

Constrained Bodies: Dance, Social Justice, and Choreographic Agency

Stacey Prickett

In over three decades of research, Randy Martin has critiqued failures of capitalism and the Left's inability to correct social injustices, interrogating relationships between artistic and cultural expressions and the way they are situated within economic and political contexts. Martin's theories offer tools for analyzing the choreographic agency in works inspired by distinct sociopolitical conditions and unequal relations of power in society.¹ Key concepts are applied below to innovative artistic responses to mass incarceration and the conditions that led to the Black Lives Matter protest movement that began in 2014 to raise awareness of police shootings of unarmed men of color, prompted by the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

The first two case studies below apply Martin's work to projects emerging from participatory creative processes and have outreach imperatives, thus expanding the theoretical scope beyond its initial articulation. The concept of mobilization is interrogated in Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Dying While Black and Brown* (2011), which explores attempts to create a sense of home while incarcerated on death row. A social kinesthetic is identified in an analysis of a screendance by Amie Dowling and Austin Forbord, whose film *Well Contested Sites* (2013) responds to issues of mass incarceration that cross racial boundaries. Choreographic power arises in part from a decentered social kinesthetic that is counterhegemonic in the way it transforms pedestrian movement. The third case study draws on Martin's concept of overreading developed in his analysis of Bill T. Jones's productions that connect narrative and abstract components of his choreography to external realities. Overreading is utilized in my analysis of Kyle Abraham's dance theatre production of *Pavement* (2012), which reflects on the complexity of social relations in an inner-city neighborhood. Inspired by his own experiences as an African American man and John Singleton's 1991 film *Boyz in the Hood*, Abraham layers abstract dance phrases with stark motifs that evoke the veil of suspicion often faced by people of color. Conceptualization of a black habitus offers another analytical strategy, one that is juxtaposed to movement drawn from technical vocabularies ranging from hip-hop to ballet and contemporary dance. The productions analyzed here are celebrated for their agency, as art, and as contributions to wider discourses around race, the criminal justice

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system, and equality. Bodily constraint, control over life, and concepts of freedom that impact upon racial and economic politics in the U.S. are introduced to help situate the dance analyses.

Biopolitics, Necropolitics, and Neoliberalism

The shaping of race relations in general and mass incarceration in particular, as articulated below, links to concepts of necropolitics, biopower, and neoliberalism that emerge through interrogation of various “wars” and armed conflicts, which manifest social control in different ways. For example, the legislation that set out to alter the socioeconomic imbalances faced by America’s poor—known unofficially as a War on Poverty—under President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 evolved into later “wars” declared by successive governments with wide-ranging negative legacies. As Martin (2008) analyzes, war as a concept has expanded beyond the conventions of an armed battle, such as the War on Drugs, which officially commenced in 1982, and the War on Terror, which came into effect in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. These wars established the legislative and economic framework for the growth of the criminal justice system, with the allocation of funding toward militaristic aims and away from state welfare and education systems (Alexander 2012).²

Conditions of biopower were articulated by Michel Foucault (1979) as conditions under which political control is asserted over life by the state and institutions, such as clinics, prisons, education, and the military. Achille Mbembé (2003) expands on Foucauldian concepts to interrogate cases of sovereign power over the body implemented by modern states in the concept of necropolitics or control over death. Taken to the extreme, necropolitics asserts control over life and death of individuals through processes of racialization and a racism that, as Mbembé argues, is prominent in the “calculus of biopower” (2003, 17). Rooted in the legacy of slavery, the current criminal justice system reinforces the ties between biopower and racialization, which Mbembé categorizes as a “state of exception” resulting in a “‘triple loss’ for those enslaved: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status” (2003, 21). Although the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 set slaves free, their liberty was partial. Legal codes were rewritten to fulfill the economic and labor needs of farmers in the American South. Conditions of neoslavery, it is argued, underpin contemporary conditions of racism and discrimination perpetuated by neoliberal ideologies (see Alexander 2012; Bush 2011; Haney-Lopez 2010).

Michelle Alexander (2012) details the legislative history from 1968 onward that arose from political campaigns that perpetuated racist ideologies and resulted in “new Jim Crow” structures.³ Myths about welfare cheats and crime, circulated by politicians, planted seeds of fear that increased a sense of victimization, particularly among poor whites in southern states. Economic globalization and the transition from a manufacturing to a technologically based economy also contributed to the rise of an underclass marginalized from the benefits of wealth and social mobility afforded to many. Racial inequities are deep-rooted—in 2015, 60 percent of those incarcerated were people of color or ethnic minorities.⁴ Such disparities sit in tension with milestones achieved in the battle for equality, heralded by the election of Barack Obama as president from 2008 to 2016. Significantly, however, Martin and others have challenged initial claims of postracial gains.⁵ Martin advocated moving beyond essentialist notions of identity even though he situated the construction of race as central to national identity in the U.S. (1998, 107). In his analysis of hip-hop dance and rap music videos, Martin’s critique of nationalism and multiculturalism describes a composite body (1998, 112), one that encompasses diverse ideological stances and cultural practices that cross racial categories although he acknowledges instances of appropriation and commodification of subcultural forms.⁶

Dances inspired by themes of social (in)justice evoke institutional issues alongside the personal, juxtaposing constraint of the body and spirit with expressions of hope and resistance. Martin (1998, 2004, for example) explored how diverse types of dance productions are more than a mere representation in how they are linked to external society, extending beyond a mirrorlike

relationship to reveal structures of power and the impact of sociopolitical circumstances and inspirations. Defining dance as politicized culture, Martin (1995, 4–15) establishes an interdependence between artistic practice and the notion of mobilization that brings specific contexts to awareness.⁷ While dance does not have the capacity to affect social change in and of itself, it can offer something unique through the activities of performance and viewing that are “the means through which mobilization is accomplished” (1995, 6). Dance is placed “in the service of politics,” and its nonnarrative elements, are “precisely what may be difficult to see in the social context, namely the horizon of possibility for politics” (Martin 1998, 61). The possibilities of mobilization and the concept of a social kinesthetic are explored below in relation to two dances that arose from specific social justice imperatives.

Discipline, the Death Penalty, and Mobilization

Dance is celebrated for transforming the lives of people who are incarcerated by linking concepts of Foucauldian discipline, biopower, and control to expressivity.⁸ Zaccho Dance Theatre offers a multilayered vision of Foucauldian theory in practice, drawing from individuals’ stories of their experiences while on death row—stories that challenge the viewer to think about the underlying social structures of the prison industry. Starting in 2010, artistic director Joanna Haigood began to research the impact of the death penalty, and began working with jazz composer Marcus Shelby on a production commissioned by the Equal Justice Society (EJS), a criminal justice advocacy group. Based in Oakland, California, the organization champions the application of the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, which enshrined in the Constitution the rights of former slaves to be citizens. Zaccho’s *Dying While Black and Brown* (2011), as commissioned by EJS, explores the disproportionate number of African Americans and men of color on death row, an implementation of necropolitical power through the ultimate control over life of the incarcerated individual held by the state.

Martin (2004) locates a power within dance and what it can achieve and defines it in relation to theories of social mobilization. Zaccho’s production offers an example of how documentary input has been creatively shaped to reveal a political mobilization within the dance, and from there the possibilities for social mobilization to occur beyond the stage. Haigood and Shelby researched the impact of isolation on those incarcerated on death row. The four performers have individual characters—one is fictionalized, the others are drawn from real people’s lives—including wrongly imprisoned Anthony Graves who spent eighteen years in prison, sixteen of these years on death row in Texas. After being exonerated in 2010, Graves talked extensively to Haigood and Shelby who also investigated the execution procedures, studying official manuals that set out the highly detailed and regimented steps required to put someone to death. Another source was Jeanne Woodford, a cofounder of Death Penalty Focus and the former warden of San Quentin prison, who became committed to abolishing the death penalty.

As Haigood (2011) explained, the choreography set out to convey a “picture that resonated with humanity” by exploring how people hold ideas of home, and deal with the sense of “being caged” when safety and survival are important. The shell of a small house becomes a climbing frame that the men move around and through, exploring its boundaries and stability during moments where it is tilted to rest on a single corner.⁹ The ‘house’ functions as a cell, a space for exploring the adjustments required to create a sense of home. The dance opens with four men in baggy top and trouser orange uniforms crouched atop the frame. They drop down into the space, clamber back up onto the roof, at ease on the climbing frame as they adopt watchful positions, eyeing each other and gazing out into the distance. They emulate the all-seeing sense of the panopticon design of prison buildings.¹⁰ In a postperformance discussion session, dancer Travis Rowland said they were like gargoyles. Moments of stillness are broken by swinging overhead from one pole to the other, then moving into and out of the space of the house/cell. Haigood compared



Photo 1. Matthew Wickett (foreground), Rashad Pridgen, Travis Santell Rowland, and Antoine Hunter in Joanna Haigood and Zaccho Dance Theatre's *Dying While Black and Brown*. Photo courtesy of Kegan Marling.

the circular flow of the four men to the neverending path into the prison and jail that black men experience—guilty and innocent—after release due to the high rate of recidivism.¹¹ At one point, as the men join arms, their precarious counterbalance atop the frame becomes increasingly unstable as they shake each other and the set. In another section, the performers enter and shadowbox, escape into a series of calisthenics—push-ups, jumping jacks—striving to keep fit in the limited conditions. Their energy shifts between antagonizing each other back to a calmer coexistence, revealing different hierarchies that change between equal, dominant, and dominated relationships as they move around, lift, or bounce off one another. Those imprisoned also become the watchers momentarily, enforcing the constraints over the others who are incarcerated. Rather than a straightforward narrative, a complex web of representation conveys processes of survival.

The second section starts with the men removing the orange uniforms of California jails, replacing them with the prison uniform of light blue top and blue jeans symbolic of moving further into the criminal justice system. Lining up in a row in the middle of the “house,” the performers step forward to call out their identities: “Anthony Graves, Floor B, 562.” Layers of symbolism are also intensified by the audio score. “Inmates talk a lot about noise, it is very loud in prison on death row. . . . They have to dig through a cloud of noise to reach someone they want to have a conversation with.”¹² An inability to hear is manifest in the battle between speech and the haunting jazz score with percussion, flute, saxophone, and piano competing for our attention. Haigood explained that the inability to distinguish clearly what the men were saying was intentional, a metaphor for the voiceless state of the incarcerated.¹³ A central moment occurs when one performer is pulled down from the roof beam, carried forward downstage, his arms crossed in front of his body. Standing still, his limbs are manipulated by two others who systematically mime strapping him down. Fear and trepidation spreads from the physical to the audible, the words he speaks are mainly unintelligible, although a plea of innocence cuts through the music. A portrayal of death emerges as constrained convulsions overtake his body still held down to the invisible deathbed, transforming spectators into witnesses of execution.

The dance functions on multiple levels through humanizing the men and engaging the viewer to think about how the men interact with each other and with their constraining space. An “incarcerated” man reaches his arms out at shoulder level, spanning the six-by-nine foot spatial dimensions of an actual cell, reinforcing the boundaries those on death row endure twenty-three hours a day. Different relations emerge—from the processes of execution to the sense of time passing and to the knowledge of impending death—that evoke the institutional systems in place. Martin explains:

For dance to move the political beyond arrested development, its knowledge of how bodies are assembled, of how space and time are configured, of how interconnections are valued must be made legible beyond the ends of choreographic endeavor. Foregrounding the analytics of movement so redolent in dance can make for a richer evaluation of what is generated through political mobilization. (2012, 64)

In *Dying While Black and Brown*, Zaccho moves beyond the narratives of those incarcerated. Two of the men manipulate the frame with the third dancer positioned on the poles—the “house” is set down to offer the viewer a window to look through as a tremor starts in the soloist’s hands and travels through his body. Shelby’s jazz score is replaced by Sam Cooke’s 1964 bluesy lyrics in “A Change is gonna come,” the song Anthony Graves sang to himself to ease his anxieties while on death row.¹⁴ Hope exists, despite the looming threat of execution.

Awareness of botched executions and wrongful convictions has helped pressure states such as Illinois and Pennsylvania to cease carrying out death sentences.¹⁵ Even though changing public perceptions around necropolitical power cannot be causally traced back to the dance, the internal mobilization of the dance manifests in the potential for external action. Zaccho’s audiences can engage in the discourses around the death penalty as the dance enacts a humanizing process that critiques capital punishment.

Social Kinesthetics in Corporeal Resistance and Restraint

Martin analyzed dance’s power as the social kinesthetic or “the capacity to move an idea in a particular direction through the acquired prowess of bodies in action” (2004, 48), which is illustrated by the second case study. A screendance production also explores the corporeal constraints of prisons countered by poetic metaphors in *Well Contested Sites* (Dowling and Forbord 2013).¹⁶ Choreographer Amie Dowling and filmmaker Austin Forbord use the notion of the incarcerated individual’s body as a contested site, where “its presence or absence, its power and its vulnerability are all intensely realized in jails and prisons—institutions that emphasize control, segregation, solitude and containment” (Amrhein, Dowling, and Schultz 2014, 3). The project was filmed on Alcatraz Island, a site that has a long history as a place of imprisonment, ranging from a Civil War jail to a place where Hopi Indians were held in 1895 for refusing to “Americanize” their children. Alcatraz, known as the Rock, also housed the notorious federal penitentiary from 1934 to 1963 and was occupied by Native American activists from 1969 to 1971 (Anonymous, n.d.). It is a deceptively short distance across the bay from crowds of tourists and the marina populated by sea lions to the island. In visiting the national park, strong winds heighten a sense of isolation that is light years away from the crowds, shops, and sounds of San Francisco’s Pier 54. Stepping from the boat onto the walkway covering barren rocks, sightseers are taken inside the prison to walk along chilly corridors, invited to peer into cells with doors gaping open. The solitary confinement rows offer a brief taste of the extreme sensory deprivation of the punishment, devoid of light, comforts, and human contact. The historical power of the site remains, long after the cells have been emptied.

In the short film, Dowling and Forbord collaborate with men who were previously incarcerated, drawing on their memories to explore physical and social spaces in prisons and relationships within them. A group of men set out their personal possessions on the ground—keys, wallets, photos, and phones. In doing so, they abandon levels of freedom, and their individuality is stripped away. The men lie face down on the rough concrete, lined up head to toe as the camera enters the building moving past the human pathway. In long sections, the camera pans across danced phrases in rows of abandoned run-down cells and central spaces of the building. Motifs generated in one body ripple down the cells to another man despite the isolation from each other. Faces are initially unseen with the performers facing the back, the floor, or looking up to the ceiling although momentary

glimpses of a profile appear. The decayed concrete and rusted metal contrasts with the expanse of water and the golden hills in the background. Initially anonymous performers move through space, at times in formation, and gradually become individualized as identity markers emerge and stand out amidst the uniformity of clothing. Tattoos, physical build, and skin and hair color set some apart from the others. As Dowling explained, “The blurring of the faces, the lack of a single figure up until the end, was an effort to keep the audience away from focusing on one man. In story-based work audiences can over-identify with individuals and their stories, making mass incarceration about personal failures and bad choices, instead of systemic issues—racism, poverty, etc.”¹⁷ The bleakness is oppressive, counteracted by images of lifting each other up, bouncing off the walls of the narrow cells. An emotional distance in the interactions allows relationships to be read in multiple ways as the action alternates from the disciplined formations of a group to the sole or double occupancy of a cell. The façade of machismo cracks, with vulnerability exuding through tough exteriors.

Music contributes another layer of symbolism as the film ends to the accompaniment of Philadelphia DJ King Britt sampling the distinctive voice of gospel singer Sister Gertrude Morgan in “New World in My View.” Dowling describes it as a “mix of old and new sound, the religious, redemptive words and the hope the piece spoke about.”¹⁸ Hope is portrayed in the dreams of one of the previously incarcerated men who is joined in the film by his young son, as the view broadens to take in the iconic California landscape. Created by performers with diverse levels of

Photo 2. Erik Camberos and Matthew Keuter in Well Contested Sites, choreography by Amie Dowling. Photo courtesy of Amie Dowling.



dance experience, a “decentered social kinesthetic” (Martin 2012, 68) emerges that Martin describes as a transformation of the relationship between movement and culture. He explains how a social kinesthetic was challenged by ordinary gestural actions and nontheater spaces of postmodern dance of the 1970s and the physicality in hip-hop and board culture (skateboarding, for example) that moves off the vertical axis (Martin 2012, 74). Resistive potential emerges, in part through how the movements oppose hegemonic ideologies manifest in dominant dance styles (classical ballet and the canonic modern dance of Martha Graham, for example; Martin 2012, 69). Although Martin articulates the concept in relation to decolonized bodies and the financial system of derivatives, the status of those incarcerated and impacted by the criminal justice system is parallel to that of the disempowered other.

The film facilitates exploration of the prison problem in community and educational situations to “connect audiences to both the performers and the impacts of incarceration.”¹⁹ Outreach activities extend outside the local neighborhoods devastated by the effects of mass incarceration to open up a dialogue about

discrimination and disenfranchisement that often continues upon release and raises awareness of the social structures that underpin an expanding criminal justice system that disproportionately impacts African Americans and Latinos. A *Well Contested Sites Facilitation Guide* (Amrhein, Dowling, and Schultz 2014) created by a group of “artists, scholars, formerly incarcerated men and their families, and community activists”²⁰ offers workshops that invite reflection on the issues in both intellectual and corporeal ways. Theories of justice and processes of taking responsibility for criminal actions are articulated while discussion—at times with performers and community activists—helps enhance awareness of underlying issues. Simple movements are explored around words such as “confinement,” for example, moving beyond verbal communication while considering the use of metaphors in the film.

Material from participatory prison projects is included in the film and build on collaborative creative processes. Dowling distinguishes her work from therapeutic sessions by describing how the focus is on the participants’ opportunity to create “while inside,” offering “creative spaces within which individuals can engage with, and develop their artistic practices—be it movement, acting, spoken word, music or writing.”²¹ For example, Reggie Daniels, who ends the film dreaming of his son and freedom, collaborated with Dowling on another project sponsored by the San Francisco County Sheriff’s Department and the University of San Francisco’s Department of Performing Arts and Social Justice.²² Daniels’ experiences of oppression and incarceration inform an artistic practice that has helped in his journey to become a community advocate, supporting those directly impacted by the criminal justice system while educating others.

Stereotypes are challenged by film and the outreach activities that function as a powerful indictment of mass incarceration and, like Zaccho’s production, as acts of political mobilization. The expressions of resistance performed in the remains of Alcatraz mediate against the constraints and isolation of incarceration in moving through emotional states, revealing hope and the potential for breaking cycles of recidivism and disenfranchisement.

Overreading and Black Habitus in the Urban U.S.

The final case study turns to *Pavement*, an hour-long piece of dance theater by Abraham.in.Motion, supplementing Martin’s concept of overreading with analysis of a black habitus. W. E. B. DuBois’s 1903 novel *The Souls of Black Folk* (2012)²³ provided part of the inspiration for Kyle Abraham’s choreography, who also drew from past experiences of being a person of suspicion. With the approach of the twentieth anniversary of *Boyz in the Hood*, Abraham set out to question how much has changed since the film was released in 1991. Narrative impulses are accompanied in the dance by movement with a rich musicality and stylistic versatility, created collaboratively with the dancers. The interweaving of past and present and issues of race and representation in *Pavement* have structural resonances with the type of production Martin analyzed in formulating the relationship between a production and the social context that inspired it.

Martin elucidates the concept of overreading through an analysis of Bill T. Jones’ work *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* from 1990 (Martin 1995, 1998). Overreading aspires to establish connections between a dance’s “interiority and exteriority . . . to mobilize the text in the service of context” (1998, 61). Jones’s piece, which interweaves the history of slavery with contemporary questions of subjectivity set out in multiple narratives, manipulates a temporal trajectory that challenges viewers’ perceptions. Time is disrupted by Jones through the use of repetition, with the dance moving between stories, text, and subjectivities. Stories are juxtaposed with abstract sections, enabling viewers to be drawn to what attracts them, and ultimately expanding the interpretive possibilities (1998, 67–68). Setting out the dance’s narrative is central to overreading, but this interpretive practice also requires articulation of the abstract movement: “The internal movement of dance narrative, what moves the plot, so to speak, rests on the mobilization of what is nonnarrative



Photo 3. Jeremy “Jae” Neal, Maleek Washington, and the company of *Abraham.In.Motion in Pavement*. Choreography by Kyle Abraham. Photo courtesy of Carrie Schneider.

in dance” (1998, 61). It is in working through the power of the dancing bodies that the possibility of making connections to the world outside occurs, when the analysis can “read through and past the dance to the point where it meets its own exterior” (1998, 61). Following from Martin, the analysis of *Pavement* strives to delve past overt representational strategies and their political imperatives.

Abraham plays on some dominant stereotypes in *Pavement*, which opens with two male friends who stop to greet each other in passing. Initially hesitant, undulations and twitches travel through their bodies and out their limbs.²⁴ With a flash of recognition they relax—a potential standoff is over. Their pedestrian swagger, coded handshakes and backslaps situate them within an inner-city landscape, moving from hip-hop moments into a duet of indulgent movement that mutates into oppression as one dancer is forced down on the ground, arms pinned behind his back as if handcuffed. He doesn’t resist, and after a moment, stands up to rejoin the action. The phrase is repeated by the seven men and one woman to the point where the dancers adopt the position of their own volition. After numerous repeats of the handcuffed position, its final manifestation is intensified. Abraham lies face down onstage, arms placed behind his back as if handcuffed, while a flurry of activity moves around him. A highly technical unison duet explores the rhythmic intricacy of the score; moments of friendly camaraderie and an intimate gesture of support are overlaid on top of virtuosic steps. All the other dancers reappear to jog in formation around the space, their action weighted down as if controlled by others. Although lying still, the rise and fall of Abraham’s back provides proof of life, as the action continues around him for another ten minutes or so. One by one, three other dancers lie down top of Abraham, their breathing settling into a communal rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. A lengthy wait increases the tension as we ponder the physical weight born by the man on the bottom. Eventually dancers extricate themselves, sometimes from the middle of the pile. They emerge from the physical but not the metaphorical shadow of prejudice evoked by the simple yet profound imagery.

Prime material for Foucauldian analysis unfolds throughout the dance, revealing patterns of self-surveillance and normalization of constraint. Deborah Jowitt’s evocative review focuses on the quality of the walk, ranging from self-assured to fearful:

Pavement has no single narrative; its atmosphere is that of a dream in which images form, dissolve, overlap, and recur. A dream in which the fallen rise and walk and, at a later time, fall again. A dream in which a casual gesture can ignite violence between two people, yet end in an embrace, with no transitions between states. (Jowitt 2012)

Brief vignettes reveal rich characterizations. Fleeting connections between the cast rise in emotional tension and then suddenly revert to lyrical calm. Unison phrases consume space, low leaps glide into a multiple pirouette in back attitude; intricate arm popping movements travel across the body from one side to the other. The one white dancer takes the authoritarian role at times, moving Abraham or another black dancer to adopt the “arrested” position. The boundaries of race are constructed then ruptured in the dance, as the sole white male moves between the position of authority to join in the group dance phrases and the ending pile of bodies that concludes the dance as described above. The sole woman moves between roles of sister, lover, mother, and friend to the men, her athleticism matching theirs. The dancers exhibit a confident technical proficiency in flow, strength, and stamina that binds together virtuosic dance vocabularies with more pedestrian gestures, presenting a composite body that encompasses a range of ideologies. Filmed improvisation sessions helped set the movement while the material was generated in workshops with dramaturg Charlotte Braithwaite.

Cultural historian and African-American scholar Harvey Young (2010) articulates how black embodied experiences point to the role of critical memory and the notion of the black body as discursive wherein related histories provide an experiential overlap to how blacks are perceived and treated. Acknowledging “differently complexed and gendered bodies” (Young 2010, 9) and vast diversity within the experience of race and its impact, Young argues that similar experiences of objectification, prejudice, and unequal treatment place race as a dominant identity marker. The critical memory of past practices shapes contemporary experiences. A black habitus emerges, the movement patterns of life as a person of color in the U.S. today are often met with suspicion, evidenced by the unequal treatment of blacks by police in comparison to white people. This habitus is evident in *Pavement*, particularly in the ending. Moments of stillness are abrupt reminders of incarceration, injury, death, and as Young analyzes, as protest. Young (2010) describes breaks in action that disrupt an objectifying gaze or function as resistance, exemplified by Muhammed Ali’s civil disobedience and resultant incarceration in refusing to step forward for the draft in 1967. In contrast, photographs of African Americans from the early twentieth century exude confidence and power in the positions they held (Young 2010).

In an interview, Abraham spoke of how the political resonance of his works can be liberating as well as inhibiting (Cash 2014). Starting work on *Pavement* in 2010, early showings coincided with the 2012 shooting of unarmed black high school student Trayvon Martin in Florida and with other violent deaths. Martin’s killer was absolved of responsibility based on the “stand your ground” law, appearing to offer legal justification for the use of firearms to deadly effect. International condemnation brought racial injustices to the forefront of media attention, and *Pavement* was often linked the tragic deaths.²⁵ The impetus arose out of Abraham’s experiences, however, and the reflections on the essence of 1990s gang violence resonate with today’s viewers and dancers, with the performers drawing on their individual reflections in the creative processes (Abraham 2013).

Music enhances the emotional experiences with *Pavement’s* eclectic playlist offering a shifting aural landscape that moves from the blues to Bach and Vivaldi’s lyrical strings. Operatic arias also contrast with the sounds of sirens, gunshots, women screaming, and banter between the dancers. The soprano countertenor Phillipe Jaroussky intones “We’ve come to take you home” from the finale of Benjamin Britten’s opera, *Peter Grimes*.²⁶ Abraham’s prone body almost becomes part of the landscape, he has been still so long. A dancer sits next to him, eating a bag of potato chips, highlighting a quotidian reality that contrasts with Britten’s words. *Pavement’s* musical journey continues with Sam Cooke’s “So Lonely Tonight” (1960) and ends with Donny Hathaway’s “Someday We’ll All Be Free” (1973), which is faded out mid-song. Songs associated with the Civil Rights movement call for pride, self-respect, and freedom, but are heard as a fragment, leaving the viewer to fill in the gaps—or not. Lyrics can offer up multiple meanings in the passion they convey. Abraham describes how “even in the most up-beat song, you could still hear the pain in someone’s voice.”²⁷ Through overreading processes, the complexities of class and the generational and racial associations of the diverse songs can be located.

Aspects of black experience also emerge in the text, adding specificity to the bodily action. At one point Abraham pleads with others to help him: “I thought you were my brother, we’re family”—but is met with an indifference that he finds dangerous within local communities. “I look at black on black crime, use of the ‘n’ word in urban communities, a word that is so rooted in hatred and when we’re using it in these films, and we’re talking about killing each other, . . . [and] using things rooted in hatred to then reflect on why we’re killing someone that looks just like us.”²⁸ The destruction of community cohesion in neighborhoods devastated by the impact of mass incarceration, the threat of arrest or interrogation that haunts people of color—these stand in contrast to police treatment of whites in similar circumstances. Dan Scully’s lighting and set design establish a functional as well as specific space as the basketball backboard becomes a screen for projected images of exploding buildings. The drama of the streets evokes filmic narratives for viewers distanced from affected neighborhoods, while for others it touches on a daily reality.

Conclusion

Within wider society, the veneer of postracial politics in the U.S. has been shattered, as police brutality continues to generate protests and militarized police responses. Celebrations in 2014 of the fiftieth anniversary of the passage of Civil Rights Act were tempered by the implementation of new voting laws perceived as intimidating marginalized underclasses and ethnicities. Federal courts of appeal have overturned some of the voting restrictions, deeming them to be racist and directly targeting minorities.²⁹ Underlying ideological divisions contributed to a particularly contentious 2016 presidential campaign, with the Republican candidate’s political rhetoric exposing deep seeded racism, homophobia, and xenophobia which did not dissipate in the weeks after voting day. The shock election of Donald Trump to the office of president threatens decades of progress in civil rights, environmental protection, international relations, and social justice—issues that have long inspired activist dancers. As artists respond to the long-standing conditions that have led to contemporary discourses around social injustice, Randy Martin’s interrogations of the relationships between dance and politics offer analytical paradigms for revealing the political resonances of a production. Concepts such as mobilization and the social kinesthetic help refine discussion of choreographic agency while the overreading process reveals complexities of how the internal reality of the work is linked to its external reality without being reduced to a representative relationship.

Joanna Haigood, Amie Dowling and Austin Forbord, and Kyle Abraham offer corporeal confrontations, reaching out to raise awareness of structural imbalances in society through diverse creative processes. Whether working with documentary or participatory input or moving from historical accounts to engage with contemporary experiences, their dances are unsettling as well as hopeful. Issues of social inequality are confronted in direct terms, engaging with injustice through narrative and abstract constructs. Body practices push beyond established technical vocabularies and representational strategies, highlighting risk and diverse physical challenges. Zaccho constructs distinct characters through a series of vignettes while Dowling and Forbord move away from individual stories to humanize the lives of those caught up in the criminal justice system. Zaccho manipulates a set to emulate the corporeal constraints and emotional repercussions of the threat of death by the state. Dowling’s partnering work moves across the cells of Alcatraz where men are lifted up to walk around the walls and ceilings. In Abraham’s choreography, floor work and virtuosic technical vocabularies are juxtaposed by the lengthy stillness of a prone body. Although they cannot effect change directly, the dances illuminate different ways of thinking about mass incarceration, the death penalty, and race relations. Martin’s work helps reveal how political mobilization can inspire social mobilization to occur beyond the artistic practice.

Notes

1. This article began as a presentation at the International Federation of Theatre Research at the University of Warwick in 2014 and I am grateful for discussion generated in the session. Comments from Mark Franko and anonymous readers for *DRJ* have also been invaluable. Thanks go to Debbie Williams for suggesting I look at Amie Dowling's work while Rachel Straus introduced me to Kyle Abraham's choreography.

2. Elizabeth Hinton (2016) has traced how legislative changes and responses to the Civil Rights movement resulted in the modification of the War on Poverty into an unofficial "War on Drugs," which started earlier than the official declaration of the War on Drugs in 1982. *Harper's* magazine reporter Dan Baum (2016) reinforced the racial biases during President Richard Nixon's administration, citing John Erlichman's admissions that antidrug policies were designed to undermine advances from Civil Rights legislation.

3. During the reconstruction period after the Civil War, segregation and economic discrimination laws were named after a minstrel characterization of African Americans, Jim Crow. See Alexander (2012) for a comprehensive analysis of the "new Jim Crow" social structures and their impact.

4. A breakdown of arrest statistics can be found at the website of The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform, <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012/tables/43tabledatacoverviewpdf>, accessed March 20, 2016.

5. For further reading on race and politics in relation to President Obama, see Michael Eric Dyson (2016).

6. Thomas DeFrantz (2005) defines a composite body in the repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre while Halifu Osumare (2002) draws on Martin's concept in her investigation into global hip-hop dance and identity politics.

7. A number of scholars integrate Martin's concepts. For instance, Susan Leigh Foster examines social kinesthesia in *Choreographing Empathy* (2011); Danielle Goldman (2010, 8–9) draws on Martin's analysis of the multiplicity of techniques embodied in a dancer, who may not be aware of how to move outside his or her training which influences his or her improvisation and can constrain a sense of freedom; and Aiofe McGrath (2013, 25–27) investigates political mobilization in dance theater in Ireland.

8. For example, the Cebu Penitentiary in the Philippines uses dance as a disciplinary tool and has been analyzed for how the process shapes a docile body. See discussion of the performances of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* by Fleur Cathreal Williams (2013).

9. The analysis is taken from a recording of a performance at the Charles Houston Center, Harvard School of Law, followed by a discussion session with the cast (Matthew Wickett, Rashad Pridgen, Travis Santell Rowland, and Antoine Hunter) and Joanna Haigood (2016); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_q9xGfRe40.

10. See Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979) for analysis of the panopticon and architecture of prisons.

11. Joanna Haigood, interview with the author, January 26, 2015.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Joanna Haigood, email to the author, July 7, 2016.

15. Reports of action against the death penalty can be found on the Death Penalty Focus Web site, <https://death.rdsecure.org/index.php>.

16. The cast is comprised of Eric Camberos, Reggie Daniels, Travis Rowland, John Carnahan, Eric Garcia, Zachary Johnson, Justin Perkins, Gabe Stuckey, Jordan Daniels, and Freddie Gutierrez.

17. Amie S. Dowling, email to the author, January 28, 2015.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Amie S. Dowling, email to the author, August 3, 2016.

21. Ibid. For further reading on therapeutic dance projects in prisons see Sara Houston (2009), who analyzes contact improvisation sessions in a British prison, and Janice Ross (2008), who discusses issues of vulnerability and transformation.
22. Reggie Daniels worked with Dowling on *Man.Alive*, supported by Community Works West. Daniels began studying for his PhD in education at the University of San Francisco, drawing on his experiences of violence, substance abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system in projects that integrate creative approaches to transformation and recovery (see <http://danceexchange.org/summer-institute-2016-faculty/>).
23. Du Bois's work underpins numerous black studies theoretical perspectives, ranging from Paul Gilroy's notion of a Black Atlantic (1993) to Thomas DeFrantz's exploration of double consciousness (2004).
24. This analysis of *Pavement* derives from viewing a live performance in Leicester, United Kingdom, on 15 May 2015, performed by Kyle Abraham, Matthew Baker, William Briscoe, Vinson Fraley, Tamisha Guy, Jeremy "Jae" Neal, and Eric Williams.
25. Kyle Abraham, interview with the author, January 12, 2015.
26. Andrew Boynton (2012) analyzes the gender associations in *Pavement's* music.
27. Abraham, interview with the author, January 12, 2015.
28. Ibid.
29. Changes in state voting rights laws are being challenged with federal courts overturning new legislation in Texas and North Carolina, for example (see Hasen 2016).

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