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Janet Lilly, thesis committee chair, 29pp.

When individuals are released from incarceration and become returning citizens, they often face collateral consequences (Mahmood 31). Collateral consequences are restrictions placed on individuals following their release from incarceration, which limit their ability to fully participate in society. These consequences are felt most acutely by individuals who are members of minority groups or experience intersectionality (Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis” 95). In this paper, I write about my choreographic work *Released* and the ways in which it addresses the Prison-Industrial Complex’s failure to wholly release incarcerated individuals from its penalties following their sentence. The Prison-Industrial Complex is a multifaceted system in the United States that encompasses the government and private sector’s involvement in institutions of incarceration. In addition to examining the choreographic process and embodiment activities utilized in the creation of my work, this paper also focuses on how the movement, costumes, properties, set pieces, sound, lighting, and projection elements of *Released* provide a commentary on how collateral consequences are experienced by formerly incarcerated women in North Carolina.

*RELEASED: REHUMANIZING THE CARCERAL STATE*

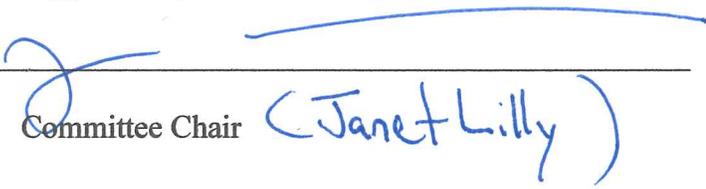
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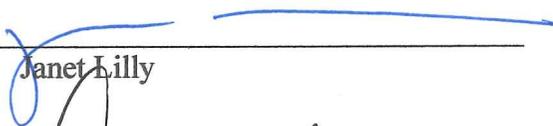
  
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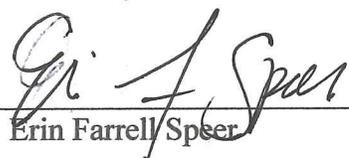
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## INTRODUCTION

My choreographic work *Released* addresses the ways in which collateral consequences limit returning citizens from fully reengaging with society after their release from incarceration, while highlighting the injustice present in the United States carceral system. For the past three years I have been seeking to understand the structural violence (Dollar 17) prevalent in the Prison-Industrial Complex in the United States. The Prison-Industrial Complex is a multifaceted system in the United States that encompasses the government and private sector's involvement in institutions of incarceration. During this pursuit, I have been drawn to the concept of collateral consequences (Mahmood 31). Collateral consequences are restrictions placed on individuals following their release from incarceration, which limit their ability to fully participate in society. Often these restrictions affect employment, licensing, education, housing, voting, and federal aid/opportunities. Not only am I heartbroken by the endless stories told within the pages of published books and collected letters (Solinger 63), but I am appalled by the United States carceral state and the government's lack of enthusiasm to address this problem. Inspired by other artists who use dance to heal issues of incarceration (Ross 270) as well as amplify marginalized voices (Akinleye Untitled), I created this project to center the voices of previously incarcerated women and encourage fresh dialogue in our community surrounding issues of mass incarceration.

I am aware of dancemakers in the past who have exploited the reduced rights of incarcerated individuals (Perillo 33), by using dance performance as false proof of prisoner rehabilitation, and unintentionally increasing the "otherness" of incarcerated individuals by

relying on popular methods of control and discipline like a regimented schedule and panoptic view (Foucault 170). The panopticon, an 18<sup>th</sup> century design by Jeremy Bentham, situates prison cells in a circle around a central, authoritarian tower and creates an assumption of constant surveillance. Surveillance cameras and “eye in the sky” technologies of today eerily resemble the panoptic view established three centuries ago.

To ensure I avoided any unintentionally harmful effects during this research, I recruited collaborators and committee members from outside departments, particularly UNCG’s sociology department, to help guide me in my research endeavors. I secured IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval through UNCG, submitted a “Ramp up to Research” plan through the University, and consulted individuals in my community who have firsthand experience with incarceration to assist me in my goals to ensure my research was representative of every participant, avoided unintended consequences, and functioned safely within a global pandemic. To this end, I ensured *Released* would accomplish my goals of increasing awareness and activism surrounding issues of mass incarceration in the United States without endangering the women involved in the work and its conception.

*Released* implores audience members to consider “A World Without Prisons” (Solinger 20), and explores how abolishing the prison system might be the most sustainable solution available to us as a nation. A large-scale goal of this work is to abolish the Prison-Industrial Complex and reconsider the penal system in the United States. I understand that one dance performance cannot completely realize this goal, but it can help us take a step forward in this agenda. There is a massive sustainability problem in the U.S. prison system, despite efforts by grassroots campaigns (ex. Sustainability in Prisons

Project) to promote green changes. Yvonne Jewkes and Dominique Moran argue that building new ‘green’ prisons and remodeling existing prison buildings to be less environmentally harmful is not the answer, despite positive intentions. These ‘green criminologists’ argue that efforts to reduce recidivism and community education are far more effective strategies to creating substantial change within our penal system, both of which strategies I address in *Released* (Jewkes and Moran 451). Ultimately, increased education surrounding issues of incarceration, paired with a plan to abolish and replace the current penal system in the United States, will create lasting sustainable change in our country. The final section of my work, “A World Without Prisons,” is inspired by the work of Rickie Solinger, whose book, *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*, has helped me to understand the far-reaching impact of the Prison-Industrial Complex and just how inhumane our criminal justice system has become.

In this paper I reflect on *Released* as a work that aims to create higher visibility for returning citizens and inspire initiative toward prison abolition. In the program notes for the performances, I included a statement that read:

I would like to acknowledge my privilege as a white, cisgender woman who has never experienced incarceration. Many of the women I spoke with throughout my research were intensely impacted by the United States Prison-Industrial Complex because they experience intersectionality. My hope is that sharing their stories will inspire action and social change. If you feel moved by the performance this evening, please consider donating to Benevolence Farm, a social services organization in Graham, North Carolina that assists previously incarcerated women

with housing and employment following their release from incarceration.

<http://benevolencefarm/org/donate>.

I believe it is also important to include this sentiment here, as I discuss the process of creating and sharing *Released*. I invite the viewers of my choreographic work and the readers of this paper to reflect on their own privilege regarding incarceration, and consider how we all might be of service to our community members who navigate collateral consequences in their own lives.

#### LITERATURE REIVEW

The United States Prison-Industrial Complex has a long and complicated history of governmental control and rapid expansion. This troubling reality has garnered attention not only in the field of sociology and among experts, but also in casual conversation, popular publications, and widely streamed documentaries. A diverse group of visual and performing artists have added their voices to this conversation and analyzed the effects of incarceration from a corporeal perspective, and in the following paragraphs I will organize several relevant examples of artist-scholars and humanities-based researchers commenting on the Prison-Industrial Complex and related social constructs.

*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, written by Michel Foucault in 1975, is widely considered the seminal reading on the development of incarceration and imprisonment in the modern world. Foucault begins in the eighteenth century, analyzing power differentials and how they affect punishment within a social construct. He analyzes the penal system and its developments throughout history, describing various reforms and

transformations that took place. In this text, Foucault describes and analyzes the panopticon, a system of surveillance widely used by prison systems beginning in the eighteenth century. He also introduces the theory of docile bodies, which asserts that bodies under constant control and surveillance eventually learn to regulate themselves, until the systems that produced the docility are no longer required to maintain control. Foucault refers to docile bodies in his explanation of mass control and economy of the body, noting the various technologies used to control the body and achieve docility; these technologies include discipline and regulation of behavior, drill exercises and physical exertion, and the organization of time and scheduling. Foucault's theories are notable to me because they reference the physical body and how it changes within these systems. I am interested in the corporeal effect of incarceration, and how systems of control lead to change in physical and behavioral patterns for justice-involved individuals.

An understanding of Foucault's carceral theories is fundamental to the work of many contemporary artist-scholars, including J. Lorenzo Perillo. In his 2020 article, "Zombies and Prisoner Rehabilitation," J. Lorenzo Perillo analyzes an event from 2007 at the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center, where incarcerated individuals gained popularity on the internet for a performance of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in their recreational field. Referencing Foucauldian principles such as the panopticon and docile bodies, as well as the "otherness" of the prison population, Perillo argues that the video's popularity was due in large part to the situating of Filipino bodies within a construct that led to monetization rather than rehabilitation. Requiring incarcerated individuals to participate in a dance performance under the guise of 'exercise' equates choreography with

discipline and regulation, and pointing a camera lens toward their bodies from an elevated location mimics a panoptic view that would later allow the world to witness what appeared to be a harmless recreational activity. In questioning the intentions of the prison administrators, this article reminds me of my obligation to my collaborators to consider their needs and protections above all else. I heed the warning Perillo's perspective provides - that dance can be used as a regulatory force as well as a tool for social justice, and I must constantly question my intentions to ensure I remain on the desirable side of that equation.

Victoria Fortuna is another artist-scholar writing on how dance intervenes politically within the context of political and economic violence. In her 2019 book, *Moving Otherwise: Dance, Violence, and Memory in Buenos Aires*, Fortuna coins the term "moving otherwise" to explain this tactic. She combines archival research with choreographic analysis to illustrate how contemporary dance embodied acts of governmental violence in Buenos Aires between 1960 and 2010, detailing how dance can be a resistive force that utilizes the practice *poner el cuerpo* (to put the body on the line), and embody action that is central to political and social change. I am most interested in Fortuna's analysis of the relationship between movement practices and repressive governments, as well as her concept of "slow violence," in which governments control bodies through structured systems and bodily regulation. Fortuna once again cites Michel Foucault, attributing corporeal control to governmental action, but she reverses the situation by claiming dance as a method of bodily organization to fight for positive political change. This relates to my research for *Released* because the United States criminal justice system is a repressive organization that relies on structured systems and

bodily regulation to control its subjects, and I believe that dance choreography is a useful tool to fight these systems and utilize bodily organization as a force for good.

This theory is supported by Ann Cooper Albright in her article, “Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell.” In this chapter, Albright analyzes the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation and shares her ideas about dancemaking that embodies personal narrative. She addresses issues of subjectivity and representation, while offering bodily and linguistic ideas for communication. Using examples of choreographers such as Bill T. Jones and Johanna Boyce, Albright examines the relationship between performer and audience, highlighting the increased levels of empathy and connection associated with autobiographical work, as well as the dancer/choreographers’ methods for creating these environments. While this chapter mostly references autobiographical work, I find many of her examples and suggestions extremely relevant to my research of embodying experience and personal narrative. This is particularly true in her analysis of Boyce’s work which shares the “I” among many bodies. Albright’s examination of the audience involvement while viewing embodied personal experience on stage is a helpful perspective for me, and the theories she outlines regarding subjectivity and representation are extremely relevant to issues of mass incarceration.

Rachel Carrico also addresses embodied personal narrative in “Second Line Choreographies in and beyond New Orleans.” In this article, Carrico discusses New Orleans’s tradition of second lines and the city’s response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. She analyzes three choreographers who created dance work related to these topics: Camille A. Brown, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Latanya d. Tigner. In examining these three

choreographic works, Carrico proposes they are all performances that make witness of others, and introduces the concept of “artist as witness.” I am inspired by Carrico’s analysis of these dance works as a call to action, and relate this concept to my research for *Released* by identifying a group of people who have experienced trauma and marginalization, and embodying their stories on stage. While the trauma of Hurricane Katrina differs in many ways from the trauma of incarceration, Carrico’s analysis of these the choreographers’ processes and research methodologies in many ways mirrors the intricacies I have encountered in my research with previously incarcerated women. An important parallel between these two experiences is that those affected had little to no agency throughout their experiences. This leads into a discussion of violence as both consensual and non-consensual, which Janet O’Shea examines in her 2019 book on martial arts training.

In *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training*, Janet O’Shea brings a radically interdisciplinary approach to martial arts training by analyzing her personal experiences practicing martial arts through the paradigm of dance studies. Comparing the use of the body and partnering in martial arts and improvised dance, O’Shea focuses on how violence in society is different from the experience of a consensual fight within the context of martial arts, explaining that sport fighting requires relationship; both parties understand the agreement to engage in combat, and it is not inherently dangerous or deceptive. Violence, in contrast, requires an aggressor and a victim, rather than two individuals in established opposition. This text is related to *Released* in that I began with an examination of violence and how it is being utilized against human bodies,

both culturally and structurally. O’Shea’s examinations of violence through the lens of dance studies have inspired me to examine my research of collateral consequences with a fresh perspective. It is important to note that collateral consequences are not previously agreed upon conditions, but rather an act of violence with an aggressor and a victim. O’Shea has made it abundantly clear that previously incarcerated individuals fall into that category on a physical level.

Issues of consent and victimization must be carefully considered when navigating matters where power differentials may come into play. The Prison-Industrial Complex disproportionately convicts people of color (particularly men), and has been shown to systemically prioritize financial gain over humane conditions. In their 2020 article, Ben Spatz suggests that embodiment must play a central role in decolonization in the United States, particularly because of the body’s involvement in racial and other postcolonial issues we face today. They question whether the anatomical body can be separated from the experiential self, and how we can use the body as a tool for decolonization. In their discussion of Walter D. Mignolo’s definitions of decolonization, Spatz suggests that universities are sites with great potential for movements that tackle colonial legacy and can act as sites of social change. Spatz points out that white bodies are the corporeality of coloniality, and they become a present, physical construct by which “otherness” is defined. This creates a responsibility for white bodies to be intentional as we heed the call to examine ourselves and our practices, knowing how easy it is for us to be part of the problem, and actively and constantly work against the structural and cultural violence we are descended from. I read this article as both a call to action and a warning to white

people, and I heed both messages in my choreographic research and practice. This perspective is particularly important in my research with individuals who have experienced a loss of rights and privileges at some point in their life.

Issues of bodily control and corporeal management are complex and nuanced. From Michel Foucault's ideas in 1975 to the recent writings of artists and scholars discussed above, it is clear that governmental control of bodies is a sensitive and important subject to consider. In reading the work of others, I learned to proceed with caution, knowledge, and intention as I navigated my research for *Released*. As a white female choreographer, I understood the weight of this subject matter, and I relied on my own sense of empathy, as well as the prescriptive writings of Ben Spatz and other culturally sensitive scholars, to ensure this research proved beneficial for my research participants as well as for our general society. As I researched and choreographed, I consistently checked in with myself and others regarding my intentions, and proceeded with caution and intentionality. Remaining in open conversation with my colleagues and my dancers about issues of representation, my priority in this project was to honor the stories of the women who lent us their voices, and to fight for significant social change, beginning with the audience's perception of the effects of the Prison-Industrial Complex.

## METHODOLOGY

*Released* was built from a place of empathy, and the whispers of this research have been in my mind for many years. The work represents a culmination of ethnographic research, oral histories, and practice-as-research investigations. I officially began the

research process for this work in May 2021 when I received a CVPA Summer Research Grant to conduct research at Benevolence Farm, a social services organization in Graham, North Carolina. Benevolence Farm provides housing and employment to previously incarcerated women, and assists them with re-entry immediately following incarceration. The women at Benevolence Farm practice sustainable farming techniques to produce goods and products to sell in the local community. They also spend time fighting for structural change in the North Carolina prison systems. They are incredible, and I was unbelievably grateful to have spent time with them on the farm. During this time, I listened to their stories, assisted with their daily activities, and learned as much about their experiences as I could while experiencing their daily life alongside them. This research resumed in a project for *Dance Studies II: Research Projects*, where I interviewed recent alumni of Benevolence Farm and began incorporating their experiences into my movement practice. I collected oral histories from four Benevolence Farm alumni as part of this research stage.

As my research continued to develop, I began to realize that my interest was primarily in *womens'* stories and how incarceration affects their lives. I have a personal friend whose husband was incarcerated as a juvenile, and for years I have been privy to some of the private difficulties they have faced due to his criminal background. My friend has shared with me, often through tears, how much harder her life has been because of her husband's experiences. I invited her to share her experiences with me in a more formal way, and she agreed to an interview where I recorded an oral history of her experiences with incarceration. A section of *Released* is based on this oral history, and in this way, I

was able to include the voice of a woman affected by incarceration who had not experienced it firsthand. This inclusion is important to me because of the numerous stories I encounter of wives, mothers, grandmothers, and daughters whose lives have been irrevocably altered due to a family member being incarcerated. It seems to me that women are affected by these experiences in a unique and poignant way when incarceration is part of their family story, even if the incarcerated person is not female.

Once I had collected as many relevant stories and experiences as possible, I began bringing this material into the rehearsal space with me each week. The dancers I worked with for this piece are extraordinary artists and activists, and I selected them for both their dance ability and their willingness to explore difficult subject matter and engage in meaningful conversation. UNCG is a minority serving institution, and the majority of my collaborators, dancers, and designers are women of color. Many of these students experience intersectionality in their own lives, and are moved by the experiences of previously incarcerated women, whose lives are similarly affected by intersectionality. As Mauer describes in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*:

Women in general, and women of color from low-income communities in particular, occupy a set of uniquely vulnerable positions when we consider the social impact of mass incarceration. Women's vulnerability within the Prison-Industrial Complex mirrors other settings – including traditional nuclear families, conservative community and cultural groups, occupational hierarchies, and other

hegemonic social institutions – in which gender arrangements serve to marginalize some women by limiting access to social resources and undermining women’s participation and our power. In the case of incarceration, these issues are further complicated by a racialized justice system designed almost exclusively for men (136).

These experiences resonate deeply with my students, particularly those whose gender identities are female and non-binary, and I believe they were similarly impactful for the larger UNCG campus community, with whom *Released* was primarily shared.

This project benefited the students who were involved in my creative process and included their voices in both the process and final product. In the rehearsal room, these students shared stories of how incarceration and immigration have affected their own families, and those stories were amplified on stage in this production in the phrasework that was performed. Many other CVPA students attended the performances and were confronted with issues of equity and access through their peers’ performance and post-production conversations. Ultimately, the stories we told on stage required amplification, and I am grateful to my student collaborators for helping me accomplish this goal.

In rehearsals, we began the choreographic process by creating unique gestures for each woman’s story. I then asked the dancers to reimagine and reorganize these gestures and merge various interpretations into brief phrases and traveling sequences. As the choreographer, I explored different methods for embodying personal narrative and explored gestural analysis and investigation based on movement research I collected while

visiting Benevolence Farm. I employed a practice-as-research methodology to explore these experiences in the studio with the dancers. I was curious about the construction of space and how the panopticon might be utilized in the work, as well as heavy weight or restricted space to represent collateral consequences and develop physical obstacles for the dancers. I prefer to work through a collaborative creative process, creating brief movement phrases and travelling sequences together, then spending time in my personal rehearsal space refining and building the material, and finally returning to my cast to create sequence and structure. Through these research methods and choreographic processes, we created an interdisciplinary work that showcased our embodied research.

## CHOREOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES FROM DESIGN ELEMENTS

While my main tool in sharing this research on stage was physical movement, the design elements of *Released* were integral to the success of the piece. I will discuss the following technical elements and explain how each area influenced or enhanced the performance experience: costumes, properties, set design, sound design, lighting design, and projection design.

### **Costumes**

Karsen Green, an MFA Costume Design student in the School of Theatre at UNCG, was the costume designer for *Released*. Karsen joined our project about halfway through the rehearsal process, and I consulted with her on ensuring cohesiveness between sections, making sure quick changes were successful, and identifying appropriate pieces for the characters the dancers were portraying. Karsen and I worked in close collaboration

on the costume design for the piece, and she helped guide me toward looks and materials that would support the overall goals of the work. I am extremely grateful to Karsen for her work on *Released*, and I give her ample credit for the success of the costume tracking throughout the work.

Concert dance pieces typically do not include as many costume changes as *Released* had, but I believe this choice was justified. There were only eight performers in the work, and we were telling the stories of a much larger number of women. I wanted to make it abundantly clear to the audience that each dancer was not a direct representation of a specific individual, but rather an abstraction of various stories and experiences of a community of returning citizens. We accomplished this primarily through costume changes.

The orange prison jumpsuit is a common symbol of incarceration in the United States. All the dancers on stage began the piece wearing an orange prison jumpsuit to clearly depict that at one point in their lives they were incarcerated. As the dancers continued to move through the first section, they slowly began to change into a more pedestrian costume, one piece at a time. For example, the first time we see dancer A she is wearing the orange shirt and orange pants. The second time we see dancer A she is wearing a white tank top and the orange pants. The third time we see dancer A she is wearing a white tank top with jean overalls. This gradual shift of clothing represents the process of leaving incarceration and returning to society. Each dancer changed their clothes at a slightly different pace, reflecting how some returning citizens have a harder time than others leaving their experiences in the past and starting a new life post release.

Eventually all the women on stage are wearing pedestrian clothing, indicating that they have all completed the transition back into society. Karsen and I determined these pedestrian costumes by researching the most common professions for returning citizens. Because of this we included a hairdresser, a janitor, a farm worker, and several other professions that returning citizens frequently employ. Several of the women wore casual, everyday clothing to represent those who are unemployed and still searching for a job.

The middle sections of the piece utilize costumes that fit the theme of the section rather than the individual women. The best example of this concept is the section where all the dancers are wearing long white costumes to allow projections to be visible on their bodies. Costumes are less symbolic in these moments and more functional.

At the end of the piece the dancers put the orange jumpsuits back on and dance as a community while Jon Batiste's version of "What a Wonderful World" plays. The impetus behind this image is to suggest that one possibility is to abolish the United States prison system and allow justice-involved women to be part of our communities in a more equitable, peaceful way.

## **Properties**

Costumes and props are used together in many moments of *Released*. The most significant use of props is in the first section, beginning immediately following the costume change into pedestrian clothing. As the dancers represent the transition back into society through their shifts in clothing, they begin adding weights, straps, and chains to their bodies. These props represent the heavy burden that returning citizens carry with

them into society after release, and bring into the space the ‘invisible’ collateral consequences that these women carry with them. Each dancer carries a slightly different burden and navigates it in their own individual way, but they all have some version of these obstacles attached to them. This idea comes from a movement exercise I began in my second year of graduate school with a slightly different group of dancers. We created phrase material to represent past individual trauma, and then danced the phrase two times. The first time I asked them to hold heavy objects: cans of soup, ankle weights, a medicine ball, etc. Watching how the weighted objects affected the phrase was mesmerizing. The second time they performed the phrase without the heavy objects, but still encompassing the “idea” or “memory” of them. The altered phrase was almost unrecognizable from the original, and this experiment had a lasting impact on me. I later asked myself, “how do the burdens of incarceration change people, and how do those shifts remain visible even when the physical burdens have been removed?” This question led me to the manifestation of the props in the first section of *Released* and influenced the movement we used in the piece following that experience.

Another important set of props were used in the section that represented my friend and her husband. During our interview she shared a story with me about a time when her husband had been falsely accused and rearrested several years ago. They were woken up in the middle of the night by police sirens outside their bedroom window, and he was taken by the police with no explanation. My friend was left in her house at 3am with her husband gone and nobody there to answer her questions. The next twenty-four hours were a blur of panicked emotions as she desperately tried to locate her husband and understand why they

had taken him. Eventually they found him, she posted bail, and he was able to return home while he awaited trial. The desperation she described as she searched for him, and the relief she felt when he was back home were extremely moving to me. In this section of the piece, I used two pieces of nylon fabric to hold two dancers away from each other as they fought to reunite. They held small notebooks and pens, which were used to frantically write messages to each other, only to come up short each time they tried to throw a message across the void. This section continues for a long time, representing the hours they spent apart, unable to communicate. Finally, the straps release and the dancers are suddenly able to reach each other. They wrap their arms around each other and slowly collapse to the floor, finding comfort in the other person and trying to process the period of separation. This moment is a direct parallel to my friend's story – she told me they spent several hours on the couch the night he returned, not yet ready to speak, but just holding each other and attempting to feel safe again. Once again, the use of props in this section allowed me to bring a representation of the carceral system into the space; the fabric that kept them apart without providing explanation, and the notebooks that showed the thoughts and messages they so desperately wanted to communicate to each other.

### **Set Design**

*Released* begins with three plain fabric runners laid horizontally across the space. As the dancers begin moving across them, the fabric begins to bunch, twist, and lose shape and stability. The goal of this design is to replicate the experience that I heard many times in my interviews with previously incarcerated women that “the ground was being pulled

out from under me.” Some version of this phrase was uttered over and over as I spoke with these women, and I wanted to find a large-scale metaphor to encapsulate this feeling. As the dancers moved across the fabric and it continually lost stability, they had to be increasingly cautious of their footing and their movement patterns. It became difficult to trust the ground beneath them.

### **Lighting, Sound, and Projection Design**

Maranda DeBusk was the lighting and projections designer for *Released*, and her collaborations had a massive impact on the work. Maranda and I met early in the rehearsal process to discuss my research and vision for the piece, and she offered some really excellent observations and interpretations of my ideas. I was interested in bringing projections into the work from the beginning, but I knew that I didn’t have the skills and experience necessary to integrate them successfully. Maranda and I discussed my research at length, and she was able to create a design that not only emphasized the movement the dancers were performing on stage, but also added a level of nuance that elevated the entire experience.

In a section of the piece titled “Letters,” dancers read from letters written by returning citizens in North Carolina. When the words are spoken into the microphone they are channeled into a loop station that repeats them continuously in a pattern. As more voices layer onto the loop the sound becomes more chaotic and overwhelming. Simultaneously, a series of projected videos are displayed onto the dancers’ bodies and white panels included in the set. The images begin with historical videos of chain gangs

and prisoners working on railroads. As the text multiplies and the tension builds, the images become less conventional and more abstract images of the isolation and despair portrayed in the letters. An additional layer of sound is then introduced; three tap dancers tapping from different areas of the stage, one on stage and two offstage. This chaos is meant to emulate the experience of the returning citizens, who often describe their experiences as overstimulating or overwhelming. The movement, projections, tapping, and soundscore escalate to their highest point right before the on stage tap dancer, covered in chains, reaches her breaking point and yells for it all to “stop.” There is a blackout before we move into the next section, bringing a moment of silence in which to process the chaos that has just ended. Because of the abundance of technology being used in this section it was the most time-consuming moment to work through during technical rehearsals. Maranda’s expertise with lighting and projection design was extremely useful in that moment of the process. I am grateful to have such a talented collaborator on my team.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, I created this work as a catalyst for social change. While I would have welcomed more rehearsal time to clean the movement and further experiment with technical elements, I am proud of *Released* and grateful for the experience of creating it alongside my team of collaborators. Several of the dancers who performed in the piece have been dancing with me for three years and are deeply engaged in my research process. Others joined more recently, and were able to offer fresh perspectives on the material and the creative process. *Released* is as much a reflection of their activism and empathy as it is

my own. If I ever have the opportunity to restage *Released*, this original cast will forever have their fingerprints on the work.

The purpose of art for social change is to create ripples that will expand far beyond where the pebble is dropped. I am confident that we have accomplished this goal in producing *Released*. I was humbled by the many audience members who approached me following the performance, sharing with me how relevant the piece was to experiences in their own families and circles. I heard stories of how collateral consequences affected many of their families during childhood, though most were not aware of that term before attending the performance. Many of my students waited after class to speak with me the following week, sharing their own stories and commenting on how moved they felt during the performance. One of the dancers in my cast emailed me several weeks after our final performance about a dialogue they are hosting with the Office of Intercultural Engagement inspired by our research on collateral consequences. They asked me to speak alongside them at the presentation, and her goal is to increase support and accessibility for returning citizens and their children at UNCG. I was honored to accept that invitation. These examples of individuals engaging with the piece and carrying something with them following the performance provides evidence that *Released* made an impact in our community.

I am grateful for the grants I received to create *Released*, and I intentionally budgeted a portion of that funding for documentation of the piece. Because dance is such an ephemeral art form, it was important to me to capture the work in a format that could be widely distributed to those who were unable to attend the live performance. From sharing

pictures and video of the piece online, I have already received an invitation to screen *Released* at a local church in Greensboro and speak about collateral consequences to the congregation. These opportunities are precious to me, and I believe this piece has not yet reached its full potential. I plan to continue sharing *Released* with my community and advocating for the justice-involved community.

Dance is a powerful tool for social change, and I hope to continue using the concert dance stage to amplify marginalized narratives throughout my career. I am grateful to the faculty members, dancers, and collaborators in the UNCG Schools of Dance and Theatre who have come alongside me in this process, and I acknowledge the massive step forward my colleagues have helped me take in my three years in the MFA program at UNCG. Creating this work has been life changing for me, and I am inspired to continue my investigation of dance making as a catalyst for social change. I will continue to create from a place of empathy, seeking a better tomorrow through the lens of dance. Creating *Released* has been a transformative process, and I hope to look back on it someday as an early iteration of a much larger body of creative work that advocates for social change in my community.

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Author: McCarthy, Allison

Title: *Released*

Choreography Date: February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Location: Coleman Dance Theatre, University of North Carolina Greensboro

Number of Dancers: 8

URL: <https://vimeo.com/693214199>