

In speaking to TAs about their role in planning and conducting their instructional design, at least 50% of them resisted the term ‘teaching artist’ in my interviews altogether; while they generally did not mind being called a TA, many of them preferred the term “facilitator” to describe their function. To them, they were facilitators because they saw themselves more as a conduit that CAs could use to discover artistic interests on *their* own terms. This also allows the facilitator to work more one-on-one with the CAs who need more individualized attention in certain skill areas. To facilitate in this context is to allow CAs to seek out what they need and desire in a more experiential manner, rather than adopting an academic approach. This allows space for creativity to flow and be discovered.

In the case of theater and music, workshops usually begin with a convening of the full group of CAs who are involved in a given program. Teaching artists/facilitators will regularly lead the CAs in a warm-up activity, followed by individual groups of musicians and actors breaking off into their respective working groups, as CAs tend to work together on projects in the long-term. Towards the end of the workshop’s duration the entire group will reconvene and do a concluding activity before the workshop terminates for the day or week. Warm-up activities are often what the CAs and teaching artists/facilitators refer to as “sound-offs”; these activities usually begin with the facilitator giving direction for one CA to begin making a specific sound, beat, rhythm,

word or phrase, with additional people joining in with their choice of respective sounds, beats, words or rhythms as they become comfortable. One musician who was formerly incarcerated in a male maximum security facility described this practice in detail:

We would all get up in a circle and all stand up – no instruments – and John (the teaching artist) just said, ‘okay...just add a sound and then somebody just jump in. So John has somebody clap, he would start a rhythm. He said, ‘Okay, this is the bass line, guys’ (*taps out a rhythm on the table*). Somebody, anybody, whoever wants just jump in whenever you want, make a sound like a noise, scream, yell. Just pour some of yourself into the middle of a circle...Let's make music together’. And some of us would be like ‘this is fucking stupid’...I know I did, I'd seen all the guys were like ‘this is fucking corny’. (*pause*) By the end of the session this thing would be rocking. I mean, when I tell you rocking – and the only instrumentation we have is our own bodies – and this thing would be rocking. The officers would come by and look like ‘what the fuck is going on in there?’ And then we were laughing and joking and hugging afterwards, as if we had all been friends *forever*.

As we can see, the role of the TA/facilitator in this context is to provide a certain level of direction and frame of reference for the CAs to then construct a creative environment with their *own* bodies, ideas, and unique creative impulses. As the above-quoted CA expresses here, this model brought about a sense of euphoria and ultimately breathtaking excitement in warming-up to do the workshop’s main activity. These forms of aesthetic performance are both individualized, wherein CAs contribute with their own independent voices and movements, but are also collectivized, wherein sounds and movements are being created. Harkening back to Goffman, this production of this musical environment consequently constructs a *shared territory of the self*, where creativity is melded in an ensemble or cast fashion. TAs explained that their objective with this design is to encourage their students to open up and unlock certain boundaries internally and shed

some of their pretense and anxiety about feeling personally vulnerable in a group environment, such that CAs may construct a sense of confidence and subsequently a sense of self amongst the carceral participants.

In my interviews the TAs frequently gave much credit to the CAs for creating the group sounds that they would make in a sound-off. In a musical retreat workshop in which I participated with formerly incarcerated CAs from New York State, one of the men's former TAs who was leading a workshop emphasized each person's value in constructing a musical environment. As he explained to us after one of our own sound-offs during which I had the privilege of taking the lead: "We all make an individual contribution to musical space. Consider, the whole soundscape in this room during this last jam would have been different if Adam wasn't here. It would have sounded completely different if *any* of you weren't here". According to these formerly incarcerated CAs with whom I was playing music in this context, this format of playing was rather similar to what they did inside together when they were incarcerated. And in the TAs' own words, he suggested that when they made music together while inside, they all "took down the walls" together. Akin to Woody and Duffy's notion of music as a collective becoming (2007, p. 885) these men agreed with this analysis of imagining themselves being geographically taken elsewhere by the music. Thus a sense of place is created in these workshop environments – within and beyond prison itself – through the shared imagination and practice of creativity. It is in these spaces at these times where a mentality of belonging is constructed and the men's sense of place is focused on not being in carceral space. In my interviews other TAs who teach music in prisons in New York State spoke with a similar emphasis on this point, suggesting that once they got

through security and into the music room it began to feel like a high school band space once they started playing. TAs' allowing and promoting a sense of energy in a space where individual creativity can flow is a facilitation of geographical circumstances that work in the carceral artists' favor and becomes essential for CAs to seize moments to produce a unique artistic space whenever they have the opportunity to workshop as a group.

Following warm-ups, within a workshop's main activity, CAs will then engage with the current projects upon which they have been focusing in the recent past. Some workshops will last for a certain short duration of weeks or months, although, as noted, this format is less common. CAs' workshops are typically a continuation of what they have previously done, and function as more of an accumulation, that is, continually building off what they have already accomplished and mastered. In music workshops, CAs will break off into corners of a classroom – or occasionally a separate room if they are lucky – and practice with the other musicians and a TA, all of whom will often play the same instrument. As this goes on, CAs and TAs will do several things, including sharing their new compositions and working out arrangements together, working on skill development, and teaching music theory. In asking TAs how much they bring in with them in terms of musical material or ideas for CAs to work with, they usually responded by saying that, because they are facilitators, they strive to impose as little as possible. As one TA who instructs keyboard stated to me:

“I think it's a myth that we're bringing music into these places. I think that music was absolutely there already and many of the guys are experienced and had, you know, careers on the outside before they came into prison. So, what I really see myself doing is like offering as many resources as I can and building a relationship with them.”

In my interviews many other TAs tended to agree with this assessment, indicating that in many ways the music was already present in prison before the TAs ever started providing instruction, even if the skills or disposition to be interested in the arts was somewhat absent, which is the void the TAs strive to fill. This is largely confirmed by CAs in male institutions who are typically interested in the music with which their respective ethnic group(s) are most closely affiliated. In this regard one TA did tell me that sometimes a certain TA will be the first person a CA can speak to about a particular musical genre or technique. For example, this TA explained that one of his students was able to speak to someone else for the first time about montuno piano style, a syncopated rhythm often applied in traditional Cuban music, and how he could use that in his own performing. So, while CAs demonstrate much initiative, TAs continue to fulfill the function of enabling the CAs' artistic environment in different ways. Through TAs' opening up of space for shared musical and dramatic contributions, they are able to allow CAs to make personal, tactical contributions with their own previously undiscovered creative expressions. This represents an exhibition of tactics and agency because these are opportunities that allow CAs to claim space for themselves and divert it to their own creative ends.

While TAs provide human capital to CAs in these spaces during these times, scarcity does continue to define the geographical circumstances affecting creativity. One TA informed me that the prison facility where she is a volunteer in New York State is able to receive radio signals for a classical radio station in the Hudson Valley, to which her students often listen because she instructs classical performance and composition, which many of her students are interested in learning. Radios are accessible to a degree, as several CAs who were in this same facility spoke of how they could get old radios

belonging to one of their friends once one of them went home; but overall, this type of access can also be marginal at times, as these are usually poor quality radios and only a certain number of frequencies and stations are available that can provide a diverse range of musical genres to which these men can listen. As such, stylistic interests are affected by these limitations.

Within this context of scarcity, CAs often uncover hidden musical interests that they proactively expose to themselves and then work on with the TAs and other fellow musical CAs in their instrument group. One TA further justified this approach because of the other responsibilities the men have on an everyday basis:

“I think it's very rare for them to get undivided attention from a civilian, and that's one thing that we really provide. It's like private lessons, it's like one-on-one...and it's for at most 20 minutes, because I have eight students and an hour and a half, that kind of thing. But I really try and kind of cherish that time and really try and give them my full attention. It's not a classroom, it's really like a private setting so that they can just sort of have that experience of being listened to and and kind of connecting on that level. So, I really try and focus on that kind of quality of our relationship in that short amount of time. It's nice when they get to be like pretty okay at piano, but a lot of my musical goals are really like dependent on what they are capable of giving, and for a lot of the guys, they're very busy; they're in college or they're working 30 to 40 hours a week, so I try and manage my expectations based on what they feel like they're capable of doing. And for me it's like there's a huge benefit to just being able to like move both hands at the same time, like cognitively, you know? I'm like, “Look, if you can do this at the age of 52, that's a huge victory, and it's not to be overlooked”. So I try and not set too many goals in terms of repertoire or technique, but really about them being able to sit at a keyboard and do something.”

TAs are of course cognizant of the temporal limitations that CAs must grapple with in regard to accessing the attention necessary to improve their abilities in workshop space.

Additionally, a TA may be working with up to eight or ten CAs at one time and must manage the attention that they can provide to all their respective group participants, especially given that there is a range of ability levels amongst the participants. On top of these challenges is the fact that some TAs are occasionally not able to come in for the weekly or bi-weekly sessions on a consistent basis, and as such CAs do not always get to work with the same TA or facilitator; alternatively, they must work instead with a different TA who is perhaps less familiar to the CAs' working group. What is also interesting to note is the age of these CAs; as the TA quoted above states, it is unique for people in their 40s and 50s to be successfully learning a new artistic skill. But on top of this is the enthusiasm they have for it. In my observations, but also in interviews, CAs spoke about their involvement in workshops and their discovery of their aesthetic talents with a level of excitement that one might conventionally expect to hear from an adolescent taking music lessons for the first time; given that these CAs never had these structures available in their lives, this preclusion is ironically broken as middle-aged people in carceral space encounter the euphoria of artistic creation for the first time, in this environment.

As TAs and some CAs reported in interviews, this lack of dependable access can disrupt the flow of creativity. CAs regularly attempt to overcome these geographical circumstances, by seeking out opportunities with each other in a collaborative fashion. In interviews musician CAs who were formerly incarcerated in New York State described that beyond the weekly and bi-weekly workshops on Saturdays there would be at least two, perhaps three other opportunities during the week to play music with one another. This could happen in the school building, but it could more likely happen in one of the

chapel spaces. CAs repeatedly emphasized to me that the music rooms in the school building would “*always* be booked”, and that their requests for call-outs to go down there would not always be honored. The procedure to use these spaces involves writing to the civilian advisor with a request, where one will only find out if they receive the call-out if it actually comes through. When call-outs do not come through there is rarely an explanation as to why. Some CAs explained that there are clerks – who are often incarcerated individuals – that process some of the paperwork for signing up for the practice spaces, and as such are able to exert politics and quietly intervene over what requests are honored and which are not⁸. This may seem perplexing to the reader, and it is true that clerks are supposed to be overseen in their job by a CO, but COs are reported often not to be present, nor do they always provide oversight, resulting in a more *laissez-faire* sign-up system. As such, these somewhat limiting, material circumstances of only having the option of looking for other musicians in the chapel(s) and sacred spaces in the prison is an act of constructing certain territories of the self, in terms of both independent and collective practice; this therefore functions as a common alternative where CAs can practice together during the week. CAs also explained that they developed their skills by playing for services in the chapel, as the hymns and tunes were simple and repetitious, providing a grounding in certain musical styles.

Towards the end of a musical workshop, the individual instruction will end and CAs along with their TAs will return from their respective instrument groups to jam collectively once more before breaking for the week. This is a moment when CAs will try

⁸ There are a variety of social pressures where clerks use their power to allow some to access these spaces and deny it to others. CAs explained to me that some of these forces have to do with friendships, but that gangs or race do play a role in including or excluding others with spatial access.

to take what they learned that day and what they have been working on and engage in a group jam, which will usually function as a crossing of musical genres. This technique of performance was rather unique because it was a combination of styles where individual CAs were somewhat thrust into the spotlight to come up with something cohesive to play at a moment's notice. I experienced this approach myself as a participant observer with formerly incarcerated musicians at the retreat I attended, where the CAs and TAs explained this was how they would jam in prison. This is literally a situation where the men are thrown together and forced to collaborate with others with whom they would normally never write or arrange music, creating an extremely diverse yet organized set of sounds and rhythms during which someone is expected to take the lead and jump in and play⁹. According to TAs and the men, this lack of jam preparation is intentional to encourage the men to shed their preoccupations regarding their perceived abilities or being marked or labeled by performing poorly. I believe this is a unique form of aesthetic pedagogy, where the construction of a somewhat artistically vulnerable space will enable CAs to enact agency in new artistic ways, simple because everything is so unplanned.

Visual art workshops operate slightly differently in prison because its presentation is not performance-oriented in the same ways as music or theater. There is a performance or presentation component germane to the medium, although warm-ups and sound-offs do not happen in the exact same manner. But akin to other genres, these TAs often see

⁹ Having been put on the spot myself as a guitarist when playing with these men, I can confirm that this is very accurate; it was somewhat frightening to be put on the spot and play in a jam completely unrehearsed, but the men effectively challenged me to play things on my guitar that I would normally never play or think of playing, which is very similar to creative structure these men experienced inside. See chapter 4 on leadership for more context on leading jams.

themselves as facilitators as well, where they also resist the urge to bring in too many ideas and approaches for CAs to practice (see Figure 4, 5, and 6 below for examples of art done through visual arts workshops). What visual arts TAs and CAs in their workshops often notice in practicing this particular art form – at least in men’s facilities – is that eventually some men who have been coming to the workshops will produce designs that bear similarity to other famous visual artists. What is interesting about this phenomenon is that the men using these approaches and styles – whether it be painting with watercolor, drawing with charcoal or pastel, or some other technique – have typically never heard of or seen work by any of these famous artists. One formerly incarcerated visual artist told me that many of the men in his workshop ended up using textures and colors very similar to how Salvador Dali deployed them; as a more experienced drawer, this CA and his TA were able to pass on knowledge and background to the men who were unknowingly incorporating Dali-esque styles, so that they might hone their craft further in the direction that they were unconsciously working.

Just as music can exist in prison prior to CAs having contact with TAs facilitating instructional workshops, CAs working in this medium have many ideas for what they want to visualize on a two-dimensional plane when they first enter their workshops. According to TAs and formerly incarcerated visual CAs, these can range in their diversity, however, visual CAs incarcerated in men’s prisons often want to draw small objects like snakes other animals. To foster greater creativity, TAs reported that they bring in examples of art for the members of the workshop to deconstruct and discuss, which functions as part of the initial instruction. TAs reportedly often use abstract art to pique interest among workshop participants, even though they often struggle in



Figure 4: “Jordan”

understanding the work of Jackson Pollock, Wassily Kandinsky and Stephen Rowe. But despite some rejections by the men in the workshops, the TAs hope that the men will see how shapes and colors are used in a variety of non-conventional ways. Through this activity, teaching artists hope that the men will see what sorts of techniques are possible and can derive something out of it for themselves and apply it in their own visualizations.

As we can observe, TAs use a set of pedagogies in visual art workshop space that encourages CAs not only to learn by doing, but to uncover their skills and styles through an organic process. TAs in the visual arts aim to avoid overwhelming their students with ideas or styles for fear it might cramp CAs’ own process of creative discovery, while still providing a frame of reference for participants to draw on. As I emphasize above, CAs rarely have much artistic exposure or training prior to being in prison, and because artistic influences inside prison environments can be limited (although at times there are of course many present influences in carceral space), providing access to the possibilities of what visual art can become is a launching point for CAs to express themselves in collaboration with others. This is one way aesthetic agency can be initiated for this population.



Figure 5: “Building a Man”

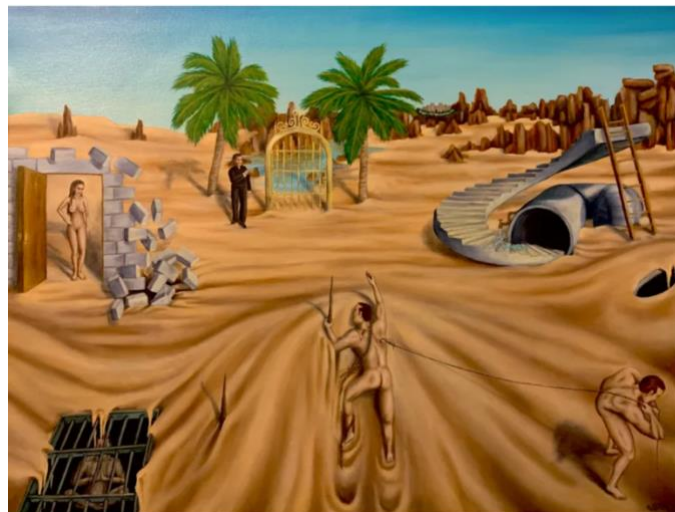


Figure 6: “Perseverance”¹⁰

Artistic Practice & Activity Beyond the Space of the Workshop

In regard to artistic practice, much of this occurs beyond the space of the workshop. While TAs open up space and help CAs negotiate the geographical circumstances that inhibit creativity in prison by encouraging and providing technologies

¹⁰ The CA that created this had been participating in workshops for years before completing this. The piece represents all the forces that the artist believes has held him back in life. He is the man in the middle foreground but is also the man in the cage on the bottom left (prison) and is fighting distractions from other forces in his path (women, wealth, other barriers to entry). The castle in the distance is this CA’s destination (home), and he must navigate through these opposing forces to get to where wants to go in life.

of agency – that is, the mechanisms that CAs uncover and utilize for their creative pursuits with the resources available – such as workshops, rehearsals and performances, many CAs engage with their aesthetic endeavors in other locations within the prison, converting mundane spaces into micro-artistic ones. This transpires in most art forms whose skill development requires practice on a more personalized scale. As we have seen thus far, these artistic practices are techniques of agency and/or resistance that take place through CAs’ own volition and social organization. And while CAs may have access to time spent in a group setting, many have minimal amounts of time that they can spend in those spaces; in order to most effectively produce artistic work, CAs use other space in the prison for aesthetic engagement, transforming everyday space into creative space.

Outside of the workshop in a classroom playing music, drawing/painting, or rehearsing theater in chapel space, CAs find alternative avenues where they can work further, either independently or collectively. As stated above, while drama programs conduct workshops, theater productions are a different beast, and, given that preparations implicitly must happen in a prison, plays require six months or a whole season to rehearse, organize and perform. CAs involved in putting on a theatrical production will need to rehearse for much longer than they have with their TAs. As a result, theater CAs will run lines outside on the yard, which can happen in all seasons. While the men I interviewed who did this explained that it was highly beneficial to take advantage of this, it is a much greater challenge than rehearsing in the chapel or the theater space that they normally use. This was because the setting was different, and they did not have their props. As such the men would replace their props with other objects – such as benches, sports equipment, and other items from their cells – tactical techniques of agency to

simulate dramatic rehearsal that would be otherwise done in the theater space together (not an actual theater, but either a converted chapel or larger room). This is compounded by the fact that these men only have one – or *possibly* two – dress rehearsals before their actual performance and must cram in practice time whenever they can.

Coordinating this style of rehearsal is further challenging due to CAs not always being able to get together in the yard, as there are few other shared spaces that can be utilized in such a collective manner when and where all other actors are present and available, due to different daily schedules. As such, rehearsing becomes difficult if even one member of the production is missing from the scene(s) being practiced. All these geographical constraints affect artistic outcomes, as actors report needing to work faster and be very efficient about running lines because not all CAs are present in the same space at the same time in doing this. A TA explained that sometimes CAs reported being able to run lines with one another between their cells, although this was mostly based on coincidence as their cells were almost next to one another, and this does not work as neatly for most CA actors. Although, when this is possible, CAs cannot actually see each other while they are inside their cells, which makes the physical element of rehearsal difficult. They also need to raise their voices slightly to communicate but must mitigate their acoustic presence at the same time (prison is notoriously loud at all hours of the day or night, and as such being able to concentrate on a task becomes remarkably aggravating at times for many CAs, especially musicians, discussed in greater detail below). Within all of this, actors also often carry scripts with them around a facility so that their lines are reachable and study-able during available moments. This becomes a tactic of drowning out other distractions in the prison, where focusing on this form of practice becomes an

alternative restrictive and mundane aspects of prison social life.

While many of the CA actors with whom I interacted and/or interviewed participated in workshops and productions leading up to performances with props and costuming, some TAs and CAs reported that certain prison facilities did not permit this model to function as neatly as some others. In many cases, props and costuming are not permissible, and as such theater arts programming must operate differently. While eventual performances for the prison population, members of the public and family are allowed (see chapter 5 for greater analysis on audience), programs at times cannot simply choose a traditional play and present the story and dialogue verbatim, due to administrative censorship. As such, TAs become creative in taking alternative approaches in designing their workshops.

One such theater program in a New York State facility where props and traditional plays are not permissible incorporates an approach that provides writing journals to men that they can take back to their cells to write their own dramatic dialogue individually. These men are encouraged to write anything that comes into their head, narrating their day or routine, memories of family, or describing emotions that they have. Men are also encouraged to write poetry as well as prose. When they gather for the workshop, the men then take turns sharing their dialogue (see chapter 5 for a deeper deconstruction of the social dynamics of presenting work in this environment), and then use different pieces to string together one story that then gets acted out. The building of such a dramatic piece based upon CAs' dialogues may take two months or longer in its entirety.

Thus, the TA in this program helps create a space where the men assign roles to

themselves, borrowing from each other as well as taking elements and ideas from traditional plays (for example, character names from Shakespeare are sometimes appropriated). This free-flowing design seeks to work around the institutional and therefore geographical limitations that the prison imposes, allowing CAs a significant degree of freedom to be creative and to articulate themselves. Within this workshop design, one formerly incarcerated actor (from the program mentioned in the above paragraph) shared an anecdote about a dialogue called “Clothesline” that his friend had written for the workshop. This was a story emphasizing the minutely available opportunity that the men have in hanging a clothesline in their cells to dry clothes, and how this was integral to his everyday life in prison. The formerly incarcerated artist who explained this expressed to me how calming it was to hear the honesty of the story, as people had the opportunity to communicate with one another through different voices and characters with stories, descriptions, and poems that drew on everyday aspects of prison social life. This man explains how the practice of writing on his own and then listening with others felt very therapeutic and freeing, opening him up to entertaining a willingness to express himself further:

“The whole atmosphere is oriented toward making you feel comfortable. When you go up there, it’s not geared towards being all about the work – *but it is*. So, it’s a relaxing atmosphere, and the techniques they use to help you become calm, open, and feel safe, those techniques are basically designed to be part of the curriculum for the class. But you wouldn’t know it!

As we can see, these approaches work in subtleties; while CAs are contributing to a collective piece that they construct together, the workshop is designed in such a way that

they do not even notice that they are supposed to expose their creativity, allowing the space to be safe and comfortable. The CA quoted above also spoke about one of his own contributions, where he took an essay he wrote called ‘soundscapes’ – an assignment he had done for a college course – and transformed it into a piece for the theater group, in which he spoke about all the distracting and overwhelming barrage of sounds one hears constantly in prison (a narrative which ended up as part of a larger theater piece). So, akin to the other drama programs and workshop structures discussed above, the TA facilitates the space by providing a creative frame of reference, but the CAs can take this further with their own interests and personal observations. Using a pedagogy perhaps unique to carceral space in artistic facilitation, CAs are able to discover creativity sometimes without knowing it, are therefore able to perform agency through the freedom that the workshop space allows and encourages.

Musicians are of course known for composing and practicing music outside of their workshop spaces. While workshops are on-going with their instrument and genre groups, these are often structured around leading up to a performance for the wider prison population, and potentially members of the public. As the phenomenon of being seen by the audience strongly directs how musicians go about their practicing and composing (see chapter 5 on this explicit element), like actors, CA musicians must take advantage of more personalized time and space in order to prepare to perform in concert. Akin to actors, CA musicians also often practice by converting the yard into a micro-artistic environment if their instrument is portable enough (larger instruments like keyboards and pianos are not as easily transferable within carceral space). Independent musical practice is also common, as musicians reported that they were typically allowed to bring

instruments back to their cells with them. Many CA musicians compose on their own as homework back in their cells to prepare to work on something new in the workshop at a later point. Much of this work will culminate as a concert performance.

Musicians must be mindful of auditory overload as well, with prison facilities constantly being noisy. This makes it difficult to concentrate, especially for newer musicians who are just getting started with an instrument. One musician explained that, once he developed some proficiency, the presence of so much constant and random acoustic reverberation throughout his cell block influenced him to compose songs that were influenced by and articulated that kind of auditory confusion; thus, the relationship between the social and the acoustic in his environment was an influence in his songwriting, giving it a “conversational” quality.

One particular piece that man wrote was titled “Under the Ice”. This was a classical composition in which different human voices – a deceased mother and her living son, based on this musician’s own lived experience – are trying to communicate. The title and the song’s musical qualities discuss that while we can see what goes on above the surface, there is a whole world occurring beneath the frozen lake that we cannot see, speaking of the son’s internal feelings that he is unable to share, compounded by being in a space of confinement. Sound can be oppressive and therefore emotionally constraining in carceral space (Hemsworth 2016) and as such this musician found the lack of ability to engage in self-expression disorienting as concentration was almost impossible for him. As a result of these geographical circumstances and conditions, he creatively expressed this idea metaphorically through the technicalities of his composition.

Regarding visual arts beyond the conventional workshop environment, visual CAs

also sometimes conduct their work in their cells or on the yard in preparation for workshops. Visual art operates in a somewhat different register in this regard in comparison to music and theater, however; this is because visual art, while it can be collaborative within the time and space of the workshop, operates as an independently oriented artistic medium in carceral space. This is to say that the work is not only personal, but its conduct is significantly dependent on being done alone (see chapter 5 for greater detail on group presentation and recognition of visual art). To this end, visual CAs report getting assigned homework by their TAs – or other visual CAs who have the opportunity to instruct – between workshops, although the patterns in my interviews revealed that many often do not do the homework. This is of course optional, but not all members of a visual art workshop bring something back to work on next time. I believe that this is because participation in visual arts workshops in prison is not as active in the same way that musical or theatrical performance is, where nearly every aspect of it is done with the rest of the group in mind. While there are exceptions when it comes to leadership in CAs instructing other CAs (see chapter 4), visual art does not necessarily have to involve others in its inception, conduct or presentation. That being what it is, the social dimension of artistic performance is less present here as there is less of an expectation to produce comparison to other artistic genres. It also appears that there are fewer opportunities for visual CAs to show their work in comparison to some of the other artistic genres and mediums, although there are some notable exceptions where this is possible¹¹.

¹¹ See chapter 5 on art being seen by others as spectacle.

Summation

As we can observe from the data presented here from my interviews and observations, with some more random cases of individual CAs tactically finding ways of doing art informally, much artistic participation occurs through programs and TAs' facilitation of workshops and performances. In discovering and being exposed to experiential and creative activity that is typically new to them, CAs exert agency by artistically working to repurpose their environments. We can see that in some cases, like the prison + agency and prison + arts literature tells us, that artistic agency often happens through informal means (Fleetwood 2020) where agency and creativity are defined by scarcity of materials (ACE Steering Committee 2020; Marek 2022; Norman 2017). Additionally, however, with this data I suggest that artistic agency is facilitated by organized programs and teaching artists, and, drawing from black geographies, it is these temporalities and spatialities with which everyday agency and resistance (Bailey & Shabazz 2013) and the imagined and practiced geographies of possibility (Allen et al 2009) become manifested. This occurs through a combination of formal workshops where CAs participate together mixed and CAs conducting artistic practice on their own in micro-artistic spaces. This access is what permits incarcerated people, in Norman's conceptualization, to circumvent carceral strategies of control, with both independent and group practice (2017). Programs and TAs open up space for CAs, and with a level of expertise provide a frame of reference from which CAs are able to draw; however, it is CAs who take what is provided and proactively convert these opportunities into *agentic tactics* – i.e., the moments and spaces wherein agency can be claimed or deployed with available mechanisms – as far as they are comfortable or able. CAs take advantage of

these agentic tactics either in the workshop, in their cells, in religious spaces, on the yard or elsewhere to learn and improve their artistic skills independently or with interest in playing with others. CAs consequently assert newly found artistic identities as they imbue space with new meanings and new uses with this everyday agency. These imaginations and practices convert mundane spaces in the prison into more artistically productive and constructive environments.

These aesthetic acts, writ large, are techniques of the self, wherein the self may exist as the social scale of the individual CA or CAs as a group. To circumvent lack of available time and access in working with TAs, and in developing one's craft and abilities independently, is to attempt to master and direct one's geographical circumstances, even if this occurs with varying degrees of success. As we have seen from the data presented in this chapter, these geographies of creative expression appear to fall within the agency category. As the discussion continues in chapters 4, 5 and 6, contextualizing these geographies within the themes of artistic leadership, the spectacle of seeing and being seen artistically, and post-carcerl artistic engagements, respectively, can help qualify how, when and where these geographies are constructed as agency and resistance.

CHAPTER IV

LEADERSHIP IN THE CONDUCT OF CARCERAL ARTS

As we have thus far observed, programs and TAs often function as the conduits through which CAs employ tactics within their particular positionality in carceral space. Space is opened by TAs and through their support and organization CAs are then able to take advantage of available moments and opportunities for temporal and spatial transformation, seizing moments “on the wing” as de Certeau says (1984, p. xix) with artistic practices. While the fundamental space of prison is not something that CAs can *foundationally* transform, they do convert their everyday prison environment into a more aesthetically productive space, much of which is accomplished through the space of the workshop, and the operations CAs can derive from it during the workshop itself and at other times and spaces in the prison. But this is not done in a vacuum; that is to say, there are certain qualities that are present in how these artistic spaces are opened up, and how CAs’ geographies of agency and/or resistance are operationalized. In examining the data from interviews and observations, these artistic tactics become techniques of the self in carceral space more specifically through two dominant, unifying themes, those being qualities of *leadership*, our focus in this chapter, as well as the social construction of *spectacle* (this latter theme is the topic for chapter 5).

Leadership in the Context of the Individual and the Group

Regarding the presence of leadership in CAs’ creative performance, I construe the concept of leadership here with a broad brush. CAs work in, through and around their geographical circumstances by asserting their individual personal presence and identities in creative space so as to play a role in making art happen within the space group. This is

the thought and act of a CA “putting oneself out there” so as to promote the functioning and facilitation of creative work; in other words, leadership is seen here as CAs taking a role in making something happen as part of an artistic endeavor that goes beyond the individual self. As such, leadership, as understood in this context, is defined by social and cultural linkages between the individual and the group. To go further, leadership in this context is the practice of placing one’s artistic geography in a shared, collective environment, where the social formation of leadership is an active contribution to the creative pursuits of others. While this may take the form of group leadership, a CA asserting themself in artistic space is sometimes also done very independently, where leadership is defined by one’s own leadership *for* oneself, which may operate outside of a group setting.

As such, leadership naturally incurs a series of power relations amongst CAs in the social organization of their artistic programs and endeavors. By “social organization” here I am referring to the multiplicity of decisions and decision-making individuals and groups involved within an art program that manages and directs CA members and their roles in how they participate in the group. As we will see in this chapter, different individuals and groups become responsible as leaders for facilitating a given programs’ activities. This can occur between TAs, program administrators and rank-and-file CAs who participate outside of formal decision-making structures. In addition, outside of direct leadership and program oversight, leadership is asserted between workshop members in the unique conduct of the different artistic mediums. As will be illustrated, CAs enact agency and possibly resistance in assuming leadership opportunities as they navigate the geographical circumstances that affect and therefore direct their creative

prison environments.

Leadership in the Arts: Steering Committees

One program that organizes workshops in many prisons throughout the Hudson River Valley in New York State (largely offering theater, but also other programs) utilizes a structural format in which CAs make many program decisions on the inside. A few years after this program was founded¹², this organization decided that there needed to be a body of CAs that had the power to be the representative body for a given facility's theater company to allow CAs to have more voice. These bodies are known as Steering Committees (hereinafter SCs), and typically consist of about five members (described half-jokingly by a TA as the proverbial 'security council'). SC members must be involved with the program for at least several years before joining the SC, and they can only do so if invited by current members. If a current member is going home or expecting to be released within two or three years, that member and/or fellow members will begin scouting out a prospective replacement from within the ranks of the theater company. While it may seem prestigious, in my interviews several TAs explained that most CAs do not wish to join the SC, as it carries much administrative responsibility relative to program functionality, and most CAs would prefer to be more associated with the production side of the program.

SC members are responsible for several elements of program management. The SC is charged with determining who within the prison population can be admitted into the program. TAs, program directors and CAs all reported in interviews that this was

¹² This particular program was founded in the mid-late 1990s. My understanding from TAs was that the steering committees in all the facilities where this organization offers arts programming were firmly in place by the early-mid 2000s.

helpful because the TAs and program directors do not know all applicants on enough of an interpersonal level to be sufficiently informed to make an admissions decision. Additionally, this devolves responsibility to the SC to decide who within the applicant pool is going to take it seriously, help the program succeed, and not put it in jeopardy. Additionally, there is a substantial amount of necessary paperwork for putting on any special event in prison, and the responsibility of getting much of this in order rests on the shoulders of the SC. While security measures are of course under the auspices of the prison administration, the SC must create what is called an “Exec Packet” on their end to be submitted to the administration, listing requests for member call-outs, requests for permission for the list of props to be used for a theater production, or any other materials entering the prison for any theater or non-theater workshop. The prison administration must approve all elements of an Exec Packet and has the authority to censor any objects/props/items for which the SC is requesting permission; the administration may also censor any workshop or theater requests of which they do not approve. These approvals or denials move from the SC to the prison administration and back to the SC. While one of the program directors typically joins the weekly meetings of the SC, internal program management in the prison rests with the SC, and the administration will often communicate with them directly. The SC in this regard functions as the organizational entity internally within the prison which functions to negotiate what the prison needs in order for the program to carry out arts-oriented events.

Furthermore, as a former CA who served on one of these SC also explained to me, in addition to several TAs in interviews, that the SC is responsible for “disciplinary” action as it pertains to participant CAs in the program in a given facility. What this means

is that the SC is the governing body determining whether a participating CA can be removed or replaced from production, as the SC deems appropriate. This exists in part to mitigate unforeseen changes in casts during a series of workshops or theater production, such as if an actor playing an important role ends up being sent to solitary confinement (which, according to TAs, has happened during production), or if the prison administration refuses to allow someone to receive a call-out to come and participate at the normal time. In the paraphrased words of several TAs and CAs, the SC has the right to say “the role is waiting for you when you are able to come back”, or alternately they have the ability to say “your role is being recast and you can try out again next season”. The SC can also remove CAs from the program completely. So, while the SC is effectively a power structure, it is a system of CAs establishing criteria for some autonomous oversight from their peers, giving the SC and other members a sense of freedom in leading their own program¹³.

Steering Committees & Leadership Challenges

Perhaps most importantly is the SC’s ability to choose the plays and workshops that the program will do each year. The SC will sit and discuss their current interests and develop a list of their top potential plays and workshops that they would like to see happen. It should be noted, however, that this is not done in an *entirely* independent fashion, as the program’s directors and sometimes TAs will provide a list of suggestions or ideas that they recommend as a frame of reference. The SC will often approach the

¹³ Similar to what is stated in the previous chapter relative to clerks influencing call-outs and ability or lack of ability of some CAs to access creative spaces, there can be mitigating circumstances and causal factors that can affect eligibility in a theater production as well. Whether a CA is included or excluded from a production by the SC because of someone going to solitary confinement, for example, can potentially be a function of other social associations, such as race or gang affiliation, or tampering by COs.

program directors with ideas or subjects that they would like to see acted out on stage, and program directors will contribute ideas or play titles. Moreover though, in having regular meetings with the SC – often weekly in non-COVID times – they will share scripts for plays and other materials so that the SC can come to a consensus together in formulating their lists. Additionally, the SC may reach out to the different on-going workshops, such as in dance or keyboards, to see what workshops people would like to do in the upcoming year. As a program director explained to me, some men in one facility informed their SC that they wanted to participate in a hip-hop class; this information was shared with the SC and moved upward to the program directors to find a TA.

When it comes to full theater productions, the process outlined above may not be nearly as neat. Even if the SC does adopt some of the programs' suggestions for plays, this does not necessarily imply that these plays will actually be produced; as stated above, the organization and SC must also contend with censorship and practical constraints by the prison administration. TAs and program directors informed me that there have been many times when the SC's top choices have been rejected. Some notable rejections have been the play *Mister Roberts* – about a rejection of orders on an American naval vessel in the South Pacific in WWII – as well as the Reginald Rose play *12 Angry Men*¹⁴ – a play concerning a jury that chooses not to convict an 18-year-old charged for the murder of his father. In this particular instance, in replacement of the *Mister Roberts* rejection, the Aaron Sorkin play *A Few Good Men* was instead surprisingly accepted by the

¹⁴ See the 1955 John Ford-directed film and the 1957 film by Sidney Lumet, respectively, for reference (both starring Henry Fonda) as to their greater analytical content. Fonda also starred in the original 1948 Broadway production.

administration¹⁵. As much is arbitrary in these decisions, it is unclear why a play where a commanding officer on a military base is being charged with the murder of one his marines was more acceptable to the prison administration than the much more comedic and less dramatic *Mister Roberts*.

Leadership, Theater & Conflicts

Because this is a prison environment, SC leadership and agency can of course easily be thwarted in its desires and interests. Nevertheless, when the SC *does* get their plays verified, the SC has made the decision for the rest of the theater program, who must go along with their decisions. According to some TAs, there are only minor conflicts, if any, pertaining to choice of plays; however, other TAs indicated that it can sometimes be a point of contention. One notable conflict arose in the early 2010s when a SC at one of the New York State facilities chose the famous Thornton Wilder play *Our Town*. Initially written in 1937 at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where Wilder spent time as a resident artist, Wilder later finished the play in Europe (Sherman 2021, p. 8). Nevertheless, in part inspired by the locale of the MacDowell Colony, *Our Town* takes place in the year 1901 in a fictional small town called Grovers Corners in southern New Hampshire. Based on the town of Peterborough, NH, the play is divided into three acts, and is narrated by a character called the Stage Manager. The Stage Manager narrates the mundane simplicity of everyday life in Grovers Corners, with the play's characters stepping in to act their parts in between the Stage Manager's quotidian monologues. At face value the play concerns school children, local newspapers, church

¹⁵ See the 1992 film version of Sorkin's play starring Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise for further reference.

choirs and young romance between a male and a female character, named George Gibbs and Emily Webb, respectively. While *Grovers Corners* is connected to Boston by railroad, it presents a geographical imaginary of isolated and rural country life in New England at the turn of the century, which, according to my interviews with the TAs directing (and acting in) the play, is meant to appear as timeless and unchanging¹⁶. As I learned in my interviews, when the theater company was presented with this play, a very vocal group of CA actors vehemently protested the SC's decision.

The main point of contention with the production of *Our Town* was the argument that it was a "white play". The dissenters expressed, in their own words, that "This white play has nothing to say to us". The play's director explained the initial imperative behind the dissenters' complaints about the SC choosing the play:

One of the agenda items, particularly, I think that the men in the program (have), is that they wanted every production that we worked on to have a message for the population of the facility. I think when one of the actresses and I came in one night, just prior to the casting process for that show, we thought we were going to read a little bit of the play with the men in the circle that night and kind of talk about the themes of it a little bit, and instead what we encountered was that there was like this fight going on – not a physical fight, but like a verbal altercation was happening between the men on the steering committee and this pretty vocal minority of guys in the room who were livid that this 'white play' was being forced on them. And the guys on the steering committee...were trying to defend my 'directorial honor', in a way, which, you know, was very chivalrous, but also not necessary, right? And so I said 'it's okay, it's okay. I can speak to this'. And again, it wasn't ultimately my decision; I had advocated for the play in the play selection process because I thought it had a lot of value to

¹⁶ See also Howard Sherman's 2021 book *Another Day's Begun: Thornton Wilder's Our Town in the 21st Century* for a deeper and more critical evaluation and analysis of the play's presentation of the mundane, unquestioned, and unchanging aspects everyday life. Many others have interpreted the play similarly (see Sherman's discussion on p. 21).

this community. But it wasn't my decision. It was the steering committee's decision. But anyway...several of these guys were like 'why are we doing this play, are we just doing this play because *you* want to do it'?

The reluctance to do this play was rooted in the argument that the play was about a stereotypical community of European descent during a particular period in a particular place. In the eyes of the theater company, this represented an idealization of everyday life that was not the norm or experience of many of the members of the theater program who are Black and people of color who have been translocated from urban communities into carceral space. While the director explained that *Our Town* is perhaps one of the most produced plays in the world¹⁷, and that she had worked on it previously, the men in this program felt as if, because of its geographical and ethnic/racial situatedness, that the play could not have a message that could speak to and for the whole prison population.

The director explained to me that CAs demonstrating this much contention over the fundamental choice of play was somewhat exceptional, as most artistic disagreements in theater productions occur relative to more minute details of acting and technical work and are minor. The main reason the SC chose this play (as well as encouraged by the director's suggestions, quoted above) was because of its thematic content as it related, in their opinion, to the social realities of life in a carceral environment. In brief, *Our Town* is a three act play: the first act, as stated above, outlines the typical everyday activities of the town's inhabitants. Close attention is paid to the families of teenagers George Gibbs and Emily Webb (who live next door to one another), the adults' jobs and their role in

¹⁷ There have been several film versions: 1940, starring William Holden; a 1955 musical television film starring Frank Sinatra; a 1977 a television film with Hal Holbrook as Stage Manager (see Sherman p. 28-29); and 2003, with Paul Newman. The 1940 film utilizes an alternative ending (see Sherman p. 22).

their local community as milk deliverers, newspaper editors, doctors, shopkeepers, and the like. Act II sees George and Emily becoming student body representatives at school and showing romantic interest in one another. Act III jumps forward in time several years to a funeral in the town cemetery, where we learn that Emily has died in childbirth. Act III is unique in that the deceased in the cemetery are acting their characters by sitting in chairs, speaking to one another and Emily. A deceased Emily says she wants to return to relive one day in her life, which she does, forcing the audience to consider how we all might navigate life depending upon what resources or opportunities are available. As the director put it to me, the play poses the question of

How do you live your life, every minute, when what you really want is for 20 or 25 years to fly by like that. Right? Because people die in maximum security every day, nothing is promised. So, if you're waiting for your life to kind of re-begin as you...shuttle your way through 25 years, you might not get there. Right? And so it was really to kind of wrangle that question of like 'what is eternal in the individual, or is there an eternal?' Right? And how do you live your life every minute when what you want is for it to just zip by, right? And also, how do you stay present and live your life every minute in a place that as (one CA) says is a 'cesspool of horror', right? How do you kind of thread that needle?

According to the director, one of the most poignant lines to which the SC was drawn in choosing the play was a line spoken by the character Emily in Act III. In act III Emily dies in childbirth and is brought to the town cemetery, where other deceased members of the town are seen sitting in their graves, speaking to one another. When Emily greets them and speaks to them, she explains she would like to go back and relive just one more day in her life. Emily states that she wants to do this because time is short and everything is always fleeting, because when one looks back one thinks and one wishes what life

could have been like. Taking directly from the script, act III has Emily converse with her deceased mother in-law, Mrs. Gibbs. The SC saw the following exchange – often considered to be one of the most famous lines in the play – as having a very literal connection to carceral space:

Emily *looks directly* at Mrs. Gibbs.

Emily

“Live people don't understand, do they?”

Mrs. Gibbs

“No, dear...not very much.”

Emily

“They're sort of shut up in little boxes, aren't they?”

The theater company explored the significance in these lines after the director conducted certain activities to open further dialogue about the play's meaning. In order to further try and contextualize the greater possible relation between the play and social life in prison, the director chose to show the men the documentary *OT: Our Town*, an examination of a high school in Compton, California that decides to do a production of *Our Town* as the first theatrical performance the school has done in twenty years¹⁸. The documentary chronicles the development of the project, including a moment when, during the period of rehearsal for the play, a student is killed in a drive-by shooting. Awkwardly paralleling the story of *Our Town*, students attend the memorial service for their peer who has died. As the director related to me, when the men (in the New York State prison) were watching this scene during their screening, they began singing along

¹⁸ For a more detailed evaluation of this film, see *OT: Our Town (2002)* on IMDb.

with “Amazing Grace” when the Compton students were singing for their deceased friend at the funeral. What the director later discovered was that many of the men in the production had been at a similar memorial service at least once if not several times prior at some point(s) in their lives. As such, this was an intimately familiar experience for them.

In addition, demonstrating a connection between carceral space and *Our Town* through screening this film for the men, the director brought in a series of photographs from the turn of the century of Black and Latinx men doing all sorts of jobs that the characters do in *Our Town*, such as doctors, baseball players, newspaper editors, and farmers, in both urban and rural settings. This activity along with the viewing of the documentary saw the men open up to the play a bit more in beginning to brainstorm how the setting might be presented:

We were having this ongoing conversation about ‘how do we want to set this in time? We can do it in contemporary clothes if that's what makes sense’, and we were having again sort of that conversation about ‘what would *Our Town* look like? What does home mean to you?’, and maybe the idea in your head or your heart of what home is has nothing to do with the place that you actually grew up...I brought in all these pictures from the turn of the 20th century, and one of the men said “I never knew that Black people dressed like this”. And somebody else said “can we wear these clothes?” And it's “yeah, we can totally wear these clothes if that's what's interesting to you! Of course we can!” So it was their decision, so we went for kind of, in a way, a pretty classic *Our Town*. But it was really because men were interested to see themselves that way, to explore that.¹⁹

¹⁹ Some may read whitesplaining or colorblindness into this explanation, and that the director was effectively foisting a more white culture onto a cast that was predominantly people of color, and that they should consider seeing themselves as white. This is one interpretation that people can make, yet it may be more complicated than just saying this. As I emphasize further below, this play, chosen by the SC, was adopted by the cast as a way of not necessarily re-claiming, but *initially* claiming a story that could be re-

As we can see, the men in the production began relating to the possible connections between *Our Town* and the lives they had lived, in and out of prison. This is further exemplified in the somewhat traditional clothing choices the men made as a group, seeking to represent a sense of everyday normalcy to which they aspired (see figure 6 below). The director also explained that to encourage the men to critically consider the play in more depth she organized a mock Grovers Corners town fair during one of their production workshops. The director discussed how she and one of the actresses acquired gate clearance to bring in bandanas (of an acceptable color based on administrative regulations) for a three-legged race, as well as plastic, hollow easter eggs and plastic spoons for an egg relay. Other events were held, such as musical chairs and an imaginary tug-of-war. The director describes this event in greater detail:

We had, you know, just like games basically that are the kinds of games that you might play at a festival on a town square in a place like Grover's Corners. And one of the things we learned was that Constable Warren was cheating! (laughter) Constable Warren would totally try to trip other people. They also struggled with Constable Warren a little bit because, you know, there's a certain set of feelings about police officers in that space, right? And yet constable Warren is the best possible sense of paternalistic, he's kind of taken care of, and sees himself as a little bit of a father figure to that community, right? And so the actor who was playing Constable Warren struggled a little bit for a while and with what his relationship (to the others was) and that he didn't want to be policing (them). So it just took him a little while to find his footing, but actually that town fair was a really big turning point for him because he suddenly had a more specific relationship with everybody in the town, because of the three legged race, and the cheating (laughter).

told in such a way - by use of clothing, props and script rewrites (see chapter 5) - that sends the message that carceral populations deserve to live lives where societal structures permit them to have social mobility to have certain occupations, stable families, and contribute to their community in positive ways.

As we can see, through participating in the town fair activities the men were lightly performing the characters they were cast as. This form of practice was a tactic that the men appropriated in acquiring a sense of who the characters were and in the process what the characters and the play could mean to them. The Constable Warren character is the policeman in the fictional Grovers Corners, who in the play is mostly seen patrolling the streets at night, making sure an intoxicated dweller of the town can make it home safely. Nevertheless, Constable Warren as a character was still an authority figure to the men and the CA playing him. For this CA to be cheating in the tug of war was a satirical play on the character's police identity, trying to win the tug of war by not being imaginatively yanked over when the rest of the men were, simply because he is the town policeman. While amusing and awkward, this was a moment where the men could relate to the play in terms of how they believed a community should or should not be policed.



Figure 7: *Our Town*, Act I, Doc Gibbs talking to George²⁰

²⁰ Photo Credit: Peter Kramer

The goal with these activities was to create a space for the CAs to become closer to the ideas that the play could represent, which, according to TAs in my interviews, did promote greater analytical consideration amongst the CAs regarding the representational significance of the play. As I learned in interviews, the men began imagining what they would like the stability of everyday life to be like for them, and began to see the beauty in the mundane, asking why their home communities have not been allowed to maintain or attain stability. For those that had lacked home, or imagined home being different, or for those that had lost friends or family prematurely, the play could then operate as a metaphor. But while art in this sense was partly a metaphor for life, acting in these moments *was* life itself, as these CA actors, through acting, *became* these characters. While the dissenters originally believed that the SC and this play were not speaking for the wider prison population, they discovered opportunities for agency that would enable them to communicate a larger idea to which the men prison-wide would be able to relate. The men began to see, in their eyes, that with the older clothing that people of color had indeed worn at the time doing a variety of working-class jobs, and with the example that the play had previously been re-envisioned in spaces that were not solely white, that this play was applicable to them. As such, they could all individually play a role and assert their presence theatrically in prison in such a way that they were representing some of the feelings that others held throughout the prison population, thus functioning as artistic leaders for the non-artists. I learned in one interview that one of the CAs who had originally been one of the most vocal dissenters walked up to the director and said “I just want to tell you I was wrong. That play’s the corner of Flatbush Avenue, and I couldn’t see it. You can coach my team anytime”. Another dissenter, who had been adamantly

opposed on the grounds that he was a Muslim and therefore did not connect with the play, later told one of the non-CA actresses “This is my favorite play. This is the play that changed my life and the play that changed who I am”.

While there is of course leadership being enacted within and amongst the CAs and their respective structures, it is worth pointing out that TAs are also wrapped up in this web of leadership. As mentioned above, the program directors and TAs provide ideas to the SC, who then decide upon what they, the CAs, learn regarding interests from the CAs in the program. The TA who directed *Our Town* clearly indicates her role above in facilitating interests this way because she believes it would be beneficial and relevant for



Figure 8: *Our Town*, Act III²¹

her to do so. But alongside this, this director explained that she incorporated a veteran CA as an assistant director for *Our Town* and several other productions. Often the assistant director would be much harder on the cast than she, the director, would be. The director reported that her assistant admonished her for being “too soft” and that she

²¹ Photo credit: Peter Kramer

should not “let them off” so easily. The director stated she explained to her assistant that “...they can hear that from you, but (it’s) the power differential, just because I’m white, I’m a woman, and I’m free, I get to walk out of here. I can’t actually lean on them in the same way that you can”. Nevertheless, having an assistant director is a chance for certain CAs to inject some influence and leadership into the artistic process in managing other actors that the TA may not be able to exert.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of production that require a direct lead from the director themselves. Some of this directorial epistemology requires a certain depth of engagement with the CAs that is necessary to overcome social barriers that are unique in constructing theater in a prison environment. While directors in general may act out a scene for an actor to show them what they, a director leading a production in prison sometimes has to go further, such as with this example of the cemetery scene from Act III of *Our Town*, when the character George has to throw himself at his deceased wife’s grave:

TA: The moment when George collapses at Emily's grave...I remember in the rehearsal room working on it, I think my perception was that the actor who was playing George was nervous or embarrassed to try to follow that stage direction with, you know, twenty of his brothers watching him. And so we talked about that idea of like just profound grief, and again, everybody in that room had his or her own experience of that. Right? So we talked about that for a while. And he looked at me again and he was like, he was getting it but (still not quite). And I thought - on the outside I would never do this - but I was like, “Okay, so I’m going to just show you. You don’t have to do what I’m going to do, but let me just show you once”. And in a way, what I ended up doing I think was just creating a permission. So it wasn’t like ‘do as I do’, or ‘say the line like I’m saying it’, it wasn’t like a line reading. So I just walked through that moment. And one of the running jokes is that the classroom, in the school house, the floor, Adam,

is just disgusting, so dirty, there's like 97 layers of chipped paint and probably asbestos, I don't know, it's disgusting. Anyway, I looked at (the CA playing George) and I said "because I love you I'm going to show you a version of this", right? And so I kind of walked through it and collapsed on the floor and, you know, cried for a moment and then I sort of sit up on my elbow and I was like "so you want to give this a try?" and he was like "yeah!" And I think because I had done that the whole room then kind of leaned into wanting to support (the character playing George) taking a risk; it sort of created a space. So again it was kind of that invitation.

As this passage shows us, directing a play in prison can demand a very physical, demonstrative approach to allow a level of comfort among CAs. As this director articulates, she established a certain form of social permission for the man playing the George Gibbs character to bestow performed emotion in a way that was acceptable for him and his peers. This would have been extremely difficult if the director had not gone to the lengths that she did in extending herself to help create that space.

Furthermore, in some theater productions – *Our Town* included – there are certain roles that are performed by non-CA actors that come into the prison with the program. This often occurs when there are female roles in a given production where it would compromise some of the meaning of the play not to have a female playing a certain role. While this is occasionally permissible, the number of outside actors is still limited. In the case of *Our Town*, there were three females playing female roles, and as such the play was performed as a town of only three women. In one scene in Act I, there is a church choir practice which, in a traditional performance of *Our Town*, is scripted as being an entirely female group of choir singers led by a male organist and vocalist. In this prison production of *Our Town*, it was the three women and all the rest as men, a function of the restrictions on the number of female actors who could be a part of the production. While

this rearranges the dynamics of the play, the outside actors emphasized to me that they were effectively not facilitators in this role. As one female actor said to me:

“Oftentimes when (the program) casts an actress, they *do* look to the pool of people inside to see if anyone, even if they are an actor, might be able to do that part... The skill set between being an actor and a facilitator doesn't always overlap. So I think sometimes it's that of like ‘are we trying to get an actress for this production, or are we trying to get somebody to sort of fill the role?’”.

While this actress explains that skill sets may differ between being a facilitator and functioning as a non-CA actor, it became clear to me in these conversations that it is very difficult if not impossible for a non-CA actor to completely step out of themselves out of the facilitator role. This may be easier if one has not been a facilitator/TA previously with the same group of CAs, although in my interviews it was evident that these non-CA actors and actresses that get recruited to join a production effectively end up enacting artistic leadership through their involvement in theater productions anyway. This is significantly a product of the fact that they have been more conventionally trained than the CAs with whom they are working. While any non-CA actor is under the leadership of the director, like any other acting CA member of a play, and does not make the same decisions, the non-CA actors and actresses end up leading by the example they set in their acting through their skills, whether or not intentionally planned. CAs discussed how there is communication, discursive exchanges and suggestions that get shared among all members of the acting group, such as how to deliver a line better, where to stand, what emotions to express, and other acting techniques. This may occur between non-CA actors and actresses within or outside of a rehearsal. Given these realities, an outside female actor cannot ultimately separate her symbolic status and experience from how the CAs

(in this case men) see the outside actress, and any acting that an actress does alongside the CAs contributes to the overall production and functions as a form of artistic validation for the men. Thus, the data indicates that, while skill sets may be differentiated between non-CA actors/actresses and TAs, power relations become embedded and/or are brought forth from previous social interactions in which non-CAs, through their own independent acting, lead the CAs by their sheer presence in that artistic space.

Leadership of the Individual Self in Theater & Music

While leadership is performed by a variety of individuals in group spaces for the purpose of constructing artistic activity that is intended to occur in group environments, I also contextualize leadership here through the lens of the leadership of the self. As this goes on, we cannot entirely separate the individual self from the group in terms of leadership in its entirety, of course, as there is always some contribution occurring; however, the focus in the leadership of the self in this context is a recognition of how one rises to the occasion or exhibits aesthetic proactivity in the interests of one's *individual* self.

While standalone opportunities for leadership of the self may be less frequent in comparison to group-based leadership, these moments are nevertheless exemplary of agentic tactics that many CAs take seriously. One poignant example of this is one tactical intervention a CA made for himself during the dress rehearsals and before the performances of *Our Town*. As approved props regularly must be less authentic than what a theater production outside of prison might use, the director was able to bring in a swaddled cabbage patch doll to represent characters George and Emily's baby in Act III. The director, the other TAs and actresses explained to me how one CA expressed interest

in holding the swaddled doll, as if it were an actual infant child, before the group started every rehearsal. The TAs reported that this particular CA, wherever he was in the room, would rush over to them and ask if he could hold the doll once it arrived. This man's desire to be as close as he could to the story in the play in part represented his own leadership in how real he wanted his character to be and sought to simulate actually holding a child as much as possible. And, as *Our Town* later became more accepted by the men as being metaphorically relevant for prison, as discussed above, this man was also simultaneously constructing an imagination of himself through the play's characters in imagining himself being closer – socially and physically – to his own family.

Additionally, the director and other TAs spoke about this phenomenon relative to the man who played the character Simon Stimson, who is the choir leader and the stereotypical town alcoholic; in this production Simon was played by a man who saw himself as previously having struggled with substance issues, who in part wanted to play this character for this reason. Thus, both of these CAs sought to be leaders in the production in trying to move as close as they could to the mentality of the characters, leading for themselves so they could lead others. These CAs focused on connecting with their own personal and emotional geographies in order to play the characters that could send a deeper message by contributing to the overall meaning of the play.

Another CA who played several lead roles in different theater productions was also able to access these moments of individualized leadership, where tactics of and for the self were enacted alongside being a leader for the rest of the theater group. This CA auditioned for and, unexpectedly to him, was cast in the role of Lieutenant Kaffee in *A Few Good Men*. As he explained to me in my interview with him, he struggled to

conceptualize the role he had to play as the defense attorney for the characters accused in a military court of murdering a fellow marine. As this CA explained to me, this was difficult for him because the Lieutenant Kaffee character displays a somewhat brazen outlook towards the female gender in the play. This was challenging for this CA because he did not wish to get into character in this way, because he as a person did not want to relate that kind of misogyny, which was significantly a function of the circumstances behind his incarceration (as he explained to me more literally). He explained to me that he had even intentionally tried to blow the audition because he was not interested in the part, yet it was his performative disinterestedness that, according to the director, was key for playing the role. As such, as he was in a way placed into this role, the TAs explained to me that this CA was the best Kaffee they could have had from the other men in the program, and he did not turn the role down. Outside of agreeing to be the first lead in the production, this man explained to me that he was faced with evaluating his own existential angst in the process, an experience that, while uncomfortable, was beneficial to him personally and internally.

This same CA had also been working as an understudy for the 2008 Tracy Letts play *Superior Donuts*, and was asked to step into the lead role when the CA playing the main character was ousted from the production by the SC. The director explained that she approached this CA about his lines – as he had been working as the understudy – about the need to step forward to do this, and he initially refused; with only a few days preparation in the lead role, however, this man was able to assume responsibility for playing the character, which allowed the production to go on (despite carrying the script with him on stage at the behest of the director, covered up so the audience would not see

it²²). Yet while this willingness to support the other members of the production by jumping in at the last minute was warmly welcomed, this rapid period of cramming and preparation just prior to the performance was reportedly rather daunting and emotional for this CA, as it likely would be for anyone. While understudies are present in any production, in prison or not, it is likely that the understudy outside of prison has had more time to prepare and to even work with the performer and receive some training from them. In prison these freedoms are absent. This CA's stress in the lead up to the performance of the play became exposed in the concluding scenes, where the character Franco has three fingers cut off because he is unable to pay gambling debts. This character is supposed to be crying in horror and agony over this, yet the CA playing this character explained that his own personal and emotional anxieties about the rushed preparation came out here *on top of* the character's emotions:

The final scene is me holding my thing and I'm bawling, it's not so much acting, it's feeling the feelings that I would feel if I lost part of my body, which has always been a kind of fear of mine. Anyway, it's all coming out, and it's not clean, it's just fucking sound...So there I was, the understudy a week before the play, and I had not learned a single fucking line because I was an understudy, why am I gonna learn a single goddamn line, (my friend is) gonna do it, he's gonna rock. And then I had to learn every line. And it was – I got through, it was like, do it for the team. But it was also the last thing I wanted to do was be public on stage as the lead person in a play for the entire prison population. At that point I cried in terror, like, literally. I had a friend who after the play (I felt like my) life was over, I just sobbed and he like held me in his arms on the stage, and I fucking, I couldn't stop sobbing, I felt like the end of my life.

²² The director also explained to me that this CA did not refer to the script as much as she, the director, wished he would have. Much of this was likely derived from the CA being self-conscious of the audience seeing him using the script.

As we can see, there is a line between leading for the group and leading for oneself, although they can coincide both temporally and spatially. For this CA to let his emotions go through the character during a play is a tactic in which he is seizing a circumstance where he leads the group through to the end of the performance, but also finds a tactic of channeling his frustrations and anxieties about the stressful preparation for a responsibility that came unexpectedly.

It is also noteworthy to recognize that not all CAs lead by being in what we might call a traditional 'leading role'. Like with any theatrical performance, there are many other contributions in supporting roles on stage and in technical roles off-stage that possess and require leadership. Again, while this leadership supports the collective CA group in the moment, the imperative may be focused on the individual self. One CA related to me his first experience being involved in theater in a New York State facility with the August Wilson play *Jitney*, a play set in Pittsburgh in 1977 surrounding the operations of an illegal taxi-cab station. This CA had the role of being backstage to press a button to produce the electronic sound of the phone ringing in the cab headquarters. This man did not have any spoken lines of his own, nor did he appear on stage in the flesh, nevertheless he was still acting as a character in the play. This CA describes his role here:

I had a keyboard that had the capabilities of making a phone ringing-sound. So I was the phone, but I was not on stage. I wasn't seen by anyone, no one knew I had that role. But it was a life-changing experience for me because when the director would talk to us and teach us about the play and make us understand the story, she asked us 'what do we think the most important role in the play is?', and everybody named their role and the reason why they thought so, and she gave everybody kudos, 'yes that's true, that's true', but she said the most important role in the play

was the phone, and she explained it was actually a character because it had lines, it was cue lines for other people, because when the phone rang, one of the real human characters would answer and they actually had to speak lines to the phone. And that was just like a self-esteem booster for me because I was like, wow, I had a sense of importance in prison, like ‘wow, I have to be at rehearsal, I have to ring the phone!’ So it really helped boost my self-esteem, to help me come out of my depression stage that I was in as a result of being incarcerated.

As we can see, despite fulfilling a function that is seemingly as mundane as pressing a button on a synthesizer, this role had a significant contribution. Not only was this act essential, but this CA was able to be a character in the play in a very subtle way, which had its own identity and relationship with the other characters. This CA was then encouraged to play this role, which he imagined to be a form of agency for him personally, as it was a form of leadership of the self.

Leadership in Music at the Social Scale of the Group

While very clear similarities may be present, leadership assumes different forms depending on the given artistic genre. Within the context of music in carceral space, leadership amongst CAs and TAs is enacted in some unique ways. Within the structure of music workshops, leadership through the act of artistic collaboration becomes essential between CAs as well as between CAs and TAs. As discussed in chapter 3, TAs are faced with a limited amount of time in working with their CAs during the bi-weekly workshops, time which may be shortened due to moving in and out of facilities. Some participants who are part of the workshop sometimes do not receive their call out for unknown reasons (as discussed in chapter 3) and cannot go down into the school building from their cell to join their usual workshop. These geographical circumstances can

prevent lack of access and can make managing the teaching of every single CA a challenge. This lack of organization is constant, as one TA explained to me, saying that “it's not like I can really have people sign up for slots or anything like that”.

In its essence, musical learning space in prison often resembles that of a one room schoolhouse, as there are a range of musical abilities and skill levels present in any given workshop. As initially discussed in chapter 3, the CA participants begin their artistic practice at different points, and some are more advanced than others. Often TAs will do their best in their respective sub-workshops – be it keyboards, strings, horns, guitars, or any instrument – to provide some of their more advanced students with some material that they, the CAs, can then share later at other times outside of the workshop with the less experienced participants. One TA explains this quality of leadership in passing on skills:

There was for some years, an informal schedule that said like Monday night was hip hop night, Tuesday night was reggae night, Wednesday night was Joe's music theory class – one of our smartest students and he would just teach class – and Thursdays something else, Friday something else. And so, those are workplaces where they could be unsupervised and run their own jam sessions and writing sessions....One thing that we haven't done so much explicitly, but that I think about and hopefully demonstrate by example, is good rehearsal bedside manner, just kind of good interpersonal practices that positive collaborative musicians do. And they tell us that they have almost no outlets in their landscape for this kind of collaboration. They're usually in competition with each other over limited resources and, you know, competing for quiet, competing for space, competing for objects.

While opportunities are often infrequent in prison for CAs to share their skills and talents with one another, in non-COVID times, as we can see here, there are environments that are constructed for these purposes. Furthermore, in my interviews TAs reported that CAs

regularly compose and rehearse jointly for the larger performances during these times, with different CAs using their artistic specializations to support other members of the group. It is in these settings at these times that CAs are able to demonstrate their abilities in their respective genres for one another and be a leader for their particular instrument or musical genre, representing what their interests are and what they have been working on in the workshops by sometimes formally instructing others.

The TA quoted above also explained that music sometimes spills-over from the workshops and rehearsals into sacred spaces in prison, which, according to this TA, can become a “major geographical site of music”²³. As such, the collaborations that can happen in workshops and in preparation for performances can end up in church settings. This TA explained that the CAs, while being hierarchy-conscious about the roles they take on, demonstrate a desire to bring their music into sacred spaces in prison based on the religious role they have in those environments. For example, while a priest in a Christian church may be someone employed by the prison, most other roles and responsibilities in carceral religious settings – such as choir directors, or band leaders in a protestant chapel – are conducted by members of the incarcerated population.

Leadership in the Visual Arts

In musical workshops or theater productions there are many people around all at once doing many things, with many noises and distractions, where peers can step in with

²³ I did follow up with several CA musicians as to whether they were participants musically in religious spaces in prison, and some said they were, but nevertheless did not seem interested in providing that much more detail about this. They were not resistant in the sense that they stated refusal to answer the question, but more so that they did not seem interested in providing many details. One man who went to the Catholic chapel described the music as mostly hymnal, with services that were musically very “basic”, whereas the Protestant chapel, which this man did not attend, had music that was “foot-stomping music”, which CAs stated they could reportedly hear throughout their peregrinations around the prison.

support if mistakes get made. This happens because these genres are oriented around a very physical and verbal style of performance. While many CAs in prison can be self-conscious of their performance abilities in the face of others (discussed in greater detail in chapter 5), this structure can lessen the burden of making possible mistakes. As with CAs in music, visual CAs have workshop opportunities to engage in artistic leadership, although in music this often materializes as a much more interpersonal process. Musical leadership in passing on knowledge and skill does occur at the social scale of one-on-one, as does visual arts; however, what makes visual arts unique as a genre in terms of CA leadership roles is that it is remarkably direct. This is to say that CAs teaching other CAs is a very overt act, where verbal and visual instruction is noticed in a less subtle way than in music or theater. This can complicate aesthetic leadership in this genre as it tries to promote agency amongst visual CAs.

Visual arts TAs and several CAs discussed how the workshop space permitted some more advanced CAs to take the lead in running the class, and the TA will operate more like a teaching assistant²⁴. One CA explained how he had devised an entire syllabus for a master's degree course he was taking while he was inside and was able to transpose that over to his visual arts workshop, which permitted him to be the ad-hoc facilitator for his workshop:

I still use the same syllabus...because I still use those prompts to get guys to go within (themselves). For a warm-up, I'd say "draw something from your childhood memory". Some guys come up with some really dark stuff and some guys come up with, you know, sunshine and houses, whatever, it's just a way. Like for me, it was a way to get guys to use *this*, you know? Anyone can draw a

²⁴ The TA will of course be present, but may take a back seat and allow themselves to follow the direction of the CA directing the workshop.

picture of a flower on a table right, but to get it, to start expressing yourself *through* the art, that was what was important to me. And, yeah, it worked, and for a lot of guys, you know, it wasn't about how good it is; I mean I had fundamental principles like first point perspective, second point perspective, and portraiture - a lot of guys were really interested in figuring portraiture and making stuff look real - and I could show them that, but that's the skill, like that takes a lot of work - but just getting it out doesn't take any work... What I wanted to do was be able to do a demonstration of it on the board, because for me, if I can see it being done, *and* there's instructions, you get the audio, you get the visual, because everyone learns different ways. So, thinking about that pedagogy, I wanted to be able to hit every single one of them, and then walk around. Like I would do my demos, and then I would teach guys how to break it into geometric shapes, and then draw those shapes and then you got your roughed-in eye, and then you could start putting in all the little details. And I would do it real quick. So they'd have a visual cue. And then I would walk around. And there were instructions. So I tried to think of all those different ways to get guys to learn. And yeah, that's a lot of work.

As this passage illustrates, this CA was significantly in charge of this workshop and was able to deliver lessons with his own pedagogy and set of teaching methods, in such a way that it brought the art out of the other members of the workshop. This CA tasked himself with considering how other visual CAs learn and tasked himself with passing on his advanced knowledge to them. While he explains this was productive and worked for the men in his workshop, this was not without challenges. Issues would arise when the CAs would work in pairs to collaborate on a piece, and this CA as the facilitator felt as if he needed to intervene in what people were doing:

(There is) a piece that me and this other artist did, it was excellent. We worked on it together. And I kind of came up with a design, and then left blank spots and he filled it in, and he did it his way, and I did my way. And it's a really cool piece, because it's two artists. It's four like 8 X 10 pieces, and we each did two, but together they make one

composition. And I've done set design working with other people, and that is that is challenging, because sometimes I'm usually the one who kind of has a say-so, but not always. And then there was a lot of conflict sometimes because I have a certain level that I want things to be at, a certain level of perfection that's not perfect but it has to look good. And if you're doing something that doesn't meet that standard, it's hard to tell someone like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna paint over what you just did, because', you know? That was always difficult for me, and I know I've made people upset a few times, but if you're doing something and you have certain (standard), we all agree, like it's gonna be at a certain level. I probably would be upset if someone did that to me. But I would try to help them make it better, but then at some points I have just redone things, which looking back maybe wasn't the best thing to do (laughter).

While the CA facilitator sought to enact leadership through constructive criticism to help improve the other men's work, some CAs sometimes found this level of intervention to be overwhelming. Even though in collaborating they are aspiring to attain a certain artistic objective or standard, CAs are often uneasy about their level of confidence with their work, as painting over what someone else has done can be damaging to someone's pride. This is often difficult to mitigate in a carceral environment, where individuals feel very exposed and emotionally vulnerable, as they must exist in a space where they are labeled by their conviction, which leads to other stereotypes and affects how other incarcerated people or COs treat them. Thus, emotions are very uniquely fragile in carceral-artistic space and there is a fine line where CAs who lead other CAs in visual instruction must balance their own skills with the diversity of others' abilities. Based on my interviews with other visual CAs, this can dissuade them from feeling confident about what they are producing.

While CAs take on leadership roles in visual arts workshops at their own

proactive social scale such as this, TAs sometimes must take a more dominant role. In attending the retreat of formerly incarcerated musicians from New York State, I learned in passing conversation that TAs in their visual arts program - that some of these CAs were a part of in addition to their musical endeavors - were trained by the organization not to “look the men in the eye”, nor to “critique their work”. The man reminiscing about this was rather bemused and sarcastic in his tone, and one of the other men who also remembered this was echoing the absurdity behind this pedagogy by also shaking his head and rolling his eyes in a disapproving manner. In navigating the workshop and in trying to give pointers, these CAs described how this TA²⁵ was having trouble providing feedback to the men to help them improve their work in trying to abide by the standards with which she was trained by the organization. Accordingly, the program gives these TAs these directives with the objective of maintaining an appropriate social distance and more formal relationship with the men. But according to these CAs, the drawing exercises that the group was learning were too hard to do without the TA actually ‘critiquing their work’, and so she eventually stated to the men “Okay, we’re in this learning and creative environment together, this is what we’re going to do to make this class good”. A decision like this is a departure from how the organization who hired this TA wanted her to lead the workshop, yet the TA saw that she needed to take the lead in her own way in the moment for the benefit of the CAs, and this required discussing with the men what they could do to improve.

Summation

CAs exert agency and resistance through the performance of leadership in artistic

²⁵ This was for a drawing workshop, specifically.

participation in carceral space. These become tactics through an individual's contribution to the overall creative project at hand within the collective of the group, where CAs aspire to make artistic endeavors 'happen' because of how they assert their role and responsibility within the wider aesthetic activity. As we have seen, this may occur through a SC, assuming an acting role in the moment, or a TA having the freedom to allow CAs to lead other CAs in artistic instruction on some level. These dynamics coalesce in group settings around the arts having a representational quality, where imaginations are communicated through different aesthetic practices. There is a present linkage between TAs and CAs in enacting the leadership necessary to make the art more accessible for all participants. As we have seen, TAs frequently strive to devolve decision-making responsibility to the CAs themselves to establish as much of a zone of freedom as they can, where they can claim tactics and therefore carry out artistic practice in their own way. As Trounstein reminds us regarding how incarcerated people can construct power for themselves in group settings (2007; 2008), we can observe that this occurs not just with theater but also with music and visual arts as a contribution towards the group. Additionally, as Black and queer geographies remind us, this may be internalized in one's imagination where the group does not have access (Allen et al 2009; Livermon 2014), as creative everyday formulations of agency and resistance through leadership can be claimed by individuals outside of what the dominant group interest, motive, or imagination is.

I also show here how artistic tactics of leadership can also be claimed for the individual self as forms of personalized geography. Literature often contextualizes personal geographies as products of power relations from a top-down perspective, where

individuals' identities are defined by being victims of power (Milligan 2000; Valentine 1998; Willis et al 2016); yet with this data we can observe that personal geographies are not only aesthetic in nature, but also that personal emotions and identities in space are constructed by how the subaltern – such as CAs – tactically assert social roles for themselves as a group or as individuals. Additionally, like Barak and Stebbins (2017) suggest, we can observe the carceral arts functions as a technique of articulating a message, either for the group or the individual. As I have shown in this chapter, leadership is one such component of this. We recognize that this is bolstered by positive social relationships (Alexander 2010; Forte 2008) and a collective sense of empowerment (Cohen and Padilofsky 2013) and community (Lucas 2013) created through emotional pride of artistry (Abrahams 2012).

But while there are these group dynamics, with the data that I present here I go beyond the arts in prison literature in demonstrating that this sense of empowerment and community is not without conflict and disagreement. As the examples illustrate, there may be conflicting outlooks and interests in how this is conducted. The performance of artistic leadership may be collective, yet the geographies of aesthetic agency are uneven. As structures like SCs and TAs are power relations and present an element of symbolic authority, CAs must navigate these aesthetic directions *in addition to* navigating the scarcity of artistic opportunities and resources in prison *writ large*. Such as with the example of *Our Town*, individual members of the theater group may *continue* to silently disagree with the decision or the play's meaning; but because of certain social hierarchies (Morse 2016) – such as with SCs or more experienced CAs – they continue to conform to the group's overall desires because dissenters still wish to enact agency through their

sheer artistic participation in a carceral environment. This is to suggest that while the artistic group may present themselves as having uniform interests and goals, others may disagree, and disagreements in artistic decisions presents a certain awkwardness in this regard. Thus, by examining the carceral through leadership in this manner helps to show us that artistic imperatives and desires do not have nearly the level of continuity that the arts in prison literature perhaps suggests. These discontinuities also indicate to us that agency and resistance are not purely binary categories, as there are fluctuations of artistic and discursive intent in artistic creation and performance. Where this nuance exists is that in a group setting an individual may go along with an idea or practice, yet it is still possible that some CAs' voices can be silenced and might disagree with how or why something is being done.

As touched on briefly towards the end of this chapter, self-consciousness and how CAs see themselves can affect their aesthetic development. TAs seek to bestow as many possibilities for self-leadership among CAs as they can in opening up as much space as they can for CAs to engage in leadership when they see this as becoming inhibited, yet this can be daunting for CAs. This is of course because CAs at times must carry this on their shoulders constantly within carceral space, in artistically leading others and in negotiating their artistic, individual selves. It is this topic of how CAs see themselves and how they see others to which we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

THE ROLE OF SPECTACLE IN PRODUCTION & CONSUMPTION OF ART

While the act of doing leadership in carceral-artistic spaces requires a certain evaluation of how CAs interpret themselves relative to other CAs and TAs, this examination of asserting oneself into a larger artistic project ultimately blends into CAs *seeing and being seen* in this process. To lead the group and/or oneself is to make the group or the individual seen and therefore recognized and present in carceral space, which often becomes a tactic for CAs to demonstrate their aesthetic abilities in spaces of performance, that is, the sites and times wherein CAs present their artistic creativity to other CAs, the non-CA prison population, as well as TAs and members of the public. As such, the consumption of artistic performance and acknowledgement from audiences becomes a significant factor influencing CAs' artistic creativity and directs CA's feelings and choices about how they wish their art to be consumed by their peers, TAs, and the public.

CA's attempts to negotiate being seen in a particular artistic way reflects how they wish their identities to be recognized. As noted in the last chapter, within carceral social life how one might be perceived by others is perhaps an inevitable reality of existing within carceral space, in which CAs are emotionally vulnerable and self-conscious about their abilities and how others interpret them relative to this. Thus, there is a gaze present within prison populations that goes on underneath the more disciplinary, authoritative gaze, which cannot ever be entirely escaped (Foucault 1977; ACE Steering Committee 2020). I conceptualize this as the *artistic-spectacular gaze*, which occurs through how TAs, CA peers, and the non-artistic incarcerated population witness, perceive and function as the audience for CA's work. CA's own perceptions of this gaze

can affect and direct their aesthetic creativity. This can also result not in a panoptic but a more *synoptic* gaze – a social arrangement where the many observe and monitor the few (Mathiesen 1997) – where CAs, as a minority identity group, are viewed by the COs, TAs, and the rest of the prison population. Consequently, CAs may view themselves in relation to how they perceive the ways in which they think others might perceive them. These social arrangements constitute what I define here as *spectacle*, that is, the ways in which CAs attempt to be observed, affirmed, and recognized in the *performance and presentation* of their artistic abilities. At the same time, spectacle occurs when CAs see and interpret other individuals and groups in carceral space, where such observational acts are also a factor directing artistic creativity.

Spectacle & Informal Resistance with Music

As noted in chapter 3, the yard becomes a space where artistic practice occurs outside of workshops. While workshops play a role in opening up the possibility of CAs using non-workshop space for aesthetic practice on their own terms, artistic engagements in these other micro-artistic environments are not necessarily organized around working on material to bring back to the workshop. In my interviews, CAs who were incarcerated in New York State spoke about doing a rap cypher on a regular basis out on the yard. This consisted of a circle where people take turns sharing their lines and hearing what others have to say through this medium. These were reported to be very free-flowing spaces open to many possibilities for personal expression. CAs explained that someone would perhaps beat a rhythm out on a table, a bench, or another object, although this was often unnecessary because, as one CA stated, “your lyrics and your delivery are so tight that you don't even need anyone to provide a rhythm and they provide their own”. A CA

who was formerly incarcerated in Oregon also confirmed for me that cyphers occurred on the yard in the prison where he was incarcerated, and that participants exhibited similar qualities in terms of the tightness and organization of the lyrics. This CA and the CAs from New York State stated that raps that are done in the cypher could theoretically touch on any theme or topic, ranging from a person's emotions, a letter they received, nervousness they are feeling, as well as subtle or overt criticisms of prison operations. Thus, the cypher is both an individual and collaborative activity, where people bring their own verses or make them up on the spot with the intention of having their peers hear and acknowledge what they are saying by grooving to the rap with them.

Similarly, the CA quoted above also said that songs could be written on the yard based on what they were seeing others doing around them, which this man very consciously described as a technique of resistance. This CA describes how one of his friends wrote a song on the spot about a soccer game being played on the yard. Specifically, the song criticized the prison administration for not providing shin guards for a soccer game, because the authorities did not care about soccer players getting hurt:

CA: We would do something with (our) instruments, and we would just make up the song...on the spot. Johnny was making the song up on the spot because we put things in it that were happening right now, like how brutal the soccer game between two teams is, like while we're watching it happen. I mention that because the chorus was 'no shin guards', and it was just this whole thing about these guys – they're kicking each other, destroying each other – and he's like, "but, um, you know, but *they still can't get no shin guards*", he was just singing a song about "what are you gonna do with shin guards", like what, what laws are they gonna break? Who are they gonna put in jeopardy? "Why can't we get shin guards". And the interesting thing is that while it was amusing – because we're watching this thing happen, and I'm telling you some of those soccer matches were, oh my god – but also there's an underlying sort of

thing that's happening too, which is acknowledging that there's no reason in the world we shouldn't be allowed to have shin guards. Like, there's no reason we shouldn't be; the only reason that you would not want me to have shin guards is so my shins *won't* be protected. And the only person that you should care that I'm trying to protect my shins from is *you*; do you intend to hurt my shins? That's the only reason that you'd be like 'no, you can't have shin guards'. But anyway, that understanding...the removal of other opportunities to be or do *anything* other than the thing that they have prescribed you to be or do, was kind of inherent in the song at the same time.

As this CA explains, the only reason that the men on the yard playing soccer do not have shin guards is because their bodies' physical safety and well-being is not of importance to the prison authorities²⁶. In response to this, there are certain artistic engagements which very overtly aim to be tactically subversive that demonstrate how CAs are conscious of their structural oppression. While the musical skills that the men were using here were likely in-part made accessible through the formal workshop model, these musicians were able to combine those skills in reacting to their own inequalities by directly critiquing them. The CAs watching this soccer game did so *as spectators*, observing this phenomenon and converting this reality into a topical and political song, to bring not just comic relief but also some humanity to the absurdity of why this issue exists²⁷. So, other non-CA members of the prison population being seen by CAs occurs spectacularly and is

²⁶ It is likely also, however, that prison authorities are concerned that shin guards are objects that could not be accounted for, and/or are preoccupied with how shin guards could be used for other non-athletic purposes.

²⁷ This particular event was also made possible by the fact that the CA who started the song had a guitar with him at the time. This CA and his formerly incarcerated CAs spoke about how he would walk around the prison with the guitar, making up songs and playing in random locations. This evidently did not ruffle too many feathers with Cos (even when jamming right in front of them at times), which allowed this CA to possess the versatility to be creative as he moved through carceral spaces. The men discussed how this act somewhat converted these spaces briefly into sites that were more fun or amusing, sites that normally were not musical or artistic. Thus, place may be made in prison, yet very frequently in a fleeting manner.

seized as an opportunity not just for agency, but also discursive resistance; in this sense, the collective imagination of subverting (Routledge 2003; 2017) the inequality of lacking something as quotidian as shin guards is panoptically claimed from below as an opportunity for creative agency, but merges into resistance in critiquing the prison system this way. At the same time, the men writing this song on the spot are seeing each other in real time and using the *spectacle of each other* – seeing and hearing one another in the moment – to invent the lyrics and chords to construct their discursive subversion. As two CAs emphasized to me, doing this in and of itself is “automatically subversive”. So, while these artistic expressions do not seek to overturn the carceral system, they are mundane acts that try to reclaim space and consciously critique carceral power’s unevenness.

Spectacle & Music: More Formalized Approaches

When it comes to the performance of music formally in carceral space, however, there are a variety of geographical circumstances that influence both the desire for CAs to be heard and seen by others. This is to say that for CAs to engage in musical tactics in prison is for them to display their abilities and creations in some way, where artistic agency is defined by the spatial diffusion of musical creativity in and across a given carceral environment. The data I gathered from my interviews and observations with CAs and TAs in New York State shows that this most often occurs through live performance for other non-CAs within the prison population, as well as concerts for the public and the CAs’ families. Of the two different music programs I examined in New York State, these concerts occur at least 3 – 4 times a year in non-COVID times. As such, while workshops are designed for the men to work on whatever instruments, songs, compositions, or styles

that they wish, the workshops also function as a time and space for preparing for these quarterly concerts. Thus, while TAs open up the space for the men to have the opportunity to essentially make their own syllabus (as discussed in chapter 3) and follow their own interests, the design is also meant to work towards perfecting a musical endeavor that can be shared with other members of the prison population outside of the music program, and with the public, if possible.

As CAs spend much time in and outside of workshops preparing for concerts, there is frequently much apprehension amongst them regarding how their work will be received and interpreted. In my interviews CAs emphatically emphasized how, when in prison, they were most interested in making music first individually to express themselves to themselves²⁸, but they are constantly thinking about it in terms of how their peers will hear the music. According to both CAs and TAs many CA musicians perform in front of audiences when they are beginners, and as such CAs can become very preoccupied about taking a risk playing poorly in front of a group of people. Most CAs who perform or share their art with a wider audience in some way spoke to me in interviews about this hyper and heightened awareness about how others in the prison might view the quality of their work, and how this would reflect on them. As a female CA who was formerly incarcerated in Connecticut told me, artistic credibility is important to people because judgment from others, including COs, can affect a person's safety, both psychologically and physically. To show one's emotions too openly or in the wrong way can be a form of letting one's guard down, so to speak. The silver lining to

²⁸ CAs are typically still interested in making music for their individual selves when they are home as well. See chapter 6.

this, however, is that to help mitigate these issues during these particular performances TAs typically play alongside CAs in an ensemble fashion. This social dynamic helps to ease tensions and helps CAs feel like they are being taken more seriously by their peers as they play alongside professionals who have status when they enter a facility. TAs spoke to me about how CAs who are new to songwriting write their first song and they suddenly see the power of it. This discovery is usually followed by these CAs asking to be the person out front during a concert leading the performance of their own material in the ensemble, as one TA stated, “to delight their peers”.

As I state above, CA’s apprehension and occasional reluctance about presenting themselves artistically to others affects how they share their skills and talents, often due to the symbolic status that some CAs see other CAs and TAs as having. By symbolic status here I suggest that there are individuals and groups - namely the carceral population and TAs - who CAs see as having an elevated credibility because they are the consumers and educators, respectively, of the CA’s music. Therefore, CAs are frequently thinking about whether their artistic work is ‘good enough’ to be heard and witnessed. One CA in New York State explained to me that even though he had been participating in one program as a keyboardist and had been involved in the program for many years, he never felt comfortable sharing his compositions with his TAs until right before he was released. In this CA’s own words:

CA: (The TAs would ask us) “you got something that you feel is decent? Or even if it's not, even if it's half-assed, submit it. We'll sit down with you. We'll fine-tune it and get to where you think you need it to be. And we'll plug it and make it sound like something. We're professional musicians. That's what we do”. (pause) I was never able to do that. I never felt comfortable. Except at the very end,

right before I got out, I submitted a piece. I still to this day think that that piece was fucking half-assed, man.

AM: Submitted for a performance?

CA: For performance, yeah. So what would happen is they would come in and we'd go "help us out. Teach us, you know, this notation, theory, read music, write music"; and then they'd have us submit pieces. So we could play together on stage (for the rest of the) population, which was incredible. So all the guys did, incredible, incredible music, phenomenal. (pause) I was never able to do that. Except for one last time, everybody was surprised. They asked 'are you submitting a piece'? I said 'yeahhh, I'm submitting it'. (My TA), he fine-tuned it, he was so psyched. He's like I'm dying, and then he was even more psyched because it was in odd-beat, it was in five-four. He said "it's in odd meter, oh my god, this is amazing! Great! I'm gonna kill this!" And it came out pretty nice.

AM: Right. And you were just anxious about the other people playing music with you, their perceptions of your music? Or just the audience hearing your music? Was that what you were worried about?

CA: Good question. Yes, yes, and yes. I was also worried about the fact that I had so little experience in music. I had so little experience with music that, you know, people might not want to hear that shit. They might say 'Come on. This sucks.' I mean, not the (program and TA) folks, I'm talking about my peers. And just the fact that I was in this program meant that I was representing my peers. That's what it meant to me. And for me to submit sub-par work in their name, right, so to speak –

AM: – Even though it's in *your* name. You're all making music at the same time.

CA: Right. So I feel like even though I put this together, everyone is with me on this thing, like this is everyone's music. Because when they look at me, they see them, and when they see them, they see me. You know what I mean? So I would just say, I would just feel like 'fuuuck, I don't want to let...some (program director) folks are going to hear this, or whoever's in the audience is going to hear this and think that, you know, 'it's such a waste of time. These

guys aren't musicians. There's no musicians in here'. Know what I mean? And that...I always carry that with me. I don't know why that was so heavy on my back but it was, it really was.

AM: Did that piece that you did submit end up being performed?

CA: Yeah, it did. And (the TA) smoked it – I mean that's just (my TA), but everyone smoked it. The piece wasn't as tight as it obviously could have been because I didn't submit it to them in time for them to sort of tune it up, you know what I mean? I was still hesitating about whether or not I should submit. I submitted it at the very last second. And (my TA) made some changes but it was rushed 'cause I didn't give it to them in enough time. Usually it'd be submitted 6 months ahead of time. But for what I gave them and what they turned it into, I was like, 'holy shit, this is decent, man'. Yeah, it would have been a lot more decent had I given more time to clean it up really, really nice. But they did perform it.

As we can see from this interview, this CA expressed how he held a heightened awareness about his work. As a member of the music program, this CA is in a sense a leader for everyone else, believing that the quality of his music needs to spectacularly represent others to themselves. This CA's preoccupied emotions were also exacerbated by how he perceived his music might be spectacularly received by his TAs. The CA quoted above expressed to me how he felt as if, because his TAs had spent so much time volunteering and taking time out of their own schedules to come into the prison to teach the CAs, that to expose one's work to them could result in letting them down, indicative of how many CAs perceive their TAs as having a spectacular, symbolic status, coming in from the outside. These anxieties can also be augmented by how the rest of the prison population interprets a CA's music during non-workshop times. For example, one TA explained that in the facility where he volunteers, during the traditional Friday evening

performances the non-CA crowd can be cruel and occasionally synoptically heckle some of the performers²⁹, as the non-CA members of the prison population are in this context the many observing the few. This TA discussed that his students have complained to him about people from the general population like this booing the performers with the phrase ‘yahh’³⁰, interrupting the musicians and heckling them between songs. This TA, who has been working with the program for over a decade, explained that this does not go on when the TAs are present, but nevertheless this rhetorical vituperation operates as a form of humiliation. TAs stated that some CAs are deterred from performing at these times because of this as reputations are fragile, and CAs do not wish for their peers to break down their sense of self on top of the fact that prison makes it difficult enough to maintain an identity with scarce artistic resources, in addition to the stigma of conviction and incarceration. Yet for CAs to continue to demonstrate this inexorability and be willing to perform despite being spectacularly ridiculed demonstrates their commitment to agentic tactics, defining and constructing an artistic identity for themselves.

In my interviews it was evident that many TAs were quite aware of these fluctuating feelings of confidence among their students. As I mention above, TAs seek to de-center these insecurities by structuring concerts in such a way that CAs play alongside the TAs when they perform, in an effort to ease tensions and open up this space further for CAs. This helps to construct a more comfortable performance environment because there is a quality of support given when the TAs, as professionals, either lead or are led by CAs in CAs’ own compositions. This becomes spectacle when CAs are seen and

²⁹ In this context, the non-CAs are the majority group, and the CAs are the minority.

³⁰ The ‘yahh’ pronunciation does not sound like ‘yeah’, but as if it were the German word for yes, or ‘ja’.

heard, not just by their TAs, but by the non-CA population, because participation in a music program is selective and therefore carries an aura of credibility with it. This performed credibility can occur off-stage as well, as during my interviews several CAs admitted that at times they ended up developing a very clique-like atmosphere amongst themselves, where seeing themselves and each other in the group as members of the music program did lead to an exclusive mentality at certain moments. Despite these perhaps unequal exclusionary social groupings, for those in these clique-like associations this imagination functions as a technique of agency, as this exclusionary outlook and behavior can construct a sense of empowerment and excitement about what artistic genres, topics or approaches are preferable and are worth greater attention. Simultaneously, others' artistic agency outside of these exclusive, more elite groups can also be silenced because of this.

One interesting element of this that I observed in my interviews and during my observations was that this culminates in "elitist" behavior at times within the music programs themselves, such as with workshop activities being defined by a core group of men who had been involved for longer than other, newer members³¹. What is unique about this social clustering within workshop space, performance space and other micro-artistic spaces throughout the prison is that this artistic elitism becomes a formation of agency in and of itself. CAs are able to create place this way because they can carry it with them to a certain extent, as the creativity of place is very impermanent across these micro-artistic environments. This elevated sense of being and existing helps CAs to

³¹ One CA who spoke of this awkward and potentially problematic element to the workshop social structure was discussing how he and others were trying to incorporate others and minimize their "elitist" mentalities and approaches.

construct not only feelings of greater personal security and intelligence but allows them to also appear this way in the eyes of other CAs and non-CAs. As such, CAs' erudite artistic imaginations of themselves become a tactic of navigating carceral life, even though this may exclude other CAs at times who are less experienced, whose agency is not always enabled by this group mentality.

However, in terms of performing for audiences, there are situations where program directors and TAs may supersede CA's artistic interests. As stated in chapter 3, CAs' participation in music programs is defined by what they want to learn; yet, relative to formal concert performances, TAs and the organization leadership sometimes will decide on a particular theme. The CAs may be involved in choosing this, although sometimes they have less of a voice. According to TAs, the material that CAs compose for concerts is reportedly sometimes focused in a particular direction. The stated reason for this is that organizations have donors, and because concerts are occasionally filmed or audio recorded, program and executive directors want their CAs to produce a symposium that is uplifting or inspiring around a certain predefined theme. This coordination is therefore important for representing the organization and the program in a way that is imagined to be attractive to the public. One TA was slightly critical of this because of how it can end up channeling creativity:

I think...they write a little bit of what they think we want to hear. The (other music) program, they're a little more focused on producing like an inspiring product for their donors and stuff, they want to have a beautiful video of an uplifting concert around a solid theme. And with only, you know, really good performances by people. So, there's a little bit of, I think...self-censorship that men do when they're writing for those concerts, that they want to do something on topic for the year, and that is, kind of, I don't know it's – it can be kind of an anodyne, as they're not

wanting to be seen as negative people, they're wanting to have a positive message. They're gonna *want* to look angry. (But) there's a little bit of model-inmate behavior that I think that they feel that they need to do.

Thus, a unique disciplinary structure emerges in how musical creativity is performed in concert spaces. This design is focused on constructing an acoustically pleasing presentation, where programs and TAs are interested in constructing a spectacle that, in their minds, satisfies public consumption. One TA complained about this aspect of the program, that at times concerts take on a “Roman Empire”-type of quality, where the program feels a need to construct a spectacle of itself to convince the institution that it should be there. As such, creativity is perhaps not nearly as free flowing as it might be in some concerts.

While many musical compositions are largely instrumental in nature, the diversity of styles that CAs learn and perform through the workshops incorporate written song lyrics. In asking both TAs and CAs as to whether they had to be hyper-conscious of their songwriting due to the possibility of authoritative censorship, most mentioned that they did not remember this being a problem that they had to regularly navigate. As such, CAs’ ability to represent themselves through written song lyrics is something that appears not to be directly curtailed very frequently, although CAs are aware that they are methods of lyrical expression that will not be permissible. One TA explains how some CAs look at this relative to their desire to be creative:

We've...had angry rap songs about the administration that we thought might be problematic. They might be. But the guards at the concerts don't seem to care or pay much attention. And, well, we do have one student who believes that he – he did a, he did a song that was critical of staff. His story is that he ran into somebody's foot by accident, a corrections officer or officers’ foot by accident, rolling a

cart while he was cooking in the mess hall, and that the officer called it assault, and had him put in solitary for a while, at least. (That student) believes that it was retaliation for the song. We have no way at all to verify that, and, I think it's also possible that (that student) feels that it's exciting to think that his song had that power, that it would need to get shut down, you know, that it would cause this kind of thing...I think the administration feels that as long as it's not ugly – like, we *have* been cautioned about profanity – I think that we would hear about it if there was a song that was just really offensive. But they drop critical lines in here and there, and it at all seems to be fine. So yeah, they do get pointed and local, but I think in general they protect themselves by being a little bit, in my opinion, too general...I think it's something that novices do when they're writing songs, and a function of their kind of self-censoring in their environment, that they tend to write in generalities, writ(ing) songs that are kind of positive in general and obvious ways.

As we can see, there is a certain interest on the part of CAs in believing that their songwriting could be discursive because of how authorities might react to it. This is not necessarily done so much to test power per se, but rather is derived out of a sense of the spectacle of the self, that to be punished for one's art functions as a form of resistance. Like in the example above, because a song *might* be able to disrupt institutional power's operations, music may operate as a sense of positive, aesthetic validation because it is imagined as possessing provocative artistic qualities, i.e., it is a well-written song³². Other TAs spoke about how there is at times, in their opinion, a certain sense of naivete among some CAs about how far-reaching their musical compositions can be; this often occurs a la stories and rumors about the internet and viral videos that could gain much spectacular attention beyond the walls of prison, a medium whose access is generally

³² As there is not necessarily an objective definition of what defines 'good' art here, TAs typically see something as well-written if it is unique and has meaning for the CA (see also Williams 2012, p. 240 on "high art").

precluded from incarcerated individuals. Some CAs reportedly have high hopes and aspirations for becoming successful artists after going home – where potentially subversive prison music could become famous online – yet they do not fully understand the realistic constraints of this happening. CAs’ imaginations about the potential of their music to make influential, spectacular waves within that immediate environment can sometimes occlude their ability to appreciate the limited possibilities of this; yet, this imagination of how spectacular their music could hypothetically be nevertheless translates into these slightly imagined and romanticized³³ geographies of possibility, and therefore functions as a tactic of agency and resistance.

As we can see thus far, spectacle is regularly present in the lead up to and within concerts and performances, whether it is directed and affected by preoccupation of how CAs believe other CAs, non-CAs, TAs or the public might interpret their identities or their artistic work, or whether it is a product of the desire to make a statement or provide social commentary that CAs want non-CA individuals and groups to see and/or hear for purposes of recognition. But while spectacular presentation of the arts often intentionally operates in front of groups, artistic spectacle may be contrived accidentally, being organically produced and consumed by other individuals in carceral space. This can happen when music can move through the prison through its own diffusion. A female CA who was incarcerated in the state facility in Connecticut described how she used her songwriting abilities to navigate being locked in solitary confinement by writing lyrics

³³ One TA explained how this romanticization about what power or reach CAs believe their music *could* potentially have in the world beyond prison is often a breath of fresh air for TAs, even if CAs’ expectations are set somewhat high here; as this TA said to me, it is nice to see this because the CAs are, in his words, “romantic in ways that jaded New York session musicians like us are not”.

and music in her head, and without any writing materials had to write her songs verbally. One of these compositions was one that this woman titled “The Seg³⁴ Song”, briefly mentioned in chapter 3, which this woman was inspired to write because of the dark, cold, unclean, and unhealthy conditions of being in solitary confinement, which ended up becoming a song sung by others:

“I wrote a song in there, and it was called The Seg Song, and it became very catchy. I sang it over and over and over and over until I heard a little knock on the door, and it was mental health asking me if I needed mental help (light laughter). But it was the only way of me keeping my sanity. And then the next morning they come and handcuff you and walk you down to the shower...and I hear somebody in the shower (singing) – ‘I did it, got a ticket, now I’m going to Seg, I did it, got a ticket, now I’m going to Seg’ – it was the song I wrote. And now I’m hearing it. Now all the girls start singing it together. ‘I did it, got a ticket, now I’m going to Seg, I did it, got a ticket, now I’m going to Seg’. So people knew the song! So it became a thing. And so I got out of Seg, and things were going well for me, they let me go to the east side, I had my piano. But the first day I was there I got called into a room and I was petrified, I thought they were going to send me back to the west side, I was so nervous. I went in...and they asked “Can you sing The Seg Song for us?” Oh my god, you’ve gotta be kidding me! So here I am going ‘I did it, got a ticket, now I’m going to seg’, and now all the counselors know the song.

When this CA sang the song for me during my interview with her, she sang it as she sang and wrote it inside, which comes off at a quick clip of about 170 beats per minute, with the rhythm occurring on the on-beat and having punk-like qualities. These features allow the song to be accessible and it easy to be learned by others only after hearing it less than a handful of times. This woman explained how it was not just other incarcerated women

³⁴ The word ‘Seg’ here is shorthand for Segregation, often termed Administrative Segregation, or AdSeg in some state facilities. ‘Seg’ can occasionally be a space of isolation other than the traditional ‘solitary confinement’, although it also frequently operates as an alternate label for the same space.

who were learning the song and singing it as they moved about through the different spaces of the prison, but that COs even began singing it as they were walking down the halls of the facility. This CA spoke about how excited she was that her writing could generate such responses, as unintentional as they may have been. This geographical diffusion of song was a source of inspiration for this CA, that her skills could have a subconscious impact that others would consume.

This woman also explained that following these series of events, other women in the prison would approach her and ask her to convert poems that they wrote into songs for them, an activity which became its own workshop. “The Seg Song” and its catchiness had spatially spread in such a way that this woman had acquired a certain spectacular credibility in the eyes of the other incarcerated women, and it was this representational presence to which the other women were drawn as they sought feedback in creatively representing and communicating themselves with their poetry. In effect the other women writing poetry became an audience for this woman as a songwriter, while this CA was an audience for the women sharing poetry with her. While she authored “The Seg Song” in prison, this woman had spent a career before her incarceration working as a songwriter and was originally signed to a record label, and as such had professional experience in music before coming to prison, which is not necessarily the norm; yet these skills allowed this woman to write songs for and ultimately *with* the other women, ranging in style from inspirational songs, rap songs with choruses, and other short dramatic musical pieces. This woman stated that she enjoyed doing this because it gave the other women – who, by her definition, were considerably younger than her – hope, by demonstrating back to them their own creative abilities through this collaborative approach. This CA later

became a member of a formal art program while she was incarcerated, where she continued this work. Yet it was certain geographical circumstances – such as solitary confinement – that played a role in constructing these artistic responses and in discovering these women’s tactics of expression. And as we can observe, spectacle may arise more organically like this as an unintended outcome, which is then more deliberately plucked as a tactic for artistic performance in carceral space.

Spectacle in Theater

While leadership of the group and of the self is accessed and assumed as a tactic of resistance within the carceral arts, these acts of leadership can blend and culminate in displays based upon how art might be perceived in carceral space. CAs’ design of their theatrical and visual works can take on a spectacular dimension as well.

Harkening back to the example of *Our Town* – as it was performed in a prison facility in New York State – this was an artistic engagement discussed by several CAs and TAs as having a representational quality in how it was delivered. As mentioned in chapter 3, the play’s script was re-written at certain points to better match the setting in which the performance was taking place. In the first act of *Our Town* the Stage Manager narrates the location and demographics of the town. As the traditional script stipulates, the town is placed in New Hampshire, with the particular latitude and longitude given for its absolute location³⁵. To make this more representative of the prison itself where this production was taking place, as it opposed to the original script’s location of New Hampshire, the theater company changed the location that the Stage Manager says to “The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New York – just across the Westchester

³⁵ Ironically, the coordinates given in the original script of *Our Town* do not even fall in New Hampshire.

line”, also including the exact latitude and longitude of the prison as the town³⁶.

Similarly, when the Stage Manager explains where in the town the churches are, the script also added “the mosque is up the hill” after “the Catholic church is over beyond the tracks” in order to recognize CAs and others in the prison population who identified as Muslim³⁷.

At this juncture in the play, the character Professor Willard is invited on stage by the stage manager to speak about the demographics of Grovers Corners. In this passage the script was re-written where Professor Willard talks of the Iroquois as the original inhabitants of the area rather than Thornton Wilder’s problematically fictitious ‘Cotahatchee’ relative to the area in what we now call New Hampshire that inspired the play³⁸. And in discussing the ethnic make-up of the town, this Grovers Corners is rewritten as having majority “Black African, brown-eyed stock” to acknowledge the racial and ethnic presence of the carceral Grovers Corners, rather than the somewhat eugenic “English brachiocephalic, blue-eyed stock” as espoused in the original script, which would not be nearly as accurate for this carceral population. This description by Professor Willard is followed by Mr. Webb, the editor of the town newspaper, who is asked by the Stage Manager to describe the religious composition of Grovers Corners, which he expresses in the traditional version of the play as “Religiously, we’re eighty-five

³⁶ These coordinates and absolute location must remain absent here in order to protect the anonymity of the CAs and the prison population as much as possible.

³⁷ There was evidently no mention of any synagogues in the script. CAs did say that there is a Jewish chaplain in this facility that is present at the prison on a few occasions throughout the week, as there are some Jewish individuals incarcerated in this facility; evidently, however, there are not enough to warrant recognition in this version of the script, perhaps because there were no Jewish cast members.

³⁸ If Wilder had been more historically/geographically accurate, he might have mentioned the Abenaki or Missiquoi (see <http://aaroncthomaspd.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Our-Town-Selected-Glossary1.pdf> for clarification).

percent Protestants; twelve percent Catholics; rest, indifferent”; in the prison production the script was re-written to reflect the backgrounds of the men incarcerated in this particular carceral facility: “Religiously, we’re 53% Protestant, 24% Catholics; 20% Muslim, rest, indifferent”.

Later in the play, the Stage Manager speaks about the surrounding natural landscape as well as the neighboring towns one can see around the fictional Grover’s Corners, NH, mentioning Mount Monadnock and the actual towns of Jaffrey, Dublin and Peterborough. Alternatively, in order to recognize their own localized presence in being in a confined space, the CAs and TAs re-wrote this portion of the script as well:

You come up here, on a fine afternoon and you can see
range on range of hills – awful blue they are – up by Lake
Sebago and Lake Welch. And way up, if you’ve got a glass,
you can see Breakneck Ridge and Bear Mountain – where
Haverstraw and West Haverstraw is. And, of course, our
favorite mountain, Hook Mountain’s right here – and all
these towns that lie around it: Nyack ‘n South Nyack ‘
Croton-on-Hudson ‘n Sleepy Hollow³⁹.

As the director explained to me, she and the CAs made these particular changes to site Grover’s Corners and its environs right on the same land where the men were incarcerated because these are the geographic features one can view out the cell block windows. Thus, to discursively engage in this aesthetic mimesis by replacing words, new labels and imagery allowed the CAs in this play to present themselves as they saw themselves. Furthermore, they were able to do this in performing for the prison population and for their families and other members of the public who saw a second performance of the play. The CAs discovered that there was a very protean versatility

³⁹ This is mentioned because anonymity is still preserved, as this could refer to several carceral institutions throughout the Hudson Valley.

embedded within the text of *Our Town* and sought to seize this opportunity to reflect upon the type of ‘town’ within which they resided. Despite the conflict that was later resolved over the SC’s choice of play, the CAs discovered an agentic tactic by constructing a spectacle of themselves as CAs and the rest of the prison population by discursively replacing and changing the landscape features that better demographically reflected their identities and lived experience of being confined exactly where they were⁴⁰.

Script changes not only took on a spectacular formation relative to spoken words reflecting incarcerated groups, but in this play the use of props and physical acting was also alternatively interpreted so that CAs could better represent their identities, both to themselves and their audiences. In act III of *Our Town*, the cemetery scene was re-worked for this express purpose. In the original script, time has passed since the wedding between the main characters George and Emily, and many members of the town have passed on, including a young Emily who has died in childbirth. The scene is conducted by characters sitting in chairs in an arrangement simulating them lying in graves in a cemetery. There are several characters that the audience has met in the play already that have lines and speak to each other and Emily when she ‘arrives’ at the cemetery during her funeral; however, in this prison production, this was changed to include other non-speaking characters that were present in the scene. The CAs arranged this in a unique way where the scene did not begin with them present on-stage, as it were; rather, the men were sitting with their peers in the audience, and right before the dead characters were to

⁴⁰ I am using the past tense ‘were’ here because the production is several years in the past now; ‘were’ in this context should not be misinterpreted, as many of these CAs in this production are still incarcerated.

begin their speaking lines, the non-speaking dead characters stood up in the audience, lifted their chairs above their heads, and walked them through the audience to the front where they “sank” their positions into their ‘graves’, as the TAs described in my interviews. This piece of acting is illustrated in Figure 9 below.

This was intentionally done to be discursively observed by the non-CA audience as well as the public. At the same time, the discursive aspect of spectacle here is interlinked to the material, because hearing and seeing spectacularly occurs in material



Figure 9: *Our Town*, Act III⁴¹

space. This is to say that for the non-audience to come into an environment that is restricted and to sit in the prison chairs is to have an embodied audience experience where incarcerated individuals sitting near them can perform a scene with a performative twist to make a subtle statement about themselves. The theater company envisioned this portion of the play as an opportunity to represent the civil death that CAs – and non-CAs in the prison population – have experienced through being incarcerated. While subtle, the

⁴¹ Photo credit: Peter Kramer

CAs who acted in the role of the non-speaking ‘dead’ members of Grovers Corners expressed in interviews how they were very proud to perform this way, to function as a spectacle for non-CAs in the prison to which they could relate, as well as to capture the attention of the public audience when they performed for them.

While several of the music and theater programs that I studied in New York State prisons had relationships with prison authorities in multiple facilities that enabled use of props, costumes, and other materials that if sanctioned could be brought into the prison, one drama program in one facility that I investigated did not have access to these freedoms (first mentioned in chapter 3). As access to anything in prison is defined by scarcity, and even though this program is able to hold performances for the carceral population and for the public/family members, this particular program nevertheless designs its workshops and pedagogy differently. Instead of using an SC to decide on plays, the men in this program are tasked with keeping journals independently outside their weekly workshops, which they bring with them to the workshops and collectively construct a theater piece out of everyone’s journal entries. This structure forces members to expose their thoughts, feelings, and ideas to the wider group, as each member takes a turn during the workshop of summarizing or reading their work. In interviews the TA who directs the program as well as several CAs emphasized how this does create a space of vulnerability amongst members, yet unlike some of the visual arts workshops discussed above where CAs are afraid of others seeing their work, this particular approach does not preclude participation.

According to the TA and CAs, this system works because members know they are expected to share what they write down during the week, and thus seek to prepare

themselves to share with others. CAs explained that they were motivated to do so because the goal was to bring everyone's thoughts together into a script and a dialogue that they could all act out together. Thus, the workshop model encouraged agency through its function of each individual member being a spectacle together. One CA spoke about a piece of prose that one of the other CAs in the workshop wrote that discussed the importance of a clothesline (also touched on in chapter 3) that he erected in his cell:

“In New York State maximum prisons, they allow us to tie a string from the back of the cell to the front of the bars, and that string is used as a clothesline to dry clothes. So (Jim) did a piece about how he couldn't live without his clothesline, and – oh man! He weaved such an intricate story about clotheslines. And to me it was genius. But everything was – the way and how he came up with the concept, you know, he wrote it down, brought it up there, and he's like ‘You know what? A clothesline is such an integral part of everyday life in prison, I'm just gonna build on it from here’”.

While some of the pieces these CAs brought in their journals were written in a poetic style, the clothesline piece discussed above was written in prose⁴². As the cell is one of few spaces in prison where incarcerated individuals have any amount of personalized agency (ACE Steering Committee 2020), enacting agency by setting up a clothesline is an act that converts the cell into an individualized territory of the self that incarcerated persons can tactically take advantage of to make their everyday lives more functional. The CA who wrote this piece furthers this through the tactic of creative writing, which becomes a spectacle by virtue of how it is shared with his peers.

In terms of performances, both musical and theatrical, while it may be limited before and after a concert or play, the CAs who perform for an audience are able to

⁴² Most journal entries written and brought to the workshop in this program were done in prose, according to this CA and the TA directing the program.

interact with the audience briefly after the performance is over. In interviews TAs spoke about how members of the non-CA prison population will regularly recognize CA's theatrical performances after the fact by calling them their characters' names from a play, reportedly done in a fun and supportive way. These interactions occur in the days or weeks following a performance. But aside from getting feedback from the non-CAs in prison, CAs *are* able to speak with the public audience after a concert or a play. CAs made clear in my interviews that these moments are minimal and fleeting but are regardless often unforgettable moments because of the quality of these conversations that can transpire. CAs spoke in interviews about how heart-warming it was for them to hear applause, receive standing ovations and receive positive feedback from public audiences. One CA discussed his social interactions with members of the public who were in the audience after a play in which he starred as the main character:

CA: Now I know most of them on the outside, I've performed with and around and for them. But (they are) do-gooders from Westchester, old, white-haired people. I remember looking at them and feeling a sort of contempt. Even when I thought about them beforehand, (they were) people who are coming into a prison to consume art – really? Like, come on, right?

AM: It's cultural otherness at that point, for them it's an exotic experience.

CA: Yeah, yeah. I thought of them – I had complete and utter disdain for these people....And then people walk up to the stage – and it's a high stage – and they're reaching up their hands, and it's weird. Like, I'm *shaking their hands*. And they're like, "Thank you so much. That really was amazing." And they like really want to let me know in that brief 10 seconds that we have together that this is real, and "I see you as a person and I'm going to carry this for the rest of my life, just witnessing this" and I'm like 'fuck, I appreciate that', like 'because you're connecting with me'. I can't deny that. And I'd be like 'Thank you, I love you

too'....Some became my professors later on, and they were like, "You got to get into school. Are you starting school?", and I hadn't really even tried to get into school at that point, I was like, 'All right, I'll try. I'll talk to them again'. And then I had a connection with that person for years after that. And like, it was just really weird, it fucked me up. But I can't hate them anymore. And that, for me - a lot of guys talk about that moment as being fairly transformative. And for me, I think it was. Hate went somewhere. I still had tears in my eyes. And it was stilted, I'm reaching down over the fence. And not all the interactions are without otherization or even fetishization, you know, some of the older white ladies would be like 'ahh' (*implies they goggle over you after at the stage*)...but to be able to see multiple layers in a complex situation – it's not all one thing of *anything*. And that – that was a gift.

As we can observe from this passage, this brief space of interaction allows CAs to acquire further feedback from the audience regarding CA's talents and abilities. While it is perhaps at points awkward for CAs to hear the public audience claiming meaning for themselves through how they consumed or interpreted the CA's art, CAs do extract positive meaning for themselves from this form of spectacular social recognition, which can also lead to social connections and relationships that CAs may be able to establish and from which they might benefit in the future. Thus, CAs having access to these minute geographical circumstances after a performance is a tactic because it permits CAs to have a greater understanding of how their art is consumed by others, providing CAs with confirmation of their talents and that those abilities have value and purpose not just within but beyond the walls of prison.

Spectacle in Visual & Fine Arts

In regard to the visual arts, while CAs can experience the consumption of art by audiences within their workshops, spectacular recognition of visual art can also occur in CAs putting up their work for the public to view when the public visits prison space

during theatrical performances. Within workshops, as discussed in chapter 4, CAs will sometimes be bashful when another CA is leading a class and makes a remark about somebody's work that may be interpreted as something other than constructive criticism. In an attempt to lessen discomfort about this, TAs strive to create an art school-style workshop structure by asking CAs to put up their work on the walls of the room so all members may comment on each other's work. In my interviews they explained to me that this is essential, that observing what other people are doing is fundamental to improving one's own craft. Fellow CAs are the audience, as well as the creators themselves being their own audience in this environment.

But because visual art specifically is inherently spectacular and is about producing something that is meant to be seen by others, TAs explained to me that mitigating this reluctance to share can be challenging. One CA explained that while homework was assigned, not all workshop members would complete it because they were rather self-conscious about how others would see it and what they would say about it, and that it was more comfortable for CAs to create when they were all in the same space, even if workshop members were all working independently. As making a mistake is implicitly spectacular in visual arts in prison, CAs and TAs explained that doing visual art without one's immediate social and aesthetic support network present can produce too much emotional vulnerability for visual CAs. Working in the same space where feedback can be shared as ideas transpire in real time and then sharing alleviates anxieties because the workshop is overall a safer space where one can more frequently make mistakes in one's art.

Beyond CAs being the audience for CAs in workshops in visual arts, visual CAs can occasionally present their work for non-CAs and the public during evenings when theater productions happen, as exhibits can be set up and can remain for up to two or three days. CAs formerly incarcerated in New York State and their TAs reported interviews how there is at times collaboration between the theater workshops and visual arts workshops in preparing for these events, where the theater CAs will request for the visual CAs to paint or design murals or backdrops for the play's different acts, which is an opportunity for visual CAs to subtly show their skills to their CA peers in other the workshops⁴³. At the same time these visual CAs discussed the significance of also spectacularly representing their skills for the non-CA population, as these pieces are sometimes on display beforehand.

In regard to visual CA's contributions to the exhibitions specifically, several visual CAs discussed with me that this is usually the closest opportunity for them to share their work in something that is as close to an art show or exhibit as can be organized in a space of confinement. CAs explained that if they wished to put up displays of their work, they needed to plan, map out and organize the show space themselves in order to acquire permission from prison authorities to do this. This planning included elements such as how many tables they would like to use, how much space they need for the number of pieces they wish to show, and where⁴⁴ they can arrange their work so that it is

⁴³ A CA who participated in theater explained that he was also able to contribute to the theatrical production by composing part of the score in his keyboard workshop; as such, collaboration between musical workshops and the theater workshops may also occur.

⁴⁴ CAs stated in interviews that this could occur in the gym or the prison's designated visiting space, where the public or other non-CAs in the prison population are able to mingle before going to see the play.

ergonomically appropriate (that is, the space needed to be organized in such a way that people could navigate the space comfortably without too much clutter, and that things were spread out sufficiently for continued and appropriate supervision by authorities). While this responsibility is placed on the CAs themselves to organize, it provides an agentic opportunity for CAs to choose how they would like to present themselves to others through their work. Some visual CAs explained that, since these art shows occur the same evenings as theatrical performances, they – the CAs – are rather busy because they are sometimes also acting in the play; as such, they need to balance getting ready to perform with being available to answer questions about their artwork. One CA discussed with me how he negotiated these responsibilities during these times when non-CAs and members of the public are milling about and looking at the art before a performance:

I would always be (busy), I would always have a part in the play. So, like I got costumes to worry about, like where's my prop? I got my lines, like you got your little stash of your scripts so you can last-minute cram; so I got all these things going in my head and I've got this art show that I put on and then I see a bunch of people standing by my work and I'm like, 'Hey, by the way, I'm the artist', and then they would just start peppering me with questions. And I feel comfortable with it, some people don't really like it, they get a little uncomfortable, they just want their work to be seen and they don't want to talk about it. I'll talk about it, because I feel like I'm really being seen – when someone sees my art, they see me. So to me, it's a source of pride, you know?

These opportunities for CAs to show their work to the public also can include family members, who are able to see the work first-hand. But, as this CA goes on to explain, for those other CAs who do not wish to be physically present to narrate their work like the CA quoted above, displaying artwork more silently still functions as a tactic: “There's a lot of talented people, right? Amazing, you would have never thought – but that's I

think...what the arts can do is (say), ‘look at what these men created, they're not monsters, they're humans just like us and they create beautiful things’”. As this CA emphasizes, the work being shared and displayed this way was an attempt to deconstruct and eschew the conventionalized, ignominious imagination that they perceive the public having of incarcerated people. Providing an opportunity for non-CAs to peruse CAs’ work, even if some of the visual CAs do not wish to be present, is a tactic that allows those CAs to be spectacularly recognized, even if there is no direct contact between artist and audience.

This phenomenon of CAs’s work being consumed by an audience with whom they do not have direct contact was also evident in data speaking to the production of crafts and fine arts in prison. In relation to this I interviewed a man who was formerly incarcerated in the state of Oregon who had worked in the prison's hobby shop. Along with several others, this man was a member of what is referred to as Special Projects, a group that is responsible for designing and producing small and unique craft items as commissioned by the warden’s office. This man was specifically involved in making trophies to be presented as gifts for retiring members of the department of corrections.



Figure 10: Trophy Clock (Special Projects, Oregon state facility)

These gifts are typically made from stainless steel with some combination of milled steel combined into the pieces; wires are cut to appropriate specifications, and a plaque with the name of the recipient of the piece is usually attached as well. Many of these items also become clocks (see figure 10 above), which were also built into a shape of the state of Oregon, adjacent to a prison tower.

This CA described his work producing these items within the Special Projects division as being an exceptional and exclusive opportunity, as most other men working in the prison hobby shop did not have access to this. To that end, most men must ask to be placed on a waiting list, usually for many years (often up to ten years or more) in order to acquire a bench in the shop to do their own craft work. This particular man was able to circumvent this rather lengthy process by being invited to join the Special Projects group. As he described, these specialty crafts were to be presented as gifts for administrative retirees. While many took on the design shown in figure 9, other items were sometimes tailor-made for a specific individual. This CA describes the production process:

“A lot of these ended up with extra stuff on them, based on what the hobbies and such were of the individual who was going to be receiving the trophy. So, for instance, when one of the assistant superintendents retired, she had a crotch rocket and really liked riding motorcycles, and so we produced from bronze a metal, bronze motorcycle and mounted it on the trophy for her. And I mean that was an extra probably 30 hours worth of labor.”

As we can see, these projects that this CA and his fellow craftsmen were creating were done at the specifications of the prison administration, as opposed to other hobby shop workers, who, despite carceral limitations and regulations, were able to have more agentic opportunities to build and design a more diverse array of items for which they had a more personal, vested interest. To participate in Special Projects in this way

presents possibilities for tactical agency, but perhaps in a narrower fashion.

As these crafts were gifts to administrative retirees, my interviews reported that there are ceremonies where these trophies are presented to the recipients, yet the Special Projects workers themselves are not included, and there is no interaction between the craftsmen and the trophy recipients. This man described to me how he and his co-craftsmen looked at this relationship (or lack thereof):

AM: How does it feel to you with the trophies – you're building them for the institution and for somebody else, right? And that's your labor and your time and your skill. And then it's given to somebody else. How do you react to something like that? Did you like that? Did you dislike that? How did that feel emotionally?

CA: I liked it. Personally, I felt like there was a certain amount of contribution of give-back, you know? Just doing something good for somebody else. Like I said, we got paid a small amount to do the labor. But that really... the feeling was that it just felt good to produce something that was a high-quality craft, a very artistic material, that was hopefully going to be very much appreciated by the individual who is going to get it. And while we were not necessarily given direct recognition for the work that we had done, we knew that all the staff who received them knew who had produced it. And so there's a rewarding feeling that comes with that, in my opinion, that's how I chose to look at it. And, you know, for me there is a certain amount of pride in producing something like that for somebody who's, you know, put in their years.

AM: And so it was a very personal thing for you –

CA: Yeah.

What this passage shows us is that this craftsman takes very seriously the role that he and his co-workers imagined themselves having in undertaking these projects, despite the lack of recognition from the recipients of the work and these craftsmen's work being valued minimally. The spectacular agency that this CA was able to manifest out of these

opportunities is also a function of its exclusionary status; that is, these men believe they have a certain credibility in the eyes of the prison administration as only a very select number of the incarcerated population were able to make these crafts and have hobby shop access. This CA goes on to express his commitment to the work and his perception of his and his fellow CAs' audience:

I think there was an appreciation for being allowed to do it. I think that it wasn't so much a matter of feeling like, you know, we *had* to do it, it was more a sense of camaraderie of, we *get* to do this thing. And it's something that's cool, nobody else is doing it, we get to do it. And it was very much appreciated by the superintendent and I believe by most of the recipients.

As we can see, this CA derived a sense of satisfaction knowing that DOC officials were, in his estimation, enjoying their trophies. This CA – and in his opinion the other CAs in Special Projects – were able to manifest tactics through this artistic labor, despite the fact that this identity is perhaps a product of the carceral, disciplinary structure, as the DOC officials are indeed the intended audience.

Similarly, I spoke to others who worked in this same hobby shop in this Oregon prison who participated in doing this style of craft and fine artwork, but more conventionally outside the Special Projects division. As stated, Special Projects in this setting allows CAs to get around the wait time to acquire a bench and workspace, however, as demonstrated, this is not the norm. Most CAs who do craft work must place themselves on a list, if they can, and often are required wait up to ten years to get into the hobby shop until a space becomes available and/or until they are given permission by prison authorities. This is a geographical circumstance that takes on a very material dimension, where other CAs who currently have creative space must either be leaving

prison, lose this privilege, or be transferred to another institution so that another CA may take over their space.

One formerly incarcerated craft worker who became involved in jewelry making in this hobby shop in Oregon explained that, while he never consciously thought of himself as an artist at the time, he did discover that there was an artistic element to his work. This accordingly became an important part of his artistic imagination because he needed to learn how to think in certain nuanced, aesthetic ways to effectively design the jewelry that he was making. In doing very fine metalwork to make rings and bracelets, this man, like many others in the shop, explained how he was able to sell his work online through the prison's hobby shop website (see figure 11 of these crafts gifted, to author). This online store (partly managed by both incarcerated men and supervised correctional officers) becomes an important medium for this demographic of CAs because CAs often desire to share their work beyond their space of confinement. Many CAs design an array of pieces that they have online, which may be purchased at any point. What is notable here is that there is a visual, spectacular aspect of artistic creation here, where design and construction is done based upon what they public may want to purchase.



Figure 11: Jewelry manufactured in Oregon state prison facility

But aside from the public's freedom to purchase standard products, a form of spectacle that can affect artistic production here is the difficulty in showing consumers the final product from specialty orders, which are reportedly quite common through the online store in this prison. Even after measurements for certain types of jewelry are given by consumers requesting a certain sized ring, bracelet, pair of earrings, or even leather hats, for example, these specifications may not fit the person who is buying them (or the person they are buying for, as jewelry and related accessories are often purchased as a gift). This is partly caused by the spatial separation and distance between producer and consumer, as effective communication is an issue and details are frequently lost in translation when the public communicates such information to CAs through the online store⁴⁵. Photographs and images must be taken of the pieces to spectacularly show consumers online what they are ideally going to receive, which is another element of self-consciousness that these CAs need to negotiate, because they do not know whether the public will accept their work. If a purchaser does not like the item once they physically see it in person after it is mailed and shipped to them, it can be returned and CAs may need to adjust things, delaying the order. Mitigated by these spectacular perceptions from public consumers, a CA must therefore navigate these geographical circumstances that extend beyond the prison in these various ways in order to derive some personal and economic value from the labor⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ CAs explained that this was very frustrating, because so much detail goes into the work, and to fix things sometimes requires starting over. This is something that is mitigated in public life when one can go into a store and more effectively and easily communicate what one is looking for.

⁴⁶ As CAs must pay for shipping fees and other fees for putting their work up virtually like this, they accumulate much less value than what the selling price is. All materials for building or design of course must be ordered and purchased by the CA as well with the limited funds that they have – the prison does not generally give away materials to these men for their individual crafts.

Summation

All in all, spectacle is a feature of artistic presentation that affects how CAs construct and share their creative expressions in carceral space. As we have seen, CAs desire to represent themselves through their artistic abilities and often take advantage of opportunities to do so through various mechanisms. This is done through practices such as writing and performing topical songs; organizing visual art displays for the public to view during theatrical performances; CAs re-writing play scripts that speak to their wider thoughts and experiences as well as those of other non-CA peers; and performing music and drama for a more diverse population than just the incarcerated demographic. There are a variety of factors that can limit or affect CAs' presentation of their abilities, such as the symbolic power of TAs, the synoptic gaze of non-CAs, and occasionally the interests of an art program's directors when they have a particular artistic structure and agenda for how they wish their CAs to promote their creativity for the gaze of others.

CAs strive to construct the spectacle of themselves that they wish to be consumed by others, even though they do not always have control over how they wish to be or are seen in actuality. As we have seen, this may occur in both individual and group contexts. Relative to genre, it is interesting to observe that CA musicians sometimes intend to construct their spectacle through a framework of resistance, writing with each other and performing songs that often speak politically about the inequalities of incarceration that are domestic to carceral space. This is a form of creativity that is done with the spectacle of an audience in mind, either through writing in generalities and/or more overtly. Visual and fine arts invoke a spectacle that is defined perhaps more by agency, as the medium of visual and fine art speaks differently and originates from CAs as individuals rather than CAs as a group.

This is to say that CAs in these genres focus more on themselves as individuals in the construction of their aesthetic spectacle, which is delivered in a less-direct manner, and is not nearly as frequently motivated by an interest in social commentary. Theatrical spectacle also moves within a resistance framework to a degree; given that a production has many moving parts, CAs are able to inject subtleties – such as through including the social commentary on civil death through a play like *Our Town* – that operates as a discursive statement and social critique (Woods 1998) about CAs’ and non-CAs’ positionality as incarcerated people, and as spectacle attempts to change public perceptions of incarcerated people (Cohen 2012). And similar to how Dougan suggests regarding the use of the musical medium for purposes of cultural representation (1999), we also must acknowledge that this can transpire in the theatrical medium as well. This social and artistic struggle is one that attempts to fight erasure and assert social presence, akin to Schacter (2008), Donish (2012), and Burbeck’s (2021) conceptualizations, although this does not just occur in the city and in public life; rather, this also transpires subjectively in more closed, confined spaces, where spectacular exposure of these social and political problems is less visible to the public. In this regard we also must not just examine the aesthetic assertion of spatial presence (Schacter 2008) from a top-down perspective, but rather one that is bottom-up where artistic activity occurs at more micro, localized scales (Zebracki 2012).

Also of note is that while agency and resistance may appear to function as binaries in the construction of spectacle, this may not happen as neatly as this. As we have seen, a musical performance or visual art exhibition, for example, may be oriented around a theme or presentation of certain styles in which CAs must present their work

within a particular frame of reference as it is set out for them, where overt resistance is not necessarily possible; yet underneath the individual CAs may make certain statements with their work that only they or other CAs will understand. Agency and resistance therefore have these unique relationships in carceral space that overlap in certain nuanced ways. To this end, in the following chapter I discuss how these artistic relationships transform for formerly incarcerated CAs when they return home to their families and communities.

CHAPTER VI

POST-INCARCERATION ARTISTIC ENGAGEMENTS

As has been demonstrated thus far in this dissertation, there are numerous geographical circumstances that CAs must navigate in developing, producing and sharing their creative expression in carceral environments. These geographical circumstances shape and direct the possibilities of aesthetic creation and affect the ways in which CAs organize themselves individually and collectively in manifesting their creative thoughts through different mediums. As has been seen, geographical circumstances can either enable or inhibit CAs' aesthetic freedoms; that is to say, geographical circumstances channel how CAs construct and present their artistic geographies, as well as their artistic meanings, to themselves and other members of the prison population, TAs, prison authorities and the public. As I have shown, workshops, performances and independent artistic work can open up space for CAs to do their art and communicate creative expression; yet, as we have seen, at times this exposure is uneven, and may overwhelm CAs from desiring to share their creative abilities. This can result in programs facilitating the presentation of some CAs over others, causing certain CAs to be less visible and less spectacularly recognized. Because we are talking about prison, we can expect varying qualities of unequal access in the enactment of tactics in these artistic spaces with these creative opportunities. These issues are continuous and are regularly reproduced, and CAs, while they may be exerting agency or resistance, face power relations within the realm of the institution as well as their own programs and must constantly navigate and negotiate these vulnerabilities.

This tactical unevenness in these carceral artistic geographies – that is, the

struggle to use art for expression to circumvent the limitations that are placed upon CAs that is endemic to conducting artistic practice in carceral space – can change, however, should CAs leave prison and return home to their families and communities. As I discovered in my interviews and observations, there is a strong culture of continuing to do art amongst many CAs who are now formerly incarcerated. There are some CAs who engaged in the arts informally and individually inside who very notably continue their work, although the data that I collected indicates that the *majority* of CAs who continue to pursue their creativity were involved in a formal arts program. As such, in this chapter I outline the alternate geographical circumstances that affect formerly incarcerated artists' aesthetic avocations and engagements and examine how these circumstances influence or lead to CAs continuing – or not continuing – their artistic skills that they discovered and developed while incarcerated.

There is a substantial proportion of CAs that continue to pursue their artistic interests and abilities that they discovered and/or practiced while incarcerated. And as the geographical circumstances that affect the access to artistic tactics change when a CA returns home, CAs are able to re-envision their artistic practices in new tactical ways. While CAs who carry on their artistic practice(s) continue to do so because of a desire to improve their craft to a greater degree - beyond that which they were able to master while incarcerated – in my interviews and observations it became evident that there were several different reasons as to *why* CAs were motivated to continue developing, using and performing their aesthetic skills, abilities and interests. These motivations are a combination of either CAs' desire to continue to build community once they return home,

and/or using the arts to make sense of their former life as incarcerated people and to negotiate the trauma that was (and still can be) part and parcel of their carceral experiences.

Building Community

Firstly, CAs explained in interviews that they were interested in continuing to find time for their art once they went home because they strive to further build artistic community, which is influenced by the sense of community that they constructed for themselves and others while they were incarcerated. The promotion of this by the arts organizations that provide programming inside prison is key to facilitating this, as I learned that many of the music, theater, and visual art programs that I investigated do incorporate alumni components for CAs when they return home.

Several program directors and TAs stressed to me that, while some alumni programs have been developed, in their opinion their programs had not yet developed anything formal that directly serves all their program members when they return home. These interviewees indicated to me that they were interested in designing more coherent alumni networks to encourage continued artistic engagement and participation but were unsure as to how they wanted to organizationally go about this. While some of these alumni programs⁴⁷ may not currently be nearly as sophisticated as some of these program directors say they would like them to be, TAs did discuss that they have been able to maintain ad-hoc relationships with many CAs, offering occasional lessons as program resources permit. Many CAs, upon returning home, also join the advisory boards for their programs, where leadership in these programs is structured between CAs, TAs and

⁴⁷ The term “alumni program” was frequently used verbatim by program directors, CAs and TAs in my interviews.

program directors. In participating in a monthly advisory board meeting of alumni musicians formerly incarcerated in New York State at the retreat, I observed that there is a vested interest within CA program leadership in finding more opportunities for encouraging further collaboration between alumni and in helping CAs find a greater audience for their work, within the CA community and with the public as well as through performances at venues in New York City.

While some alumni activities were curtailed during the brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic, as of the fall of 2021 some of these organizations have started holding events again like they were before 2020 in an effort to maintain the artistic communities that had been built previously in carceral space. CAs expressed much enthusiasm and interest in these opportunities during the retreat. In regard to the retreat that I attended in upstate New York, this particular event was organized mostly by CAs themselves, and functioned as a chance to reconnect personally and artistically. In participating in these days of jams and workshops, I observed how the TAs – who were the same TAs with whom these very same CAs worked when they were inside – would begin each workshop with an introductory question of “What do you each wish to get out of the next couple hours?” In many cases, the CAs discussed how they wanted to jam, have fun, and connect musically with others, to learn more about music, in theoretical, philosophical and practical ways. All these CAs expressed that they wanted to glean as much as they could from everyone there, not only to improve their own craft and develop their own artistic interests and ideas in the long-term, but to share with others who might benefit from playing with them in the same way. In this sense, playing music was certainly about the music, but moreover the imperative was to find new ways to open up space for enabling

the diversity of creativity *with one another*. This is to say that the workshops were not necessarily about assessing and reviewing each person's skills, but rather drawing on the diversity of interests and artistic backgrounds to see what could be produced and what that could teach us.

Additionally, CAs discussed how they were actively interested in “creating a safe space for everyone here” in the workshops, which all the men articulated at different points throughout the course of the retreat's workshops and activities. Stating this was important to these men because they believed this was necessary for artistic creativity to flourish, to better bring the music out of everybody⁴⁸. According to one of these CAs with whom I conducted a more formal semi-structured interview, this style of jamming was similar to what these CAs did inside together, but now that they are home, they have the freedom to make music without the restrictions of how they made art in prison (and being able to call a jam a “safe space” when they were incarcerated was not nearly as discursively possible). Interestingly, however, the art-making structure of the workshop continues to be drawn upon, as these CAs (and TAs) believe that it is still a productive method for encouraging creativity. But within this structure, there is a certain spontaneity that formerly incarcerated artists utilize when they congregate and create music together, such that the potentialities of the music are unearthed through this more carefree approach. One might argue that there will inherently be spontaneity of creativity flowing out of any given musical jam space⁴⁹; however, what is notable here is that these CAs are

⁴⁸ I believe that the invocation of this discourse is unique because, in an average space of musical interaction amongst individuals and groups who are unaffiliated with the carceral arts, the professed importance of this is not necessarily constructed. For example, after twenty years of playing music, I have never heard anybody ever say anything like this before a jam or performance.

⁴⁹ This may often be true, although this is of course dependent upon genre and performance style, as to whether creativity happens spontaneously or not. Speaking in a general sense, much music in many genres

now able to make art in such a way that they could not in prison with the presence of surveillance and a lack of materials. To remove these geographical restrictions is to open the floodgates of creativity, which I observed the CAs exhibiting through a committed enthusiasm. One CA asserted the significance and unconditional *need* for recognizing the greater amount of freedom they as CAs now were able to access: “You’ve *got* to produce...once you have something, then you can go to someone and figure out how you can get it out there, how you can maybe get paid for it; but the fact remains that you have *got to produce*.” This sentiment was affirmed and echoed by the other CAs present, who indicated that their freedom permits them to access creative tools and social interaction for collaboration that was previously unavailable to them, and that they should rise to the occasion to proactively make art, simply because they have the ability to do so.

Throughout my other observations at the retreat the men continued to emphasize the desire for enabling greater exposure for their and other CAs’ work in performing for the public, which they indicated was their main imperative. But beyond just showcasing music written and performed by formerly incarcerated people, at different points the men discussed at length how they were interested in designing their music around the concept of resistance. They explored this not just in playing music together at this event, but by also taking turns putting on playlists of their favorite music. Being familiar with 1980s music⁵⁰ these men listened to and discussed the U2 song “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, a song that, in their view, criticizes the violent impacts of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These men related to this song because of its political, anti-violence message. Thinking

and styles is, of course, very planned and calculated.

⁵⁰ I am mostly unfamiliar with popular music from this period, so this was also partly an education for me.

of this songwriting approach as a model, these men spoke about how writing with these motivations. They stated that being direct in songwriting like this is important for writing songs inspired by prison, because they would like their music to counter otherization, to better show the public incarcerated people's capabilities. As such, these CAs wished to brainstorm how resistance could be brought into their work more.

On this point the men asked me what I thought, and I replied in my (limited) estimation that this can work lyrically, but that it can also happen subtly, wherein one can make statements with musical techniques even without using words. The men agreed with me but expressed that they were interested in creating pieces with a message that was more overtly communicable and comprehensible to an audience. I suggested that that hurdle is a challenge for any artist, and I was unfamiliar with how non-lyrical writers might do this. My recommendation was that any artistic piece has a story behind it, and that's part of the performance, and that a song's meaning can be shared with an audience before it is actually played. The men seemed hungrier for more, and stated they wanted to think about this in greater detail. One TA told one of the CAs that "Just doing your music at all is resistance", to which this CA replied "Really? Are you sure?". I found that this comment was playing down this CA's interest in writing politically motivated songs. But what this shows is that formerly incarcerated artists' artistic agency may incorporate meaning which they see as resistance that cannot necessarily be heard by an audience. Thus because of the difficulties in doing artistic work in communicating messages, a CAs' agency and resistance are never purely separate objectives or aesthetic outcomes. We appreciate then that presenting to public audiences, agency and resistance are not

deployed in pure binaries fashions in these contexts outside prison.

It is also important to acknowledge that, in asking CAs about their carceral art experiences through interviews and observations, their remembrances of doing art in prison did bring about a unique sense of nostalgia for the time and space when and where they first made music together. Many expressed that they wished to hold onto this and reproduce it in new ways with more freedom now⁵¹. Thus, for CAs to create music together after getting home is a tactic because they can build community in new and different ways. This is a community space because it is now defined by new and different geographies of possibility, where individual members can contribute to the collective art-making process in a less-restrictive fashion; in so doing, they can now access more time and resources *to enable each member* to enact more agency individually, i.e. to become creative in new and different ways, so that they can contribute towards the musical group with whom they continue to maintain relationships. This is defined by access to resources such as internet access, musical equipment and other technology that can enhance creativity both independently and in a group setting. In attending the retreat of CA musicians, we had an impressive array of mic stands, microphones, keyboards, electric

⁵¹ It should be noted that this sense of nostalgia for artistic collaboration was not in any way nostalgia for being incarcerated. There is a common socio-spatial imaginary within the public discourse – produced by cliché, monocultural films like *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and other stereotypical cinematic and television dramas (Davis 1998, p. xviii) – that formerly incarcerated people wish to remain incarcerated, or would prefer to return to prison after being released; this imaginary is rooted in the assumption that changes in the outside world desensitize incarcerated people, and in their absence from public life this terminally and inherently prevents them from being able to ‘make it on the outside’. These imaginaries are ultimately the stuff of myth, a collection of discourses that I have previously referred to as the “carceral imagination”, or an unrealistic representation of prison and carceral social life (Morse 2013). Hopefully this data will help to debunk that myth. Even though some CAs miss the time they had available for their art inside, I saw absolutely no evidence in my research to suggest that anyone actually *wants* to return to prison.

instruments, and electric and acoustic amplifiers, much of which would not be available in prison to accessorize the music more freely⁵².

The availability of these mechanisms may appear obvious to some, yet one must recall the scarcity with which formerly incarcerated artists had been working for years prior; CAs are regulated in prison by not having access to records or CDs, and they must pay higher than market value for mp3 files if they wish to download music to their tablets (through an exploitative platform known as JPay⁵³). Some TAs from the programs in New York State indicated in my interviews that in the past their CAs did have access to cassette tapes and cassette players⁵⁴, but that these were labeled as contraband a few years before the pandemic and were confiscated. As I mention in chapter 3, radios are permissible, yet can only reach a small range of stations. As such, the geographical circumstances that suspended CAs' ability to catalog, organize and listen to music are no longer as limiting, and access to virtual technology in less restrictive ways produces significant enthusiasm amongst CAs in being creative once they are home. Community is built out of this because CAs can follow new musical avenues, which supports more collaboration. For CAs to make music at home therefore also functions as a tactic because it reinforces to them – through making music collectively – that they are no

⁵² Several pieces of equipment belonged to me which I donated for the event. Between all of us brought along, this surplus of items allowed us to exploit musical dynamics (a musical term meaning how loud or quiet an instrument can be controlled) in such a way that likely is not as doable inside the walls of prison.

⁵³ In my interviews I learned from several CAs and TAs that all incarcerated people in the New York State prison system (in state facilities at least) had direct access to a tablet as of the last five years. JPay's platform also enables the virtual movement of worksheets and homework between TAs and CAs. E-books and other multimedia material is also accessible through JPay and the tablets, yet often at an extreme monetary cost to CAs and other incarcerated individuals.

⁵⁴ When TAs mentioned these, they used the conventional term 'walk-men'; in-text here I have removed this gendered noun.

longer incarcerated. TAs do continue to support their students, giving lessons as organization funds allow; however, TAs stated to me that they often did this for free beyond the formal program itself. TAs discussed how their former student CAs sometimes develop an interest in making their own musical album, for example, or want to work one-on-one with their TA. While many TAs reported to me that they were usually enthusiastic about supporting this, however, this sometimes occurs beyond the formal structure of the program or organization.

Beyond retreats like the one outlined above⁵⁵, several of the arts programs that I studied in my dissertation research typically hold what they refer to as either “homecoming” and/or “gala” events, in the case of theater/visual arts and music, respectively. These events are held to recognize CAs who have returned home in the past year, and to allow CAs to perform their recent artwork for their families, TAs and others.



Figure 12: CA Alum and TA making music together

⁵⁵ This event had been several years in the making, having been initially planned before the pandemic. These particular events occur less frequently, although there is interest within this organization’s CA advisory board in making them happen on a more regular, annual basis, with a plan for the organization to purchase land in upstate NY that could function as a space for such retreats and other events for formerly incarcerated artists long-term.

Regarding music, TAs explained to me that the gala concerts will often incorporate collective performance between CAs and their TAs, similar to the performance approach used in prison where CAs and TAs play alongside one another. This provides an opportunity for CAs to share their newer compositional material and is a space where they can simply speak about their experience and their work. As this does not occur in a prison environment, the geographical circumstances that normally limit speech and creativity are not present, and many CAs reportedly take time before or after performances to address the crowd as spokespersons – or in their exact words, as “preachers” – for the program(s). In my interviews TAs discussed how their students would talk about how their worldviews have been affected by their carceral experience as well as the importance of the arts and why it is necessary for people currently inside.



Figure 13: CA Alumni, Program Directors (and dissertation author)

CAs thus have access to a more direct conduit by which they can take advantage of spectacle to be representatives for their fellow CAs who are still incarcerated, as being in a public environment allows CAs the freedom to speak their mind in a prosaic way that they did not have access to while incarcerated. This functions as a form of tactical advocacy in these times and spaces for supporting CAs who are still incarcerated, as those CAs are unable to exercise their voice in the same way as someone who is home.

In my interviews CAs further discussed this element of advocacy in explaining that they had actually gone back into the facility where they were previously incarcerated to perform with their TAs for their CA peers who are still incarcerated and other members of the prison population. In the advisory board meetings that I observed, CAs demonstrated a continued interest in doing this once Covid restrictions were relaxed enough that they would be permitted to continue this. This opinion was not entirely uniform across my interviews, however; while some CAs expressed excitement about engaging with CAs who are still incarcerated, others expressed to me that they found this weird and somewhat uncomfortable. These CAs explained to me that they did this out of a sense of duty to their CA peers, to represent them by performing for them, to show that they who are still inside are not forgotten. Several CAs who were incarcerated in prisons in New York State indicated that they would like to go back into facilities to perform or participate in workshops with their peers again, but they are not currently able to do so because they have not yet been home for long enough (as the Department of Corrections precludes formerly incarcerated people from visiting prison facilities for a period of time after they return home). These CAs highlighted to me that once this time has passed they are looking forward to participating again, as they enjoy the feeling of being a part of this

particular artistic community in this way.

One program director – who is also a formerly incarcerated artist himself – explained to me that their homecoming events are also opportunities for their organization to share information about jobs and occupational opportunities, which are often not necessarily in the realm of the arts. This organization in New York State – focused predominantly (but not purely) on theater and visual arts – focuses on following up with their CAs once they are home, not promoting artistic careers in any major way. As this program director described, their role is not to be a CA’s agent; while they may distribute knowledge about acting opportunities, for example, this is not their main function as an organization. Nonetheless, this program director explained to me that their organization is sometimes contacted by acting agencies for off-Broadway productions looking for actors for theater work; as such, the organization will help connect CAs with these networks to further facilitate CAs’ continuity of their work independently in a more public manner⁵⁶. This particular organization reportedly also supports CAs with gigs as they come up in terms of being representatives of the organization, such as through stipends for attending public events to sit on panels and providing traveling reimbursements to participate in other such events where a CA alum will represent the organization’s work as a public advocate. But while this occurs to a certain degree, another program director from this same organization discussed that, while they want to provide such opportunities for alumni, sometimes they are selective about offering too many things. As was emphasized to me, this is because the organization sees itself as

⁵⁶ As I explain here, these organizations do not attempt to find artistic careers for CAs; TAs stated they have had a couple alumni end up on *Law and Order*, but this is rare; any artistic opportunities to which they can connect their CA alumni, even for pay, are not the imperative of these organizations.

being responsible for supporting alumni by helping them acquire employment and security when returning home to their families. While theater opportunities can encourage continued creativity among CAs, program staff expressed concern that too many artistic opportunities can distract from CAs needing to focus on their jobs, families, and livelihoods.

What is interesting here is that, while a formerly incarcerated artist may be able to enact agency with the theater or visual arts skills that they acquired during their incarceration through a connection that the organization makes on their behalf, it became evident in my interviews with programs directors and TAs that the organization⁵⁷ is also very interested in promoting itself by encouraging CAs to participate in public events to represent the organization. This is to say that the organization has a vested interest in putting their alumni out into the community and encouraging their agency in such a way that publicly and therefore spectacularly represents the work that the organization does in a positive way. In my interviews some TAs explained that they had been observing program directors doing this for a while, and in the TAs' view the organization was somewhat inappropriately "over-asking" in encouraging alumni to participate in artistic endeavors on behalf of the organization upon returning home. TAs that worked in women's facilities suggested that sometimes there is a certain burden that is put on this population to have a public presence, which is foisted by the organization. Being a minority compared to those incarcerated in men's facilities, this is likely why these women have been asked to further represent the organization now that they have returned

⁵⁷ This was observable with this particular organization in New York State. This element of 'over asking' and pushing CAs to represent the organization once they are home was not nearly as evident in the organization in Connecticut discussed further below.

home⁵⁸. TAs discussed that the women with whom they had worked inside are often uninterested in maintaining or further building artistic community once they leave prison, largely because of family or personal responsibilities⁵⁹, and that these women simply wish to move on from their carceral past.

The act of building community for formerly incarcerated CAs is also defined by performance for public audiences, where CAs seek to bring knowledge about the realities of incarceration to communities through artistic performance. This phenomenon stood out particularly in interviewing several female CAs that were incarcerated in Connecticut, who expressed to me that one of their main goals in sharing their artistic work now that they are home⁶⁰ is to use the arts as a spectacle for public consumption that represents the complexities of incarceration, to better encourage audiences to consider why mass incarceration exists. This organization of formerly incarcerated women takes advantage of several artistic mediums in doing this, specifically dance, spoken word, and music, but often will combine all of these into an ensemble piece designed around a particular theme⁶¹. Several of these performances occur each year (either in-person or virtually).

⁵⁸TAs expressed that CAs that were formerly incarcerated in women's facilities are very rarely in attendance at alumni events, and as such is thus one of the motives behind the stated over-asking of women to come out for artistic opportunities, because they are a minority.

⁵⁹ Because of these challenges, speaking to any of these CAs from this demographic was essentially impossible.

⁶⁰ Some of these women were involved in this same program when they were inside and very directly transferred to the formerly incarcerated group soon after returning home. As I learned in my interviews, however, women who participated in the program inside sometimes end up becoming uninvolved for a period before they may join the alum group again later on.

⁶¹ This approach has been applied by these women in their performances for the past 10-15 years. In light of the pandemic, while some performances were done outside in person, they still continue to be done virtually as well.

Most recently this group's May 2022 performance was titled "Building Bridges, Finding Community". While participating as an observer during one of the group's virtual rehearsals, I discovered how active members who wish to participate will write their own individual piece(s), and the TA/director will edit and incorporate and coordinate all of them into a longer ensemble performance. Thus, while the women exert agency through their own artistic component, this is refined further by the TA to help the women better articulate what they may be trying to say. While some women incorporate dialogue that overtly aims to expose the structural constraints of mass incarceration, other women write more from a perspective of lived experience. Thus, as I observed, the women differ in their artistic imperatives and motivations. As these are ensembles, the choice of words, stories, or artistic mediums is left up to the women to express themselves as they wish, giving them that freedom. And while these performances are designed around a prompt that is meant to function as a connective tissue which the director uses to bring the individual pieces together to send a collective message about incarceration and its impacts, these women do not all necessarily imagine their practice as being about structural issues. Rather, it is more about being able to talk about difficult issues and have others hear about them. Thus, while some members conceptualize their work in a resistant format within the creative process, not all members begin at that point, and both approaches and anything in between can influence the final product in these performances.

Simultaneously, female CAs who are currently incarcerated who are involved in this same program inside engage in a similar process in creating a piece. Alumni will then take and perform these ensembles on the outside for public audiences. While these

women are networking together and supporting each other as a collective unit (Story 2019, p. 133; Gilmore 2007, p. 234) artistically speaking, this agency is in many ways an affirmative enactment by these women. But as these women explained to me, they are also very much concerned with the overall discourse of the piece as it is presented relative to the designated theme. As some of these women articulated in my interviews, they are interested in producing something that can be heard, seen, and interpreted by the audience that will then encourage the audience to more critically think about the ‘why’ of incarceration. This is to say that by artistically interpreting these women’s experiences and perspectives, public audiences will hopefully begin asking questions regarding the underlying reasons that perpetuate the presence and impacts of the carceral state.

Now that they are home, these women see the public presentation of their art as a platform for promoting thinking such as this that goes beyond the classic interpretation that exists within the public discourse. In my interviews the women in this program described to me that when they became incarcerated, they discovered that they had had a rather false imagination about what prison was. This was similar to how, in these CAs’ estimation, the public typically conceptualizes incarceration. This mentality, in their view, is defined by the more conventional narrative of, as one woman put it, “people made a mistake, committed a crime, and something warranted their incarceration, and they now have an opportunity to become a productive member of society”. As these women stated, they discovered that this was *not* a realistic understanding of prison. As opposed to clinging to the traditionalized narrative of ‘these people just made bad decisions’, these women view this approach as deflecting from any real conversation about mass incarceration. One of my female interviewees expressed that ideally an

audience will react to one of these ensemble performances in a certain way that promotes the possibility of an alternative understanding of mass incarceration:

AM: “How does an ensemble piece for the public articulate the story for the audience in a way that just saying it doesn’t, necessarily?”

CA: “I remember the first time that (the first) ensemble piece was brought out to the public. There was one particular part where the piece was written by a woman who was a mom, and she was writing about photographs of her children and, for lack of a better word, the years that went by, and for her the ‘meeting’ of the latest version of her child. And the audience all of a sudden realizes that the women in prison are *moms*. People don’t put that together.... They’re not thinking about these moms, or they’re not thinking about the people who were not educated because they were required to stay home and take care of their families because their families were incapacitated by drugs and alcohol, that they’re on the streets, they’re eleven years old, they’re worried about their baby brother and sister, and now they end up incarcerated. So they (the audience) start to learn the backstory... I just think that the public doesn’t have a clue... They don’t see the children, and this mom was trying to feed her child because she was unemployable. And then her survival is criminalized. And now she’s separated from her children. And all those things. It’s like ‘that’s what we’re doing?’”

This woman emphasizes that the audience’s recognition of the fact that incarcerated people – in this case women – are parents became noticeable amongst the audience members during the performance. These women underscored in my interviews how this is the type of reaction that they hope the audience will have, and that this experience is necessary for fighting the stigmatization and the social separation that has occurred through the socioeconomic disparities that lead to mass incarceration. The audience, in these women’s eyes, should therefore be made to feel a little uncomfortable as they struggle to get a grip on what just happened on stage. But, as opposed to just telling the

story in prose alone, these women believe that constructing awareness and interest like this is most effectively done through an artistic medium. As the woman quoted above went on to tell me:

“When you *tell* people the story, they’re not getting it, they’re not hearing it. But through the arts we’re touching people in a different way...telling the story through the arts is a way to reach people who are *unsuspecting*. Like, they were curious, and they have a preconceived idea of what this is, and then they’re caught off-guard – *emotionally* caught off-guard, because all of a sudden it’s just like ‘Oh my god, I just didn’t know’”.

As this CA explains, the artistic method of telling stories of women’s carceral lives and the causes of them being translocated from their communities into carceral spaces encourages the public to receive and interpret the message because it is delivered in a particular way, such that without the combination of music, poetry, spoken word and dance, the meaning would not be projected or reinforced nearly as effectively. Thus CA women’s use of artistic mediums to share their stories has a certain *sociocultural sophistication* attached to it; this is significant because it functions not just to spectacularly impress the public, but moreover to harness the arts as a form of entertainment to communicate lived experiences and their causes because it is enveloped within an intellectual residue; that is, through a constructed sociocultural sophistication, the arts has an heir of finesse and worldliness that will, hopefully, attract the public to pay attention.

As several CAs from this program highlighted in my interviews, this approach is key for how these women encourage people to take both currently and formerly incarcerated women’s voices seriously – not just in terms of purely recognizing their voices, but also in hearing the *discourses embedded* within these female CA’s voices,

both currently and formerly incarcerated. Through interviews and participant observations, the most frequent themes that are presented in these ensemble performances are focused around situations of abuse as experienced by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, where women find themselves in relationships that are defined by the same abuse they experienced from their fathers; social inequality and poverty, where stories are heard of women depending upon criminalized economic activity in order to support their children and families; as well as what my interviewees referred to on several occasions as “generational incarceration”, where mothers and daughters will end up incarcerated together in repeat cycles of being incarcerated, released and incarcerated again because the structures that can intervene to stop this circulatory form of incarceration are absent. By presenting these themes through this ensemble medium, the women aspire to construct pieces that discuss these complex social patterns and realities of how individuals and groups are cycled from communities into carceral space, and moreover what are the structural mechanisms that maintain and preserve this system. One of my interviewees stated that “the cycle needs to be broken”, that is, this repetitive chain of events whereby women continue to return to prison because of the social disparities that they experience in their communities. Thus, these women use these ensemble performances as a technique of resisting these inequalities as exacerbated by the carceral state.

I was further able to observe how these performances for public audiences function as tactics of resistance through interacting with the performers through one of the talk-backs following one of these (virtual) performances. In asking the group about how their individual and creative process(es) worked in presenting their message(s)

through writing and song, one of the CAs replied that she wrote with the intention of her words and music being helpful to others in some way, whatever that may be, while simultaneously attempting to convey how inequalities that women experience through being criminalized impact their emotions, and that this contributes to the cyclical nature of female incarceration. Others responded by saying that they initially will draw upon memories of their own incarceration to develop a story. For example, in one piece during this particular performance a woman spoke about when she was taken to segregation for an injudicious reason, and during this week-long period of isolation she describes how she seized her isolation as a time and space for meditation. In her words:

“What actually happened? A Department of Corrections staff person overheard a conversation I'd had with a sister inmate – a conversation about our life's purpose and what we came here, to this planet, to do. This innocent, spiritual discussion is misconstrued somehow as a covert operation! We were not planning to overthrow the prison! Of course, I am eventually found innocent and without explanation, I am escorted back to my general population cell.

But in the meantime, in the silence of my solitary cell, where there is only a bed and a toilet/sink, made of heavy metal and welded to the wall and a lightweight blanket, I start thinking about things I have read about in my extensive, self-help/spiritual library long before my incarceration. I think, hey, people pay big bucks for Buddhist retreats, and such – to sit alone, in silence, in a stark setting. So for 5 days in my prison version of a retreat, I find myself sitting in the silence of myself.”

In the process of being in solitary confinement, this woman imagined her situation and space as a tactic, that is, something she could adapt to her own purposes. Thus, individual members of these ensembles express themselves and communicate for other women on the inside through performing those women's pieces as tactics for themselves, but it also operates as a form of resistance, as these are interventions that are defined by

intentionality about critiquing power that has arbitrarily profiled and criminalized certain sexual and gender demographics.

In terms of gleaning how the audience has interpreted their pieces, this organization of CAs and other volunteer members of the group (who are students) seeks to acquire feedback with the audience post-performance through different mechanisms. Firstly, the organization attempts to follow-up with the audience through online surveys. As audience interpretation is very important to the performers, the main motive behind these audience surveys is to garner a deeper comprehension of how the public is absorbing performances. The director of the group explained to me that the survey questions are developed by her and an outside professional evaluator. The goal then with this information is to understand how the work is being received, and then potentially use it to adapt, change, or improve what the group is presenting and/or how in order to better articulate what they are trying to say⁶². For example, Figures 13 and 14 below taken from one of these surveys asks the audience to emphasize their reactions to certain criteria presented about the performance.

As we can see below in Figure 14, by providing these specific criteria as a frame of reference for evaluating the performance, and in Figure 15, asking agreement about the extent of understanding, the CAs and volunteers demonstrate that they not only wish to acquire feedback about these elements, but moreover that these are the elements about which the group is attempting to produce a deeper conversation. Constructing thought-provoking, moving pieces that speak to the complexities of certain social justice issues

⁶² The professional evaluator and the program director analyze this data initially. The CAs are reportedly not as deeply involved in the analysis/evaluation process. Program participants also take the survey, however, to more formally reflect how they interpret their own personal and collective performance.

5. What stood out for me in the performance was ... (mark all that apply)

- ☐ The performers' writing
- ☐ The diversity of age and experience of the performers
- ☐ The personal nature of the material
- ☐ The social justice issues presented
- ☐ The opportunity to understand more about incarceration
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Figure 14: Survey Question 1

6. How much do you DISAGREE or AGREE with the following statements about your experience with this performance?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The performance was thought-provoking	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was moved by this performance	☐	☐	☐	☐
This performance effectively linked to issues of social justice	☐	☐	☐	☐
The performance helped the audience look at those incarcerated in a different way	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 15: Survey Question 2

is part and parcel of these CAs' objectives to capture the audience's attention. This functions as a tactic of resistance because it discursively attempts to draw attention to the lived, human realities and impacts of mass incarceration, which these women tactically endeavor to introduce into the public imagination.

In speaking about how the public typically responds through the female CA's post-performance interactions (in-person and in non-Covid times), the women I

interviewed from this program discussed two common reactions. Firstly, the public often wishes to know who within the group was formerly incarcerated, as there are at times non-CAs that perform alongside the CAs in these ensembles as well, and the audience is reportedly sometimes frustrated that they cannot figure out who from the ensemble was incarcerated and who was not⁶³, nor do they know why they are asking it. Akin to the experience of the male CAs interacting with audiences after the performance of a play as discussed in chapter 5, this reactive display of otherization can be awkward at times for these CAs, but the women also see this as a tactic for producing awareness because it is an educational moment, and therefore an opportunity for them to exert agency as CAs by having clarifying conversations about what the purpose of the piece was. Secondly, the audience purportedly also regularly asks “what can we do about this?” and expresses an interest in going into the prisons to further promote this type of art. In response to the audience’s question, the CAs typically respond by saying that going into the prison is not necessarily the most productive action for the public to take; rather, the audience should share the experience with others in their community and develop a point of view around these issues. Should they want to be involved, the CAs instead recommend going into communities and doing the work there as a peer mentor or TA for the *children* of people that are incarcerated, who are vulnerable to the collateral damage of the carceral state.

At the very least, these women explained to me that these responses confirm for them that these people *do* experience some transformation of their own, and that something happened within the performance to capture their interest which they can now share with others, which these women see as a success. In this sense, resistance is being

⁶³ Audience members are reportedly sometimes shocked when they learn that some of the white performers were incarcerated.

accomplished because the audience acquires a truer, more critical, and informed imagination of the causes and realities of incarceration. The goal in providing the public with this is that they may be *potentially* radicalized in such a way that they wish to engage in the practice of building artistic community themselves that seeks to mitigate the impacts of incarceration.

While these women see their creative work as having a greater significance in terms of critically representing the impacts of incarceration, it is important to emphasize how these practices enable a sense of community amongst this group. For the formerly incarcerated women who do creative work in this program together now that they are home, they are able to associate with others who have had the same or similar experiences as them. In a group such as this, there is a common understanding of the issues that they are presenting to others. This is to say that certain topics do not need to be discussed necessarily because there is a collective and shared imagination about each members' individual experiences, whereas for an outsider (such as a researcher) these topics would need to be further asked about or observed. This common vernacular allows a comfortable space where women can derive a sense of enjoyment from telling their stories and express themselves, as they are able to do so in such a way that helps to mitigate vulnerability about the realities and emotions they discuss in their individual work.

Additionally, while it may be precarious and not steady, the women in this organization did indicate that depending upon the performance they will receive some form of monetary compensation for their contribution. While this may not be much, the women to whom I spoke indicated a sense of validation from this, that their work and

their creative labor could be recognized in this manner. At times, this income can be very meaningful both materially and emotionally because of the precarities that returning citizens⁶⁴ frequently experience. As stated briefly above, many returning citizens must grapple with a variety of challenges when released from prison. These include returning to family responsibilities and assuming or re-assuming guardianship and providing for dependents (Charles et al 2019, p. 220), navigating unequal housing access (Herbert et al 2015) where lack of access perpetuates the cyclical “carceral continuum” of incarceration (Hamlin 2020), and establishing and maintaining stable and sufficient employment (Charles et al 2019, p. 241; Anderson-Facile 2009, p. 189-190). One of the women from this group explained that some of her poetry ended up in a book that was published following her release, and the advance she received allowed her to pause from her job as a house painter to participate in a book tour to promote her work and represent the other women in her program by doing so. Similarly, another of these women spoke to me in detail about the limitations she faced in her job prospects because of her criminal record. Even in applying for the simplest of jobs she is turned down or is eventually let go before long because of what her employer discovers when her background check is completed. As such, picking up artistic gigs is a main source of income for this woman as the carceral system has, in a very calculated way, induced violence by constructing economic precarity through further legal mechanisms (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019), effectively disempowering her in her return home.

⁶⁴ TAs and program directors often used this terminology when talking about this demographic of formerly incarcerated people leaving prison and going back to their communities. These interviewees did not ever use the term ‘reentry’, which is now seen to be another institutional label and misnomer foisted upon individuals leaving prison, as it does not accurately recognize the social or economic realities of going home (Kumanyika 2020).

Spectacle, Advocacy, and Negotiating Post-Carceral Trauma

In addition to the nuanced imperatives and techniques of building community, it also became evident through interviews and observations that CAs use the arts quite directly as a technique for navigating trauma and emotions incurred by having been incarcerated. Akin to the geographies of art *inside* prison itself, formerly incarcerated CAs' pursuits are often defined by an interest in doing art for the individual self that permits them to make sense of their experience, what led to that experience, and how they can develop further as a person and an artist by attempting to ask (and *perhaps* answer) those questions through their art. As CAs are often compelled to continually negotiate their emotions and worldviews, agency and resistance can become embedded within CAs' artistic pursuits after being incarcerated.

As with the practice of building community through performance as discussed above, some post-incarcerated artwork engages with negotiating traumatic lived experiences within carceral space through providing social and political commentary. One such example of this comes from some of the women from the Connecticut program discussed in the sub-section above. Aside from participating in the group ensembles, some of these women perform individually for other audiences, such as within university classrooms or affiliated lectures, or are simply asked to speak about their experiences in these public environments as well. While a component of this is building community, as explicated in the above sub-section, these women underscored that part of their motivation for taking part in these opportunities is for their own reflection on the emotional trauma they experienced when incarcerated. The woman who authored the aforementioned "Seg Song" (see chapters 3 and 5) stated that she is invited to perform

this song regularly for many different audiences, which draws on her traumatic experience of segregation and solitary confinement. Much of this was derived from these women's sense of vulnerability and fear regarding their own mental and physical well-being while incarcerated. To speak and do performances that directly address these lived realities with broader audiences provides an avenue for these women to educate others. This functions as a form of resistance because it is rooted in an intentional medium of social commentary that strives to show the public that trauma manufactured by carceral experiences is a form of harm that requires greater attention and recognition by society.

Carceral trauma is also discussed by CAs through the visual and fine arts. A 21-year-old woman who was formerly incarcerated for several months in a county jail in the state of Georgia indicated that she very directly applies these objectives as a visual artist through what she calls "trauma-informed art". As she explained to me:

I think there's an element to it which I've been exploring, which is "how can I have other people empathize and humanize someone that's been through the system?", because there's the stigma that we're crazy or dangerous or we just want to commit crimes all day and hurt people and that kind of thing. So it's really just being like we're more alike than we are (dis)similar, which has been part of my work. And then also, another aspect is, how can I make other people who've been through the system feel like they're not alone? Because there was this time after I was released when I was really paranoid, I was having really bad nightmares, I was having really bad reactions to people; I wouldn't let anyone touch me and, and that kind of thing. I was just really having a hard time, and I thought I was crazy, I thought I was the only one. And then I spoke to other people who had been recently released – or were released years ago – and they said that they had the same exact thing, the nightmares and paranoia. So I felt a lot less crazy, and I'd felt just like a wimp for having this affect me so much when I was only incarcerated for a few months. So that's another part of my work, it's like, "you're not crazy,

you've been traumatized”.

Here we can see this CA’s imperative in making art that attempts to reconcile her own trauma, but also aims to appreciate others’ trauma as an outcome of similar experiences. As such, this conversation about trauma is in fact somewhat merged with that of community, in that this woman aspires to represent others whose post-incarceration syndrome – as she calls this newly recognized condition – also becomes stigmatized or is a condition that is simply ignored. In speaking about the piece below under Figure 13, titled “Free My Mind”, this woman had this to say about how the piece represents trauma experienced by incarcerated people:

That was a school project. And they basically said, ‘create a sculpture that includes the movement of your body’. And instead I created this sculpture. And when they asked why there was no movement, I just said “people who are incarcerated don't get to move. They're in solitary confinement. My facility was on a lockdown, so I couldn't leave my bed for like 13 to 16 hours a day”. So yeah, I kind of was like, ‘screw your movement’ (*amused tone*). It's unfair that we get to move so freely when there's innocent people and people who've been traumatized that are just being re-traumatized.

As we see below in Figure 16 up close⁶⁵, the cardboard box is of course the piece itself, but according to the artist the piece is also meant to operate through being worn on one’s head (see Figure 17). This is to illustrate the mental consternation of confinement, and just how subjectively internal the experience is for an incarcerated person. In other words, this attempts to speak to the *temporality* of how being incarcerated can affect someone mentally. In the artists own words:

Another part of this piece is it kind of deals almost

⁶⁵ As we can observe, the piece is in mid-construction here.

directly with post-incarceration syndrome. So part of the statement is like, yes, you're free physically, but you're not free mentally, which is why the sculpture only covers the head. So it's like, even though I got out I was still waking up at 5:00am for headcount, and I was still constantly watching my back, and I was still guarding my food while I ate. So it's like yes, I was released and I was at home, but it's like part of me was never released and may never, ever be released.



Figure 16: "Free My Mind"

As the above passage outlines, one may become physically free, yet one may not feel free again for an undetermined length of time, not knowing how or when the post-incarceration syndrome will stop affecting an individual. Thus "Free My Mind" is a form of discursive resistance on the artist's part and on and on behalf of others because it is intentionally critical statement that attempts to reveal the pain and harm that the prison system manufactures through its debilitating psychological impacts. This woman also shared a poem with me that she wrote titled "The Whimsical Sink" that speaks to additional elements of trauma. Drawn from her experience during her first three days and

two nights in jail, this this piece discusses how this woman was kept awake while the sink in her cell



Figure 17: “Free My Mind”

continually dripped. The text of the poem is below:

The Whimsical Sink

My second day in jail
My faucet would not turn off.
Drip Drip Drip
All day and all night
It dripped into metal jaws.
Drip Drip Drip

It echoed in the tiny cell.
Down the drain, the water fell

Drip Drip Drip.
And with the river,
My sanity as well
Drip Drip Drip
I told an officer; she said,
“You won’t drown,” and bid farewell
Drip Drip Drip

Sinister drops of murky water
Mocking my confinement.
Drip Drip Drip.
They can leave.
I cannot.
Now I pray for silence.
Drip Drip Drip.

This woman said that because the noise was continual – on top of other chronic acoustic distractions – she felt powerless and unable to critically determine how to stop the sound.

In her own words:

“It just dripped endlessly and it drove me crazy, and I thought I was like weak minded or just insane for being driven crazy by this, this little sink. But when I got out and I researched it I actually found that in certain POW camps they actually use those tiny little relentless noises to just drive people crazy....The thought never crossed my mind that I could stop the noise and I don't know why. Like it just felt like I had no power in that situation whatsoever. Because like this when I got out and I talked to my friends who were incarcerated about it, they're like, ‘Oh, yeah. All the time. Why don't you just put saran wrap?’ I didn't have saran wrap, but I could have used toilet paper or something. And I was like, ‘Why didn't that – like why did I just let that happen?’”

This woman went on to explain to me that this inability to focus and determine how to respond to this problem – compounded by a lack of sleep – was beyond her abilities in this space at this time. This was made more challenging as this woman was being reduced to a certain biopolitical status by the state, that is, being a victim of generally limited

amenities and an intentionally contrived unhealthy living situation being in jail. To verbalize and imaginatively represent the experience now is a tactic of agency where this CA can try to move past the mental anguish and trauma of this event by poetically articulating it to herself and sharing it with others through this medium.

This CA has also attempted to navigate her post-incarceration syndrome through her piece titled “Primordial Chaos” (see Figure 18 below). Her goal with this piece was to adapt a painting from Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam”, partly because that piece is well-known and would encourage the viewer to consider her piece further. But additionally, this CA described to me that the piece is a conversation about the gender relationship between men and women, inspired by having been sexually harassed while in jail. This woman described that this piece has to do with the need for women to protect each other in carceral space – and in general, in public life – under these circumstances. Because she was arrested at age 17, this CA explained that “The relationship between men and women is very complicated, and it's continued to be very complicated for me”. She went on to describe the underlying meaning within the painting:

So all the hands in this painting that are blue are women, and the yellow ones are men. And some of the hands are like dragging – like the woman's hand in the right corner is dragging the man's hand away from the woman. And it's crushing the man's hand again, trying to get it away from the relationship between men and women. And then in the top left corner, it's just the man like strangling the woman in a way, and it's just kind of like, a series of just oppression and what's wrong in the world. And it's like, why can't there be like, why can't we be amicable? Like why is there – why do I have to walk downtown and by campus with my keys in between my fingers and why can I have my music playing because I have to know someone's gonna approach me from behind that kind of thing. Why is it like that? Why are men asserting their violence over women like that? And that's something that I saw,

especially while incarcerated. Just like when men did interact with women, when the male guards didn't interact with us, it was bad. And it was gross. And there was even an instance where there was a woman that was incarcerated with me, and the doctor just hit on her relentlessly. And it's like, she's I think a 21-year-old girl and you're like a 40-something year old man. And you have all the power here and it's your word against hers. It's like, 'why are you doing this to her?' And she hated it. It just made her miserable. So just things like that. I was just really exploring the relationship between men and women. And I mean, women have a lot of fault in a way too, but it just seems like men have the power so it should be up to them to change it.

This very personal exposé about power relations relative to gender in (and ultimately beyond) carceral space is a personal response to this CA's lived experience in jail. As she says, these instances of having been harassed in carceral space have disrupted her regular ability to develop and maintain relationships with those of the male gender, and as such she produced this painting as a form of agency that attempts to negotiate and help her reconcile her past – and future – relationships with men.

While this woman spoke to me about how this art that she has created



Figure 18: “Primordial Chaos”

communicates her personal perspectives based on her carceral experience, such as with “Free My Mind”, “The Whimsical Sink”, and “Primordial Chaos”, she emphasized that she does this also on behalf of others affected by the carceral state. Her piece below under Figure 19, titled “Mother Nature” is one such example. This woman described to me that this piece came out of her carceral experience in observing that when she was in jail that she was “one of only two white women there”, while there was a disproportionate number of non-white individuals. According to this CA, “Mother Nature” is inspired by the BLM Movement. As a technique of advocacy this piece provides social commentary that speaks to how in her view white women have been complicit to structural inequalities and have failed women who are Black and people of color. This woman described that “Black women, especially in the context of the system, are demonized and it's hard for them to view themselves as beautiful. So that's part of what I wanted the painting to do. It's like, “you are human and you are beautiful””.



Figure 19: “Mother Nature”

Lack of Continuity of Artistic Practice

While many CAs strive to continue making art upon returning home, there is a population of CAs that do not continue to make art after incarceration, neither independently nor collectively. As touched upon very briefly within the above sub-sections, this may be due to the fact that arts programs and organizations do not wish to foist artistic opportunities upon people who are attempting to resettle themselves with family, employment and housing and other basics of everyday life. Moreover, in my interviews I discovered that much of the lack of continuity of artistic practice by CAs is due mostly to their own realization that they simply cannot focus on it for the time being, given their returning home and busy responsibilities, and/or that they simply lose interest, and to make art now means less to them now that they are home.

Many CAs who cease to do artistic work when they are home do pick it up later on, as time and space become more accessible to them. One visual CA who was formerly incarcerated in New York State and was released in June 2020 explains his struggle in getting back to his drawing and painting:

I've had a hard time getting into that space, since I've been out; I've created a few pieces, but because of everything I feel like I'm on a 10 speed and getting on the thruway, so everyone's doing 80 and I'm pedaling as fast as I can, and people are flying past me, so I'm just trying to catch up, like I'm drinking out of a firehose. I think I'm doing relatively well. But there's always a sense of urgency and a panic, and I can't get into that zone and just relax and paint when I'm like that. So, I will. It's just an adjustment phase, because anytime I would move to a different facility, the same thing would happen, it'd take me months before I got the paints out. But then once I settled in, I could relax and I could do it...I think I'll be able to fall back in. It's more important to me really than anything else, to keep doing it, keep producing, because it's who I am, like I found my kind of – I think this is what I'm supposed to do in this life, is to

create art, and share it with people. It's more to me than making any money off of it, it's not really about that...I have a drive in me, this is what I need to do. Regardless, I mean I make money doing other things, which is great. If I can make money doing art, I'd do that exclusively, but it hasn't happened yet. Still waiting for that big break. If it doesn't happen, I'm still gonna be an artist painting stuff, and selling it."

While this man states that he is committed to returning to his work in good time, others choose not to continue, even if they have the time. These CAs explained that, even though they discovered that they had a hidden talent that never had been revealed to them before their incarceration, this was more or less an agentic tactic that was relevant to them within carceral space only, that is, art was largely a mechanism of simply coping with everyday life while inside. Part of this was CAs explaining that they sold their work to others in prison⁶⁶ – often visual artists making portraits – for a small amount of cash or food, which had much value for CAs while inside; with the absence of this everyday need as a tactic of survival, however, art is less important to some of these individuals. Furthermore, upon returning home, CAs prefer going to work, or finding new pastimes or cultural pursuits – such as relationships or outdoor activities – that they did not have the freedom to do while incarcerated, which interests them more than older artistic endeavors that were part of a previous chapter of their lives.

Another reason that CAs do not follow up on their prior artistic work from prison, however, is that while CAs spend a considerable amount of time creatively expressing themselves, they sometimes never saw themselves as “artists”. Some CAs stated that, while their skills did surprise them, that they are not in the echelon of what they perceive

⁶⁶ Based on my interviews, sometimes this is done with permission from prison authorities, and sometimes it is not.

an “artist” to be, and thus do not feel comfortable continuing aesthetic activities back home. As one CA who was incarcerated in New York State explained to me about how he sees his aesthetic abilities now:

AM: You said before that you didn't necessarily think of yourself as an artist. And so, is that like a title or an identity you just feel like doesn't describe you? Or you just feel like it's not relevant for who you are?

CA: Well, I think it's a reflection on what I believe my abilities are to me. *Artists* can put together a nice piece at any given time, that's what they do, right? Even though they have to be inspired by stuff, still, they have that ability. I don't think that my skill falls in that kind of category. Like, I just can't sit down and put a piece of work together, you know? So that's why I don't categorize myself as an artist, so to speak, you know?

AM: Yeah. I'm a musician, and there's a common phrase that people say, that ‘there are songwriters. And then there are people who write songs’.

CA: Yeah, there you go. That's exactly how I feel.

As we can observe, this CA examines his artistic skills and therefore his aesthetic identity in a very humble way. One interpretation of this point of view is that such an individual does not feel confident about their art and worries about silently judging their own work. While this is possible and is maybe occurring on some level, based on my conversations I believe this has more to do with the lack of a social environment within which these CAs previously made art before when they were in prison. As we learned in chapters 4 and 5, leadership can at times overpower CAs and give them anxiety about their art within the workshops, worrying about how others will see them and their work; but even though this social stress exists to different degrees depending on the CA, these CAs still had a sanctioned time and space where they felt motivated to make art, either individually or

collectively. As they are now home this social infrastructure is gone, and in the process, I believe that these self-defined expectations and interests tend to evaporate as well.

Summation

In conclusion, CAs who continue to pursue artistic engagements post-incarceration tend to do so through either the desire to continue to build artistic community, and/or to negotiate the trauma of incarceration. This continual building of artistic community can occur within groups of CAs for their own individual and/or collective interest and benefit, or it can also transpire with the motivation of expanding knowledge and awareness about mass incarceration through performing for public audiences. CAs making art on their own, with the support of their TAs and fellow CAs who have returned home occurs largely as tactics, where CAs seek out agency for themselves with the freedom that they now have in communicating and interacting with CAs, TAs and others. Much of this artistic sharing functions as agency because it is predominantly rooted in CAs' desire to simply create and perform for themselves, their peers, and public audiences when possible – this is to say that the building of community in constructing agency through the arts (Bledsoe 2017; Hawkins 2013; Lucas 2013) for returning citizens in this manner is not defined by *how* these CAs want to be interpreted, but rather that they want to share their creativity in and of itself.

Alternately, we have also seen how CAs aim to build community through art that strives to make an intervention that discursively criticizes the carceral state by exposing its effects on people's lives. This data is drawn largely from formerly incarcerated women, who articulate that their unique positionality as women who have been affected by the carceral state (Shankar 2013) in part affects their interest in using art to build and

maintain community amongst themselves after returning home. As Mary Cohen (2012) suggests, we can observe that these interventions of artistic performance are motivated by CAs' desire to alter or disrupt public perceptions of incarceration and incarcerated people. But as we learn here this occurs not just through music, as Cohen suggests, but also through more variegated forms, such as the ensembles. As such, these discourses and practices operate within the register of resistance because they intentionally evokes social and political commentary about how the prison system does not solve social problems.

As has also been evidenced, this conversation speaks to the inequalities exacerbated by the carceral state, including the reality of trauma that formerly incarcerated people carry with them after incarceration. In this we recognize these personal geographies of trauma not just in terms of the impacts that trauma has had on formerly incarcerated people, as Valentine (1998) and Willis et al (2016) discuss, but additionally how this demographic enacts agency and resistance in *negotiating* this condition with the geographical circumstances that define their return to public life. These artistic discourses may be oriented around CAs' individual encounters, but also speak on behalf of others who have had similar experiences who are less able to articulate their voices. And additionally, we observe that returning to one's family and community is often defined by economic precarity (Hamlin 2020; Herbert et al 2015), within which CAs depend on artistic gigs to materially support themselves; however, we must also appreciate that to be able to have access to capital that way given CAs' disenfranchisement has important meaning for some of these individuals. And additionally, while many continue their artistic work, either within the realms of agency or resistance, others do not maintain or advance their creative expressions upon leaving

prison. Some are less interested in these tactics because they saw them as only relevant to surviving the everyday social life of prison, or because they no longer have interest or time, given the pressing realities of everyday responsibilities.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

General Summation

This dissertation has examined the geographical circumstances in prison spaces that affect and direct how artistic practice is constructed. I have investigated these topics through the lens of the geographies of agency and resistance in considering how artistic geographies can operate as techniques of agency and/or resistance in, across, and beyond carceral environments. In doing this, I have conceptualized the geographies of art as creative expressions that are articulated, communicated, shared, and performed in space by individuals and/or groups, which may take on discursive and/or material forms. Using this framework and these definitions, I have outlined the role that art plays in CA's lives and the multiplicitous meanings and nuances of its practice, both within and beyond carceral space.

The research questions that I have asked and sought to answer in this dissertation have been a) what geographical circumstances affect CAs' efforts to access, enable, discover, conduct, and perform art in and beyond the carceral landscape? And b), in what ways do these artistic geographies manifest and exist as geographies of agency and/or as geographies of resistance? In asking my first research question by invoking the term *geographical circumstances*, I have attempted to illustrate the variety of materialities, imaginaries, discursive apparatuses, spatial structures, and tools to which CAs have varying degrees of access. In doing so, I have sought to show how these arrangements can facilitate and/or inhibit how CAs' geographies of art – and therefore their geographies of agency and/or resistance – come into being. My second question takes the empirical context of the geographical circumstances that affect artist practice in and

beyond carceral space and considers how these artistic geographies, based on how and why they are enacted, operate as either agency or resistance.

Drawing partly from Michel Foucault and more deeply from Michel de Certeau, I have applied the notion of the technologies of the self and tactics, respectively, in contextualizing how agency and resistance are imagined and carried out by CAs. I have applied the notion of the technologies of the self to the creative operations that CAs construct, what Goffman thinks of as “secondary adjustments”, to emphasize how CAs devise new and different ways of being as power operates on them. I have used de Certeau’s theory of tactics to discuss the opportunities and practices that CAs discover to manifest some control in their claiming and transforming of carceral space(s). Tactics, as we have seen, take the form of creative expression, which are defined by CAs capturing and seizing moments and techniques to express themselves cleverly and creatively. As I have further demonstrated, tactics may take the form of agency or resistance, which are subjectively defined by different imagined qualities of intentionality.

Through my focus on agency and resistance I have outlined the ways in which both are distinctly defined by the imaginaries that propel and direct their creation and practice. Agency, as I have defined it in this context, is the capacity for CAs to possess motivation and interest in some form of creative expression and the attempt to assert their ability to enact those expressions. Resistance is an enactment which goes beyond the imagination and practice of just agency alone, in which agency blends into a form of intentionality whereby CAs imagine their artistic discourses and practices as being in contention with their everyday geographical circumstances, and perhaps even the greater carceral state in some way. Based on my findings, my codes indicated that there are four

general thematic categories that reveal the distinctions between agency and resistance within the geographies of art in carceral environments. These are, first, the role of the space of the workshop in facilitating CAs' artistic tactics; second, CAs exertion of tactics through their leadership in both group and individual contexts; third, the reality of spectacle – how CAs see themselves and perceive being seen by others – that affects the performance and sharing of CAs' artistic geographies; and fourth, CAs' post-incarceration artistic engagements, that is, the ways in which CAs continue their artistic work after returning home.

As chapter 3 discussed, the workshop writ large is the mechanism and the geographical circumstance that facilitates and enables much of the inception of CAs' artistic agency. While informal artwork occurs, with CAs utilizing their aesthetic abilities they had or developed outside of workshops, the data indicates that TAs' expertise and instruction inherently involve collaboration, and thus can open up space for CAs to learn, through what we can think of as everyday forms of agency and resistance, or enactments performed through the mundane (ACE Steering Committee 2020; Allen et al 2009; Rosenberg 2012; Livermon 2014; Daché et al 2022). As such, CAs become active in repurposing their environments and in doing so conduct their own artistic agency. While the workshop is a geographical circumstance that opens up art to CAs, CAs still struggle to practice their art due to available attention from TAs during workshops, as well as restrictions over spatial access in doing one's practice at other times when the formal workshop is not occurring. A significant amount of artistic work, if not the majority of it, is enabled by CAs tactically having and asserting access to the workshop model.

The second theme, leadership, was discussed in chapter 4. As I emphasized here,

tactics are discovered and deployed when CAs assume leadership opportunities in their artistic practices. Through asserting themselves into available roles and responsibilities that have been devolved to them by TAs and program directors in their artistic activities, CAs both temporally and spatially endeavor to make art ‘happen’, as it were. With the support of their programs and TAs, there are certain structures with which CAs are able to manage and affect decision-making in the overseeing and directing of artistic opportunities. These can include micro-structures such as Steering Committees that define workshop interests for other CAs in a given program, or CAs operating as assistant directors during a theater production. There may or may not be contention over how and what artistic mediums and discourses are practiced, as CAs can differ in their opinions regarding what programming they want to happen and why. We observed this through the example of the play *Our Town*, where there was initial reluctance to perform a play that CAs believed had very little connection to the majority racial demographic of the theater company and the prison. This was then followed by CAs assuming leadership in a re-envisioning and reclaiming of the play that could tactically work in the register that the CAs wished. This operated as a form of resistance within which CAs could more effectively empower (Cohen & Padilofsky 2013) through positive social relationships (Alexander 2010; Forte 2008) and represent themselves (Barak & Stebbins 2017) as a community (Trounstine 2007, 2008) to themselves and to others. We recognize that while this occurs, however, contention with the wider group can exist, and agency may be conducted even though individuals may oppose the motivations of the group. As I have demonstrated, leadership in the carceral arts can occur as a contribution to the wider artistic group of CAs; as such, may be exerted by and for the individual self as a more

personalized geography, where the emotions and imagination of the leading oneself – such with visual arts – is seen to be more important as a form of agency.

In chapter 5 I deconstructed the role of spectacle as it influences artistic agency and resistance in carceral space. I defined spectacle as the ways in which CAs attempt to be seen, noticed, or recognized in the performance and presentation of their creative abilities. I also discussed how spectacle can be at work when CAs see and interpret other individuals and groups in carceral space – the many noticing the few – where such observational acts are also a factor affecting artistic creativity. I presented data on how CAs represent themselves spectacularly through a variety of different means. Relative to music and theater, these individuals who write songs with social commentary and embed discursive emphasis within them (Woods 1998), organize visual arts exhibitions, and re-script plays so that they may function as a form of representation (Dogan 2013) often do so to speak a broader message to the prison population that attempts to shed light on their oppressed carceral positionality. As I indicated, spectacle is used and harnessed across these artistic approaches to construct different perceptions of incarcerated people (Cohen 2012). As I show, this is meant to be a spectacle not just for the prison population, but also for the public to observe and consume, enabled by CAs having access to a wider audience that can hear the plight of their civil death, that is, incarcerated people's social, political, and economic disenfranchisement and their subsequent forced removal from public life. These interventions of spectacle frequently serve as tactics of resistance, because these CAs imagine their artistic practices as discursively attempting to question and critique the power of the carceral state. As we also saw, spectacle in CAs' visual artwork is sometimes created with the purpose of both the group and the individual being

seen by other CAs, non-CAs in the prison, and the public; however, there is perhaps less resistance and more agency here during some of these moments, as the imaginative motivation of presenting social commentary does not construct visual art quite as frequently. And while other scholars have contextualized the arts as forms of symbolic representation and therefore assertions of agency in claiming public space (Donish 2012; Schacter 2008; Zebracki 2012), we recognize that these experiential techniques and social formations are also at work in unique ways in spaces of confinement as well.

Finally, in chapter 6 I demonstrated the differences between artistic agency and resistance amongst different groups of formerly incarcerated CAs. As we observed, there are two dominant themes that define how formerly incarcerated CAs continue to produce artistic works, namely the objective of continuing to build community, and the desire to use art to combat the trauma of incarceration, which can have long-term temporal impacts. CAs may be mainly interested in continuing to do their art in terms of agency after they return home, being mainly focused on musical sharing with the other CAs with whom they were previously incarcerated. These CAs wish to continue channeling the emotional euphoria of having made art together inside, given that they now have more time, space, materials, and access to their TAs. This demographic of CAs also provides support to their CA peers who are still incarcerated and demonstrate a desire to also share their music with a wider audience in general. These geographies are particularly characterized by agency, as the specifics of any underlying meanings or discourses embedded within these art forms is less important for the audience to interpret; in other words, the desire to build community based on carceral experience (Hawkins 2017) is rooted mainly in an interest in simply being heard and seen, regardless of what the

audience's connection with the CAs' work actually is. Alternately, post-carcer art that is done by formerly incarcerated female CAs illustrates a strong desire for the audience to see their work in a particular way (Cohen 2012), that is, speaking to the broader issue of mass incarceration and its structural issues. In this section I also discuss how the carceral arts are taken advantage by CAs to navigate the long-term trauma (Valentine 1998; Willis 2016) that was imposed on them while they were incarcerated. We appreciate here how we ought not just to look at the structural impact of carceral trauma, however, but to also engage with how formerly incarcerated individuals negotiate this. Taken largely from women's experiences, these geographies in this context of trauma fall more into the framework of resistance, as these CAs imagine their work functioning in this particular way.

As we have observed, geographical circumstances can be enabling or dis-enabling. Such geographical circumstances that avail artistic access to CAs can occur through techniques such as through TAs' role in opening up artistic space through workshops to provide collaborative environments, providing artistic materials which CAs cannot afford or acquire otherwise. This may occur independently but also collectively in a group space where there is an effort to collapse judgment so creativity can better flourish, or through performing theatrically for different audiences and sending a message by doing so. Alternately, more *limiting* geographical circumstances are moments such as prison authorities' curtailment of CAs' desired choice of plays to perform, the loudness of prison preventing effective concentration to be able to practice one's art, the vulnerability of placing identity out in the open due to the spectacular nature of artistic performance, the small number of incarcerated individuals who get admission into an arts

program, or inequalities of call-outs and the potential of being unable to physically access sanctioned micro-artistic environments within the prison.

Due to the limiting realities of artistic thought and practice in carceral space, CAs' construction of place occurs in an awkward manner. On the one hand, performing for the public and connecting with them during and/or after a concert or play, sharing visual arts in an exhibition, or engaging with other artists of the same genre or instrument in a workshop are activities that build a sense of place. Participating in sound-offs or enjoying being part of a jam that incorporates a multiplicity of musical styles are practices that build meaning through the excitement and emotions of being creative, learning from one another and sharing with one another. But, as we know, the carceral-artistic continuum – that is, access to all these tactics and the spatial arrangements that make them available and possible – are defined by many precarious contingencies because they occur in prison. At any moment, tactics can become inaccessible for anyone. And has been noted, while a certain nostalgia exists amongst formerly incarcerated artists, this is a memory of the meaning of the activity that happened in a space where members all came together; it is *not* nostalgia for confinement. Thus, artistic place in prison is dualistic, enveloping a residue of social, emotional, and cultural connection, but is also simultaneously nonplace (Cohen 2000, p. 284), inherently having a fundamental, dispossessing quality embedded within it.

What is paramount to acknowledge is that, while all these geographical circumstances can preclude or inhibit the ability and/or the feeling or desire to be creative in certain ways, artistic geographies in prison are constructed by these limitations. The nature of tactics and the meaning they have for CAs – be it agency or resistance – is

produced by how free or how constraining geographical circumstances might be. In this context, art is often first and foremost a technique of the self where the individual person – in this case, the CA – strives to feel safer, more secure, free, and less vulnerable to the loss of identity that occurs in prison. As many CAs emphasized to me, to make art in prison at all – and to find ways of getting that creativity seen and heard by the public – is the antithesis of prison. As such, these geographies of possibility can theoretically permit the CA to claim an imagination of the self that is more open and liberated by virtue of enacting their creative expressions within and beyond carceral space. Thus, CA's art as interventions that function as forms of recognition, validation or affirmation that has meaning for those who produce it and share it. If a CA sees their aesthetic efforts as a coping mechanism that assists them in navigating the social life of incarceration, then it is this imagination of themselves that can define their art as agency. For other CAs, if these coping mechanisms are claimed and utilized as practices that go further to provide critique or social/political commentary about everyday life in prison or the inequities of incarceration within or beyond the prison system, then these activities and practices will fall within the framework of resistance.

As we have seen, enacting agency and/or resistance utilizes similar if not the same operations, be they through workshops or exhibitions in carceral space, performances by currently incarcerated CAs and formerly incarcerated CAs, composing music, running lines for a play, or drawing/painting in one's cell. The distinction between agency and resistance is defined by the CA's imperative behind their artistic work. In other words, it is the CA's thought or mentality, i.e., their imagination, as to what they are doing and/or saying with their work that directs *why* they are doing it or saying it. If the CA imagines

their artistic engagements as speaking to a broader context where they intentionally attempt to discuss or expose power in some way, then this is when and where agency blends into resistance. Additionally, however, as I have noted in the empirical chapters, agency and resistance are not always pure binaries. This is to say that a given artistic tactic, a given performance, or a given genre does not *necessarily* imply that a certain aesthetic activity or engagement is agency OR resistance, that is, one or the other.

This is to say that individuals contributing towards an artistic activity that is collectively performed may employ different conceptualizations and imaginations about their work, i.e., intentionalities are not black and white. For example, the majority of a theater company in prison may have a message they wish to send by putting on a certain production, although individual members may be enacting agency in their own way by their participation that means something entirely separate to them than it means to other members of the group. This same phenomenon applies in music and visual arts, where a common theme of performance may unify CAs in the presentation of their creativity, but yet there may be more individualized, personal geographies of meaning that are not captured or recognized by the presentation, within which individual CAs may not imagine themselves as sending or signally any major message. Thus, agency and resistance provide parameters for considering how and why creativity is conceived in carceral space, yet we recognize that there is much nuance in how these discourses and practices are constructed and shared.

But in recognition of the imagined imperatives of CAs' aesthetic engagements and activities, we also observe that enacting agency or resistance and existing within a

disciplinary structure happens at the same time. This occurs regardless of whether art is intended as agency or resistance. If the disciplinary and biopolitical structure did not exist (in prison) in the ways that it does, then what it means to conduct agency or resistance would be entirely different. Agency and resistance can happen where there are gaps in the structure, and agency and resistance become defined by those gaps and how wide or narrow they are. Through recognizing that one can perform tactics and be disciplined simultaneously – perhaps a common feature of neoliberalism yet becomes more evident to us through examining a phenomenon like the arts this way in carceral environments – that shows us just how hard one must work and how cleverly must think to be able to perform agency at all for whatever purposes one is attempting to construct it.

Shortcomings of the Research & Future Research Directions

The dissertation was to a degree affected by a variety of circumstances that limited the scope of what data was able to be collected and how. Given that I began the project at the very onset of the Covid-19 Global Pandemic, my initial data collection was restricted to conducting interviews in a purely virtual way for the first year of research. As techniques of online communication during the pandemic matured and developed, I was able to begin attending some virtual observations. Nevertheless, this was one of the major shortcomings of the research. By the time I was writing, the majority of arts programs and organizations – along with other prison organizations – were and still are not entering prisons to provide programming for CAs. Thus, while I had made some connections with different individuals in multiple organizations prior to the pandemic, this did not lead to me to being able to go into a prison facility to directly conduct participant observation of a given program, its workshops or performances. Seeing these

workshops would have been ideal, especially multiple times to see how skills are developed and learned as a progression over a period of weeks or months.

Not having this access was deeply disappointing from a research standpoint, and for me personally. To mitigate this as best as I could, I sought to qualify the research using the means and methods that have been available to me by speaking to many different CAs and TAs within the same organization(s). I would have liked to survey more individuals affiliated with different programs through a more random sampling technique, but ultimately this was not possible. I attempted to turn that shortcoming of not having a random sample to my advantage in the research, however, by appreciating different carceral art networks. This was a method of determining who knows who, and finding the shared anecdotes that can provide clarity about the phenomena that I was investigating. Speaking to one TA and then one or more of the CAs with whom they have worked – or vice versa, speaking to CAs first and then their TAs – helped in gleaning a thicker description of the social life of the arts in prison. This also assisted in acquiring an understanding of the uniformity or lack thereof on certain subjects, where individuals in the same networks had alternate takes on the same topics or questions.

Ironically, I believe that interviewing over Zoom versus interviewing over the phone – which would have occurred perhaps on some level even without the pandemic – was actually beneficial from a data collection perspective. All my research subjects whom I interviewed over Zoom were willing to participate, and every single one of them had their cameras on. This allowed the interview to be more real, as people are able to exchange eye contact in the conversation, which also allows the matching of body language with tone of voice. This form of greater proximity to the research subject

supports the development of stronger rapport, which makes the data richer. While I could not write down these details from phone calls, I could make a note of this from Zoom conversations, which, as the reader has seen, I was able to include in the writing-up of my data in my chapters, as it is relevant for representing interviewees' opinions and points of view. So, while in-person interviews would have been ideal, I was able to at least acquire some of this data to better help inform the words that were being said.

Being able to attend the retreat and some live performances in late 2021 did end up being essential to the data collection, even though they occurred towards the end of the project. Yet, while I acquired significant data from these interactions, I was not always able to follow up with these CAs afterwards in any greater depth. It is and was a privilege to speak and interact with all these individuals, and although I was initially able to make plans with some of them to further communicate, I was unable to get back to them. Given our interactions and conversations, I believe many of these CAs with whom I have lost contact were excited about my interest in their work and their lives, virtual and in-person; however, like anyone these individuals move on to the next thing and can easily become unable to give the researcher further attention, or they may become uncomfortable with the researcher giving *them* any more attention. As continuing to try and maintain contact could cause harm, the researcher needs to know when to step away.

I was able to follow-up with some of my interviewees, however, which led to acquisition of more detailed data. As with any set of interests or cultural pursuits that people have, artists often have a dialect all their own. This allowed me to have more relaxed and amiable secondary or tertiary interviews, which opened up my conversations to discuss with these CA in greater detail certain topics such as genres, historical figures

in an artistic field, painters, musicians, and many others. Normally I would never have conversations with most people about these things because these topics mean less with others for whom art has less significance or relevance. What a joy it was to speak to folks who do not take these things for granted like so many others in the world! I will miss these conversations, and hope that one day I might reconnect with some of those folks, and perhaps even make art with some of them.

Because of the research shortcomings in terms of operationalizable methods and loss of contacts towards the latter half of the project, I hope that it may be possible in the future to conduct more direct participant observation in prison settings themselves. As the outcome of Covid continues to be uncertain, so too are these possibilities, but I aspire to be able to do this one day. Furthermore, while this project as a dissertation required a rather holistic examination of multiple artistic mediums to draw out the phenomena discussed in this monograph, it may also be useful in future research to focus on just one or two artistic mediums for a given investigation. This would permit thicker description that is very focused and would allow the discovery of detail that was not possible in this project with the sample I had to establish.

Another methodological but also partly analytical shortcoming was the distribution of gender demographics in my subject pool. As has been stated and represented in the data here, the majority of my CA interviewees were men and a minority were women. As I noted at different points throughout the dissertation, this is due in part to the smaller number of incarcerated individuals in women's facilities as opposed to men's facilities in the United States. This is also compounded by women in the New York State carceral arts network reportedly being less interested than men in

representing women who are still inside or continuing with the arts themselves after they return home. It was interesting to observe, however, that the women I surveyed from the program in Connecticut exhibit more of a public presence than the New York State cohort. With more time and data it would be interesting to interrogate this further regarding public representation. I do not have the data to conclude on this currently, but I believe that it is possible that the culture of program leadership and the culture of creative oversight has something to do with the women's desire to participate in the arts after leaving prison in these contexts. The ways in which TAs in the Connecticut program provided artistic opportunities for returning women appeared to be more free flowing than what the programs in New York State that I surveyed offered to alumni, which were also overall fewer in number, as noted in chapter 6.

On this point, it is interesting also to acknowledge that while the male CAs in New York State were predominantly interested in presenting their creativity for other audiences mainly with the imperative connecting with others through the lens of art for art's sake, the female CAs evaluated in chapter 6 had other motivations behind the presentation of their creativity that spoke to broader social, cultural, and political issues. Regarding gender, for future research it would also be interesting to build a larger sample of CAs to further ascertain if these preferences are in fact a more widespread phenomenon, where these artistic objectives are defined by gender demographics in this manner on a broader scale.

Another shortcoming of this project was being able to follow and trace a CA in terms of their return home from prison, and how their material well-being and socioeconomic status differs from others who are not CAs. The project did not

necessarily demand searching for this data, although for future projects I believe that it would be relevant and helpful to gain a qualitative understanding of the extent to which CAs participating in arts programs and exerting artistic agency and/or resistance has a correlation with material circumstances post-incarceration. This would involve examining this population relative to employment, income and more or less economic precarity when returning from carceral space. Like with other future research possibilities outlined above, re-establishing contacts and having access to more CAs' in-person performances and events would, of course, be essential.

Policy Prospects for the Carceral Arts

Given that the arts in prison have this important function, it is relevant to also consider policy's role in affecting prison arts programs. While some prison arts programs receive state or public funding for their work⁶⁷, the program directors and TAs that I interviewed from the programs in New York State explained how much they functioned as independent operations with limited public support. These individuals emphasized to me that much of their staff's time is spent applying for grants, seeking donations, and lobbying constituents in state congress for legislative line items so that they may receive support to continue to pay stipends for their TAs, salaries for their staff, and all the other art materials they provide to CAs in workshops. Some of these programs and organizations are bigger than others and have larger private fundraising mechanisms and therefore do not face these exact same challenges; yet recognition of prison arts program

⁶⁷ See the William James Association Prison Arts Project in California for an example of this (https://williamjamesassociation.org/prison_arts/) and their direct sources of funding (<https://arts.ca.gov/press-release/california-arts-council-offers-funding-for-development-of-prison-arts-programs/>)

at other legislative and bureaucratic levels was reported by these organizations as being minimal.

The question of greater funding for these programs, or of the state being more involved in supporting them is, of course, a double-edged sword. In asking TAs as to how they interpreted the arts as an intervention that potentially deserved greater financial support, they sometimes expressed that that is “*the question*”, and they are often at a loss because they are providing agency to CAs and enabling their creativity as facilitators, but simultaneously when they go inside (and at other times) they also despise the prison system and the social and economic inequalities that it does not solve. TAs reported that dealing with this dichotomy often seems insurmountable. But it should also be noted that other TAs and program directors, while they were not thrilled by limitations placed on their program and their program’s participants, did not indicate such vehement disagreement with the overall prison system. This group was perhaps more supportive of seeking program funding – either through outside organizations or directly through the state – because, as they articulated to me, ‘I can’t imagine a world without prison’. Thus, in these TAs’ view, because prison is there and should be there, policy should be directed towards supporting program within this industry.

Naturally though, the problem is neoliberalism in general and the conditions it creates which consequently incarcerate particular groups and individuals (Gilmore 2007). As Michelle Alexander tells us, mass incarceration has been a failure as a crime reduction strategy, yet as a system of social control it has been rather successful (2020, p. 224-225). Interestingly, while Alexander also tells us that while the reform discourse can lead to the social reproduction and perpetuation of the current system (p. 216, 232), she also states

that “The relevant question is not whether to engage in reform work, but how” (p. 223), meaning that any series of reform efforts must be part of a broader strategy (p. 223). This is to suggest that a much more comprehensive and radically oriented set of policies is required for a redistribution of resources such that surplus bodies are not predatorily removed from their communities and placed in carceral space. If we recognize that the arts are one such technique that attempts to critique and work towards breaking the cyclical nature of incarceration, then it certainly deserves greater attention.

As we have learned, the carceral arts are about fixing problems that were created for people in their younger lives. In this regard, we can observe that things are literally backwards. If the structures are there earlier on, these issues can be deterred. The key to this is recognizing that greater policy interest in the carceral arts cannot coincide with any greater build-up of the carceral state and its mechanisms. Doing work facilitating the arts for incarcerated people is an important contribution to make, but our emotions as advocates should not be what is most important to us here. From a policy perspective, supporting the arts in these contexts cannot simply be about us as members of the public simply feeling good about ourselves – these actions must be directed at fighting the inequities constructed by the structure itself, for the purpose of changing how things fundamentally work. Any one organization getting a grant or donations to do their work is helpful, but if investment in the carceral arts it is not coordinated as a component of a more radical and comprehensive approach to collapse the everyday functions of mass incarceration – such as through decarceration and state closure of prisons, improved social safety nets for the working class, and minimized predatory policing practices – it will not have the impact that our society desperately needs.

The Significance of the Carceral Arts, Agency, Resistance, and Geography

As I stated in the introduction, I do not believe that art in and of itself can somehow magically eliminate the prison-industrial complex. Like any attempt to critique or dismantle oppression, there is not one sure-fire solution, as a multiplicity of forces is essential to deconstructing the arbitrary – yet often calculated – limiting effects of coercive institutions (Chomsky & Foucault 2006, p. 37). It should be noted that while I have made a case for arts' role and its potential in this dissertation, I do not mean to suggest that it is the *only* tactic of agency or resistance available for currently incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals, or for other members of the public who oppose the carceral state. Incarcerated individuals' capacity to enact agency in carceral space can also be done with other tactics, such as through more conventional education programs, (Behan 2014, p. 24; Mertanen & Brunila 2018, p. 166-67; Warr 2016); other creative or recreational activities in other spaces of the prison, such as in the cell (ACE Steering Committee 2020); or in physical sports (Norman 2017, p. 601; Norman & Andrews 2019, p. 454). And beyond carceral space, CAs may conduct and accomplish agency by *not* continuing with their art, as other responsibilities for returning citizens can take precedence, as we have seen.

What the carceral arts show us is more than just the arts itself. What these investigations demonstrate with greater significance is the human ability and capacity to adapt to and shape space. Under certain conditions and geographical circumstances, we can gain a greater appreciation for what the human aptitude for endurance in and across space looks like and how it is designed and structured. Within environments of duress and impossibility, we come to appreciate how and why certain practices are conjured and what meanings are attached to them and propel them as creative endeavors. We can

observe that cultural and political geographies of power, agency and resistance are defined by these geographies of the extreme, which we recognize can apply in non-carceral contexts as well. Due to the regimented, disciplinary apparatus of prison, art in these settings and with these populations becomes a way to establish identity and assert the fact that you are still human and that you do still exist. This allows CAs to feel more secure in their own person and provides them with a veneer of emotional protection relative to the spectacle that they are able to promote in prison with that credibility.

The arts are valuable skills in these spaces, not purely from an aesthetic perspective, but because they become a tool for something beyond just the arts. For these demographics in these environments, the arts provide an imagination of sophistication, which becomes an important tactic for navigating and negotiating the complexities of the social life of incarceration. And as I originally stated in the introduction, recognizing and analyzing agency or resistance with the perspectives and approaches I utilize should not be romanticized or examined voyeuristically. As Cindi Katz reminds us, these are not necessarily productive forms of analysis (2004, p. 240). On the contrary, the arts as agency and resistance in prison are not an end in and of themselves, but as tactics they are rather a vehicle for providing the means to navigate and negotiate prison and its impacts. Indeed, many of the CAs with whom I spoke and interacted defended the idea of art for art's sake and what their discovery of it and their skills has given them, yet their goal generally is to apply these abilities and discoveries in such a way that it permits them to manage their feelings and lived experiences differently and with more ease. In other words, the arts serve a purpose beyond itself for these people. Whether it may be material through the selling of portraits when inside, connecting with others and building

a community of people with similar interests, or the emotional satisfaction of accomplishing something that they never knew they had in them, for these groups and individuals the arts function as a conduit for some greater, non-romanticized end for survival in and beyond prison.

Nonetheless, I have contended in this dissertation that the arts specifically do have a greater significance that deserves more notice and recognition, as the arts more deeply inform and alert us as to the realities and reasons behind incarceration in the United States. As I have shown in this dissertation, while some formerly incarcerated artists use their art to comment on the impacts and inequalities inherent in the US prison system, many other CAs are more interested in creating artistic works as a form of personal expression unto themselves, or they simply see it as a method of navigating the everyday life of incarceration. To do something artistic is a technique of the self that attempts to come in touch with, construct, or represent one's identity in a space where the ability to hold onto and know one's identity is often scarce. To do art is to use agency to navigate and fill the void where identity is fleeting. And while they do not stand in *opposition* to each other, to do resistance is to take how one has come to know oneself in some way and make it more external, wherein the imaginary of the self – either as the individual or the group – is related to and in perhaps in recognition of a larger social reality.

As we have seen, art does not always produce an imagination of societal change, as my contextualization of artistic agency seeks to demonstrate. And even if resistance within the carceral arts is occurring, we know that this in and of itself does not necessarily imply any major structural transformation within the prison or the wider prison system. Tactics, as de Certeau suggests, do not necessarily possess nor are they

necessarily designed around such a motive. Nevertheless, the discourses and practices that constitute artistic agency and resistance in prison are perhaps more powerful than people would like to appreciate. In a world of neoliberalism and infrastructural failure, especially in light of Covid-19, it is imperative for us to more deeply consider what techniques of the self are available to us within our personal proximity, and re-invest our efforts based on connecting to those resources around us. To consider what is accessible to one in their immediate environment in carceral space (Williams 2012, p. 240, 241) – such as with artistic tools or opportunities – is the first step in this complicated, messy work of enacting tactics, which is what CAs do, regardless of whether their aesthetic imaginaries are oriented and directed by agency or resistance.

The musical compositions, plays, scripts, performances, paintings, drawings, and poems that I have discussed and shared in this dissertation are artistic practices which function as responses to disciplinary power and therefore the geographical circumstances of the carceral state in some way, including the conditions of the pre and post-carceral. Many of these CAs respond to power by creating art that assists them in negotiating everyday life in prison and is done with those very personal motivations. Other CAs do this with the imperative of having social and political messages embedded in their work, because it has been important to them to recognize the geographical circumstances and conditions out of which their creativity has been born – within, prior to and after prison – and to use these available circumstances to make their discourses heard. They have produced art because of structural issues and want others to see these realities.

Those who have lived precarious lives, whose livelihoods – or lack thereof – and bodies have been an outcome of unwanted surplus have been victimized and criminalized

by the carceral state in the United States. The denial of normalcy and stability results in a form of sociocultural disenfranchisement, where the value and importance of artistic engagement is made to be absent, either intentionally⁶⁸ or by default. This absence is exclusionary, where people are denied cultural access, often along class lines. Art often becomes represented or imagined as belonging or needing to belong to middle or upper middle-class people and is often materially made available as such⁶⁹. Those who are not born into these echelons of society often do not absorb the importance of art, nor are they in the places where art is constructed as having value for people's lives. During the retreat that I attended one of the TAs made a statement wondering "Why is it that only kids who go to elite private schools get to have the opportunity to take so many diverse arts electives, whereas kids in under-funded public schools don't get to do any of this?" This question perhaps makes us wonder why this dissertation was not about youth incarceration and art; evidently this is another potential avenue for future research. But studying adult CAs in prison demonstrates the literal backwardness of our economic and cultural priorities in the United States.

The art that CAs produce – for example, the female CAs' work discussed in chapter 6 – assists us in appreciating that there are long-term effects that culminate from this lack of investment, leading to the warehousing of bodies in cages and the material

⁶⁸ Wacquant argues that neoliberalism is not coordinated (2010, p. 607), and therefore the effects of structural inequality cannot necessarily be 'intentional'. I disagree with this. While neoliberalism – and its puppet, the state – are in many ways defined by many different sectors of capital, governance and bureaucracy and their respective interests that contend for dominance (Peet 2007, p. 6) – where no one single constituent is wholly responsible – neoliberalism is not always so surreptitious, as there has indeed been planning and design behind the construction of the carceral state and the warehousing of bodies (see Dan Baum's 2016 article "Legalize it All: How to win the war on drugs" in Harper's Magazine).

⁶⁹ There is a deep history of working-class people having a close relationship to the arts (Lomax 1993; Woods 1998), yet these histories are often ignored in the public discourse.

challenges of returning citizens, not to mention the trauma of the carceral experience. These psychological impacts and memories – not only affecting CAs as individuals, but their families as well – stay with people for years and decades, causing unrecognized harm that can easily reproduce itself. As the female CAs emphasized to us, just saying words alone does not carry the message nearly as effectively. Art has the ability as a creative medium to capture the interest and therefore communicate and demonstrate a sophisticated response to these social realities.

I believe that making art is and should be about crossing boundaries, not creating them. Using art to find ways to cross social barriers is more necessary than ever before in human history, in large part since our contemporary world is so significantly defined by tribalism. Many people in the western world – not all – have culturally siloed themselves into their own groups, organizations, and collectivities where they imagine themselves as being secure and existing where they ‘belong’ (Chua 2018, p. 25; Sotirakopolous 2021). Tribes are inherently exclusive and have barriers to entry, where those who do not match the dominant criteria are either canceled out or effectively ignored. And because of our current political climate, we become more aware on an everyday basis that tribalization can and does happen across the political and ideological spectrum (Sotakirapolous 2021). As individuals seek safety and security, we recognize that in many ways this may be an expected form of behavior. Simultaneously, it can operate as a form of exploitation and alienation, where individuals are unfortunately unaware that they have become blind and shut off (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018, p. 58). When we realize this, we suddenly discover perhaps an even greater relevance of Emily’s famous line from *Our Town*, when she observes how people are “...sort of just shut up in little boxes, aren’t they?”

In the context of art, tribalized identities can inhibit us from thinking that it is acceptable to ask questions such as: What is *your* relationship to art? Why do *you* have that particular relationship to it, whatever that is? What is it about *your own* sociocultural disposition that opens you up or closes you off to an art form, or art forms in general? For one to believe that art or mass incarceration or structural oppression are things that one ‘just doesn’t think about’ reflects the effects of power in the most fundamental manner. To fall victim to this imagination of oneself as inherently being disconnected because of how you think you are ‘supposed to’ culturally see yourself is to be a victim of Foucauldian discipline in the most literal sense. If we want people to be inspired, learn from, and be influenced and directed by art, and if we want art to function as any kind of socio-political intervention that can mitigate or fight the lengthy arm of the carceral state, then it will follow that art ought to be made more available. It is when this is not done that people are alienated from it. If we do not appreciate the carceral arts, the stories they tell and the social problems that they reveal, it is because we have been trained not to care. This is due in part to the fact that the arts and their application are made invisible to certain individuals and groups, as is incarceration writ large.

To fight the processes that cause incarceration and the carceral arts to be less apparent, we must ask fundamentally ourselves why we are unfamiliar with these phenomena. For example, why are the carceral visual arts not used as examples to teach painting or drawing techniques in elementary school classrooms? Why do high school band teachers not assign compositions written in maximum security prison facilities? Why are plays that have been written from rap cyphers and performed in prisons not performed elsewhere for other public audiences and reviewed by the press? Why are

songs written in prison not hit records? And perhaps most importantly, why do these things have to be radical ideas?

It will follow then that if the carceral arts are everywhere, then stigmatization is easier to fight. Any artist knows (and, given that we are crossing boundaries here, now other non-artists reading this also know) that to be familiar with art is to know where it came from, that is, under what (geographical) circumstances and conditions; as such, art carries even more discourse along with it. To view the carceral arts as acceptable is to begin to recognize mass incarceration in new ways. Additionally, however, this is not just about seeing the carceral arts as acceptable simply because it is a medium. This is the fallacy of identity politics, as we know that affirmation alone will only go so far. The objective is to avoid setting ourselves up for reactionary politics (Freire 1970, p. 37) and actually become familiar with what the discourses are, to then draw out a politics that underscores the structures that produce the identities and conditions that construct the carceral arts. This is not to say that validation is not entirely significant – it is significant, but as I have indicated at different points in this dissertation, it is a tool for something much bigger than itself.

If we can learn the skill of deconstructing where the carceral arts come from, then that is another tool available to us for questioning the carceral state. Indeed, as Clyde Woods reminds us, “Both the creator and the audience are systematically marginalized when questions of social power and social conflict are excluded from discussions of artistic expression” (1998, p. 21). And as Cohen suggests, “we are, in the first instance, students, learning from anyone and anything that can teach us” (2000, p. 283). To this end – and many will disagree with me here – it is developing a cohesive and critical point

of view that is ultimately necessary for any societal transformation. I believe that we have everything we need to do this, and that we always have. Whether we effectively use these tools and avoid becoming distracted is up to us.

As an artist in my own right, being a preservationist and protector of folk and roots music, I have always made efforts to make art, both its practices and its discourses, more evident to others. I have done this by crossing ethnic and political boundaries in my own creative way, and in sharing musical discourses that I continue to keep alive with people who normally never would hear those certain genres or songs, because those people are in *their* own tribe. Who ever might have thought that songs written in a prison at any point in human history would experience such a scale of geographical diffusion that they would end up being performed at a summer camp for teenagers, where over a thousand young people each summer get to hear this material? I seem to be alone in all this; the jury is still out, but one day I hope that I will meet others with similar practices and goals, where tribes can be further infiltrated in all spaces and places. In making these inroads and interventions, however, we are also reminded of the weaknesses of too much intellectuality; as the (appropriately controversial) author and poet Charles Bukowski once wrote in 1969, “An intellectual is a (person) who says a simple thing in a difficult way; an artist is a (person) who says a difficult thing in a simple way” (166). Ironically, it has taken me a whole dissertation to say these simple things in a difficult way. My hope, though, is that the theoretical and intellectual grounding I have offered here will be of help.

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