Performing resistance: 'Seven Last Words' and the Carceral Culture.

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PERFORMING RESISTANCE: *SEVEN LAST WORDS*  
AND THE CARCERAL CULTURE

We face a social landscape with more (or at least as much) need for radical change than we faced in the 1960s, an era that produced, flawed though it was by lack of follow-through, a mighty impulse toward change...Prison walls are being posed as a final solution. They symbolize our shortsightedness, our fear of the real problems caging us all. The pity is how blindly, enthusiastically, we applaud those who are constructing the walls dooming us.

John Edgar Wideman

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter Benjamin

I. DOCUMENTS OF CIVILIZATION

Since the early 1980s, the incarceration rate in the United States has doubled, with over one million people in U.S. prisons and jails as of 1993. As of December, 1994, there were 113,282 women in U.S. prisons and jails; this figure represents a 275 percent increase in the imprisonment of women in the U.S. since 1980. African Americans and Latinos account for sixty percent of state and federal prisoners nationally, with the ratio dramatically skewed in several states and cities: eighty-two percent in New York State prisons, seventy-six percent in San Francisco City jail.

As prisoners serve longer sentences and penal facilities attain greater shares of states' building and maintenance allocations, the predicament of what to do with the prisoner's body preoccupies the national, mainstream media. In 1995, the successful film *The Shawshank Redemption* brought prison gang rape to the attention of millions (this same film was blithe on matters of race and "redemption"). *Dead Man Walking* (1995) and *Last Dance* (also 1995) examined the ethics of execution from different ideological poles. Beginning in the summer of 1997, the HBO show, *Oz*, claims to show what it's really like "on the inside"—perhaps to offer quasi-documentation of the next step for people who are actually arrested on-camera in *Cop Watch* and other "live"
The Theatre Survey shows. But the cumulative impact of these dominant media representations, I would argue, is to make familiar, even normalize, the values and procedures of the contemporary, swiftly-growing, penal industry. And the cumulative impact of the media representations may well enable widespread acceptance of warehousing large swaths of the population, and easier consumption of prison-made products. Indeed, people on the outside now interact with people on the inside much more than they know. Microsoft Corporation has bought labor from the Twin Rivers Corrections Center to shrink-wrap its Windows products and promotional packets. Reconditioned Konica copier machines throughout Ohio may well have been upgraded by prisoners at a rate of thirty-five to forty-seven cents an hour. The “Prison Blues” line of clothing trades frankly on its manufacturing origins in Oregon State prisons. The brown paper bags I use at the Rainbow Grocery Store to bag my groceries are stamped on the bottom with different men’s names, and the correctional institution number they are known by.

Foucault painstakingly traced the juridical bases, ethical urges, and authoritarian excesses which collaborated in the making of Enlightenment-era penalty. With the plethora of well-financed representations of prison life, late-90s U.S. culture is an eerie replay of the early stages of development of the carceral society, wherein linkages between punishment and representation thereof—now with home entertainment centers equivalent to public gallows—are key to the values of an essentially rehabilitatory penal philosophy. In fact, the concept and representations of penalty in the U.S. in the 1990s fulfill the prophecy implicit in the conclusion of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish: “[I]n the central position that it occupies, [prison] is not alone, but linked to a whole series of ‘carceral’ mechanisms which seem distinct enough...but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of normalization.” Following this image, contemporary representations of prison life, certainly as produced by well-financed institutions such as Hollywood cinema and commercial television, display in both a material and ideological sense the thickness of inter-linkage among technologies of power. Despite the image that Oz invokes of prison being well-removed from our living rooms, the wizardry of the carceral culture ensures that our daily life grows accustomed to the idea of “inside” all around us.

Throughout the 1990s, and certainly in response to the penal system’s perceived “necessity of combat” in relation to prisoners, theatre artists have increased their own representations of “life inside.” Well-known examples of theatre artists working in the 1990s with incarcerated persons include the Los Angeles-based Keith Antar Mason and the Hittite Empire, Rhodessa Jones and the MEDEA Project in San Francisco, and New York-based solo performer Michael Keck and his touring show, “Voices in the Rain.” All of these artists are active in the prisoners’ rights movement, through their provocative works and their additional advocacy work on behalf of prisoners. Tamar Thorne, for instance, whose Seven Last Words is the subject of this essay, is active in the campaign for Mumia Abu-Jamal’s re-trial and, largely
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through *Seven Last Words*, works to raise public awareness about the MOVE Community in Philadelphia where Abu-Jamal worked and lived.\(^\text{15}\)

Theatrical representations of contemporary penality involve the very material commodity circulating within the penal system: the human body. The actor representing a prisoner to an audience (or, as in The MEDEA Project’s case, the prisoner representing herself/Every Prisoner) is both real body and fluid sign, “inside” the system of coercion that makes the representation and “outside” it in his “free” affiliation with the spectators. As “prisoner” in a theatrical representation, the actor’s body traces the channel between “the representative, scenic, signifying, public” philosophy of correction and “the coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model of the power to punish.”\(^\text{16}\) The semiotics of theatrical representation reveal the embedded semiotics of apparatuses\(^\text{17}\) in advanced carceral society. This semiotic verisimilitude provides theatre artists seeking to defamiliarize the rapid normalization of prison life with a rich representational system. Director Tamar Thome’s *The Seven Last Words* (1995–6), in a production of semiotic richness and material simplicity, showed the outsider “the inside” and explicitly linked this privileged “seeing in” to what Joseph Roach calls “the great bourgeois project, the internalization of social discipline.”\(^\text{18}\) Through immanent criticism of its own intertextuality, *Seven Last Words* opens a critical dialogue with contemporary representations of the incarcerated subject.

II. ACTING DOCILE, DANCING DEFIANT

Director and choreographer Tamar Thorne has been working with an ensemble called The Expanding Secret Company for twelve years, developing in the related languages of acting and dancing a powerful performance language of her own. Dance is central to Thome’s work, and her choreography favors the legacy of Yvonne Rainer and Deborah Hay—dances without “danciness,”\(^\text{19}\) built of non-representational movements and everyday actions. “Probably the most influential work for me was Pina Bausch,” Thome reflected in an interview, “her dramatic stagings, her respect for dancers, allowing them to develop their own stage characters, juxtaposing that with large simple group movements.”\(^\text{20}\) Thorne’s style of theatrical dance has developed within the rough, motley materials of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, where much of her work has been shown at Bread and Puppet’s Glover, Vermont performing spaces, both indoor and outdoor. She is the daughter of Bread and Puppet Theatre founder and director Peter Schumann, who is himself trained as a dancer and choreographer. Thorne describes her earliest experiments with movement as very much like her father’s, although her movement style has developed its own distinct vocabulary.

Bread and Puppet’s emphasis on both politics and sparseness in its productions has had a lasting effect. “I can’t discount the Bread and Puppet influence—the political focus, the heavy grounded movement of the puppets, and the use of painted backdrops, the simple box stage that can be put in non-
Figure 1.
Backdrop for *Seven Last Words*, featuring the text of David Thorne. Directed by Tamar Thorne at the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Vermont, August 1995. Photo by David Thorne.
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Thorne’s work also shares with Bread and Puppet a reliance on Brechtian principles of showing the performer in relation to the material circumstances of performance. Her work is political and feminist. Her themes have included: the life of Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva in *Alexander Nevsky* (1987); the romanticization of the female pastoral under Reagan and Bush in *Rural Roots* (1988); male rites of passage and Vietnam War movies in *Utopia and Psychotherapy* (1990).

Thorne’s work develops away from Bread and Puppet in its usage (and critiques) of realistic acting conventions, its interest in the human body in relation to technology and popular culture, and in its knowing relationship to live theatre’s version of the cinematic gaze. In all her Expanding Secret Company pieces, lines between theatre and dance are permeable. Thorne uses dance as a parallel register to the quasi-realistic acting style her performers strive for, allowing dance to work the way a second language works in bilingual theatre. Like the second language—usually the “first” language of the speaker—dance is the eruptive action of the colonized body, the notation of the unfree seeking a new narrative of freedom.

Thorne’s *Seven Last Words* (1995–6) was developed and presented during the summer of 1995 in Vermont, and, after revisions, had a two-week run at Theatre for the New City in New York in June 1996. The piece is set to music by Haydn, the 1786 oratorio *The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*. Its plot relies loosely on the 1989 movie, *Lock-Up*, starring Sylvester Stallone. Much of the spoken text in *Seven Last Words* is a compilation of published writings by former Black Panther Party members Assata Shakur (currently living in exile) and Dhoruba Bin Wahad (imprisoned twenty-one years) and by Standing Deer, a still-imprisoned leader of the American Indian Movement. The backdrop for the piece is a wide canvas with text written by graphic artist and Resistant Strains poster designer David Thorne (see Fig. 1, and below for full text). Words are spoken and sung throughout the piece, and are continuously readable by the audience.

*SLW* quotes many texts and genres. The piece refers to theatrical melodramas, silent movies, classical music concerts, and action blockbusters. The sections below examine in detail the uses of these genres in connection to text, and the design of the performance space they occupy. Thorne’s overall performance text is internally dialectical and irresoluble, seeking to elicit a “complex feeling” in the audience in its refusals of narrative reconciliation or character redemption.

The story of *SLW* has several protagonists: the figure at the center of Haydn’s oratorio, the male characters of *Lock-Up*, the men and women whose writings are spoken texts, and the ensemble of seven women who perform the piece. As an ensemble, the women form what Sally Banes calls an “ensemble of social meaning.” Here, their performance as a collective body, inclusive of
The individual characters, constitutes a recognizable image of people resisting the very framing devices within which they literally and figuratively perform in society and onstage. To the real-time accompaniment of a small orchestra and chorus, the performers move through three kinds of narrative modes, examined below, which I will call the acting sequences, the inquisitions, and the dance sequences.

The performers’ costumes signify drabness and conformity—yet they are also utilitarian in that they allow for movement in the dance sequences. All the women playing prisoners wear light blue dresses or skirts and blouses; the color, though not the clothing, is uniform. One woman wears black pants, boots and jacket as the warden, and a white shirt as the judge. All the women wear heavy black boots.

The performing ensemble for *SLW* at Theatre for the New City includes seasoned and new Expanding Secret Company members: Pati Hernandez, as the framed prisoner; Susie Dennison, co-choreographer and prisoner; Jody Moore, Jackie O’Halloran, and Celia Cerulli-Johnson as prisoners; Alexis Smith, warden and judge; and a woman who wishes to go unnamed because of immigration status, as a prisoner and judge.

As the analyses of performance moments below will show, the acting sequences in *SLW* are sites of thickest reference to “seeing:” seeing as we are conditioned to see by film, and not seeing the material conditions of the carceral society. The acting sequences are sites of pessimism. The dance sequences, on the other hand, are sites of possibility. Innocent though the idea of “movement” as freedom may be, the dance sequences are not taxed with the intertextual quoting that thickens the acting sequences, but rather spiral out of that complexity with presentational, aggressive urgency. At one point, for instance, after a tense “fight” between factionalized prisoners, a dance sequence erupts out of the narrative. The lines of conflict and character are broken. The women performers check each other for cues as they execute the synchronized movement in the choreography, reaching through long open arms on the diagonal and pivoting together, or watching peripherally for Susie Dennison, the co-choreographer, to initiate a new sequence. The women work in these sequences as dancers, not characters, tracing alternative patterns of movement that rely on collectivity and evident cooperation. They are not “trapped” inside the representations and blocking patterns of the acting sequences, wherein others’ stories, director’s instructions and, most poignantly, silent submission, constitute their being as performers onstage.

**Acting Sequences**

The ensemble acts out the story of betrayal and violence at the center of *SLW*, taken from *Lock-Up* and also, implicitly, from the Haydn work. *SLW* tells, thereby, a conventional prison story. Guards bring a new prisoner (Hernandez) into a group of long-termers in established hierarchies of power. A seasoned prisoner (Moore), on the outs with the ruling group, shows the new
prisoner the ropes. The omnipresent guards bribe one of the top dogs (Cerulli-Johnson) into murdering the new prisoner’s ally, thereby provoking the new prisoner to violence against a guard. Having fallen for the frame-up, the new prisoner is beaten viciously and thrown into solitary confinement. Unlike *Lock-Up* or *The Shawshank Redemption*, reward for her endurance of suffering is not at hand: the framed prisoner in *SLW* is marched in handcuffs before the other prisoners and led offstage to an uncertain end.

The story in *SLW* concerns the systems of domination and brutality within the prison-setting, introjected from the culture outside. It also shows the reliance by “the system” on the divided, conquerable status of prisoners. Although the plot follows the experience of the new, brutalized prisoner—and the choreography confers on Hernandez the most demanding physical work in terms of representing torture (see Fig. 2)—*SLW* does not concern itself with the journey of an ultimately triumphant hero(ine). The piece plays with the conventions of the hero’s journey, but breaks that journey into episodes wedged into the Haydn oratorio. *SLW* thereby compels seeing with “eyes on the course” rather than “eyes on the finish,” as Brecht would say. The course, in *SLW*, includes viewing the corpse of the near-dead prisoner(s), while contemplating the corpse of the once-dead but immortal Christ invoked constantly by the oratorio.

The acting sequences in *SLW* play like silent movies: actors adopt a quasi-realistic gestural style, and they mouth, rather than speak, their lines. There are, of course, no subtitles to guide the audience; the performers’ muteness and gestures exist in a space of unspecified, and unspecifiable, meaning. The music plays like a score to this “live-action” movie. The acting has the slightly exaggerated quality of television and film melodrama acting, alluding to the artifice and conventions underlying the “realistic” portrayals of serious subject matter in film and television drama. Thorne draws attention to mass culture treatments of serious subject matter by “turning the volume down” and exposing the bodies within the acting, underneath the words. Bodies *feel*, her project implies, no matter how battered they are—no matter how much we look away. If Haydn’s music is in some way a retrieval of the history of Christ’s body (and its pain), then *SLW* is also a demonstration of the body within art and the experience of real pain the artificed body represents.

By directing her ensemble to perform the psychologically tense and physically violent story in vocal lock-down, Thorne draws attention to the coercive nature of her own role as director. The mutedness of these acting sequences, enforced on the bodies of the performers who undergo heightened states of tension and progressive stages of exhaustion, signals the performers’ docility inside the production process, the limited extent to which actors actually can act or demonstrate free human agency. The actors mouth the words of heated exchanges, but they cannot be heard. They gesture vehemently in accompaniment to their own mute “speech,” but the gestures cannot make us listen. Unlike the seven valorized words of Christ, upon which arguably the
Figure 2.
The Dance of Solitary Confinement from *Seven Last Words*, Pati Hernandez as prisoner. Directed by Tamar Thorne at the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Vermont, August 1995. Photo by David Thorne.
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entirety of Western civilization has been built, these women’s words recirculate into the mill of invisibility and inaudibility that is the material and internal prison-house of the carceral culture.

As prison writings reveal, all sentences are death sentences.28 The waiting for nothing, the randomness and viciousness of beatings, of rule-changes, privilege-removal, instigations, all make incarceration a parody of its higher aim, rehabilitation. “The remoteness of the prison made the authorities feel they could ignore us with impunity,” wrote Mandela. “They believed that if they turned a deaf ear to us, we would give up in frustration and the people on the outside would forget about us.”29 Mumia Abu-Jamal writes, “the mind-numbing, soul-killing savage sameness that makes each day an echo of the day before, with neither thought nor hope of growth, makes prison the abode of spirit death that it is for over a million men and women now held in U.S. hellholes.”30 The women’s silence in SLW depicts the depth of prisoners’ isolation, the extent of their invisibility and voicelessness—in short, their nearness to death, their bodies’ corpulence. What part of ourselves have we killed? What do we recognize in the silent straining of bodies onstage?

The Inquisitions

The inquisition sequences allow the actors to speak, using texts by Assata Shakur, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, and Standing Deer.31 The performers take turns as lone defendants under a spotlight, near a long judges’ table. They speak in clear, plain voices that give little away about the characters’ fears; the words do the emotional work for them. Their speech-acts fall on the deaf ears of the two judges sitting side by side with papers and water glasses. Director Thorne wrote inner-life narratives for the judges, which erupt out of the interrogations. The judges speak about the banality of their jobs and the torment that underlies their own alienation.

The Biblical words that provide the context for SLW and SLWCC are written in large print in an oversized book beside the orchestra stage right; the lead vocalist turns the pages, revealing the words, at the appropriate moments in the oratorio. The correspondence between the inquisition sequences and the Haydn work symbolically connects high art and jurisprudence; the connection links their capacities to erase the feeling body in their processes of generalization about bodies and persons. Consider the following interrogation sequence, built upon the first of the seven words:

JUDGE 2: (to herself/audience) These are difficult times. Very difficult. (Pause. She picks up a pitcher, and pours water slowly into a glass as she continues. Judge 1 shuffles papers.) Sometimes the feeling comes over me that I’ve been kidnapped and left tied up in a trunk unable to move gasping for air with blood seeping out of my mouth. When I get this way, my heart begins to shudder so hard I shake all over and I can hardly lift my arms to help myself.

JUDGE 1: (to prisoner) You never imagined such things would happen to you?

PRISONER: No. But they did.

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JUDGE 1: As you probably already know we are here to address this matter.

PRISONER: I understand.

JUDGE 1: You must understand two more things. *(Leans toward prisoner.*) We aren't fair. And once we reach a decision you will live by it.

JUDGE 2: *(coming out of her reverie, to prisoner)* Why are you so quiet?

PRISONER: I have a lot to say.

JUDGE 1: We are not here to listen to whatever you feel like talking about. What we are here to do is to deal with the specifics. If anything, the less you say the better.

JUDGE 2: Do you have someone to represent you?

PRISONER: No. I am here alone.

JUDGE 1: Let’s get on with it.

JUDGE 2: *(Leaning toward prisoner)* You might think that you recognize me. But don’t let your eyes deceive you. In fact, I would rather you not look at me at all. *(To herself/audience)* I've fallen in so deep I don't know what to do. Please forgive me.

*(Vocalist turns page, revealing the words “Forgive them for they know not what they do.”)*

VOCALIST: *(sings, as performers assemble onstage for next scene)* Forgive them for they know not what they do.

In this sequence, the judges attempt to intimidate the prisoner, while one judge actively represses fantasies of being tortured by unknown assailants. Thorne suggests their penal system jobs—and the carceral culture around them—implant these fantasies, which they in turn convert into aggression against the prisoners in their charge. Judge 2’s direction to the prisoner to “not look at her at all”—lest the mis/recognition of humanity take place between them—sets up the theme of looking: Who gets to? Who will not? Who wants to be seen? As in future inquisition sections, the words in the oratorio echo the exchanges between prisoners and guards. The imbrication of the two texts fuses the historical and the present moment, and shows the dual figurations of humanness and inhumanity.

As the violent plot at the center of *SLW* thickens, the inquisition sections include whole paragraphs from political prisoners’ writings. These include details about contemporary prisoners’ treatment at the hands of guards, and the deprivations they endure in prison. The audience hears about beatings, solitary confinement, and denial of toilet paper or sanitary napkins. In each of the inquisition sequences, the judges speak from their own inner prisons, using the theatrical convention of the aside to narrate their inner torment. “Why can't I sleep?” Judge 1 moans at one point. Before the sixth word, “I thirst,” Judge 2 says:

As I drove here this morning a strange feeling came over me. I felt like I was lying by the side of the road, police everywhere.

The inner lives of people on the outside, *SLW* suggests, are full of restlessness and paranoia. Fear pervades the culture, thanks to what the prison warden calls the “violent contrast” between “this empty vacant time and the intense
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rhythm of normal life.” In the last inquisition, a prisoner speaks angrily about the social inequalities underlying the pervasive fear. The judges steal away offstage while the prisoner’s speech builds in intensity. The text is from an essay by Standing Deer:

There is an illumination with me. A spark of life, like a dream, that tells me that human beings were meant for something better than working their brains out in somebody’s mine or factory. Now that they have stolen all our shit they make us volunteer to become their slaves without even putting chains on our hands and feet. They steal our labor. They issue us green paper to buy food and clothing and things we have to have and then they tell us we are free. And while we work until we wear out like used-up automobiles they become richer and richer and more powerful. And while some of them are good God-fearing Christians they would sooner see your guts mashed out in the street than they would even begin to consider returning one iota of the riches they have stolen from the children of the poor. No amount of moralizing, of philosophizing, of preaching, of clean living, of eating natural foods, or praying will ever change any of this. Only when the people who suffer the immediate degradations and punishments of this insane form of social organization are organized into a force that can physically wrest control of this society from the tiny minority of criminals who control the mass technology and the means of production—only then will freedom become possible.

The same actor (Jody Moore) who had insisted to the uninterested judges that she had “a lot to say” in the first inquisition (see above) delivers this monologue, in a strong, incantatory voice. This monologue is the longest speech-utterance in the piece. The words are urgent, almost relentless. The speech functions formally like Lucky’s famous monologue in Waiting for Godot—a prisoner finally gets to speak. Lucky’s monologue is fueled by the excitement of speech itself, rattling through seeming-random images until it settles on the figure of the “skull,” as if the images of heaven, hell, earth, and sea finally resolve their contradictions in the speech-silence of death. For Thorne’s prisoner, the words are thrown, not spewn. The “illumination” that accompanies the prisoner in her usual wordlessness is the “spark of life,” not the figure of death, and it connects her to the possibility of collective—perhaps coordinated “inside/outside”—action. With this speech, Moore the actor moves out of the corps ensemble of social meaning established in the piece and into a social-political register, wherein speech and action fuel each other. Lucky’s monologue cannot convince by content; it presents the spectacle of the silenced prisoner fumbling for sense, and therein lies its poignancy. The speech in SLW appeals through both form and content to the audience’s ability to see one of its own, a sensible fellow in the human condition. It re-associates power with the body, to invert Foucault’s phrase, and by example challenges the audience’s “body” to sabotage the mechanisms of shared subjection.

Thorne is under no illusions that this speech will actually move the audience to physically wrest control of society. The moment soars out of the piece but the piece must go on after the moment is over, and indeed in response to the transgression. The spotlight snaps off when Moore finishes the speech,
and she walks quickly and quietly backstage. The next scene begins right away and, as we shall see below, provides an ominous response to the Standing Deer text.

The lead vocalist turns the leaf in the giant book to reveal the sixth word: "It is finished." The juxtaposition to Moore's monologue begs the question, *What* is finished? The body? The patience of the penal system? The patience of the audience thereby? The acting sequence that follows has the warden lead the framed prisoner (Hernandez), handcuffed and wearing a shocking orange coverall, in a slow march in front of her fellow prisoners. The prisoners stare at the handcuffed prisoner with fearful silent faces. After all, it is they who made her the bait for the system to dispose of. Their stares, as prisoners now comparatively more free than she is, are dumb witness to her plight. The prisoners are silent spectators, linked in their silence—and presumably their culpability—to the audience as it too watches a presence, a body, imminently absent. The lone prisoner is led offstage, and the women in the line of prisoners fall to one knee, arms extended above them as if in surrender. When they rise, their hands lower and make fists at face-level. They march in unison toward the audience, literally shaking their fists and figuratively rattling their cages. When they reach the front of the stage, they begin to "speak" to the audience, angrily but in silence. Some mouth angry epithets, others just scream silently. The Haydn adagio moves through wild turbulences and subsides.

The Inquisition Sequences give voice to both kinds of prisoners in the carceral culture. The spoken texts with the greater "weight" in the sequences are those written by current and former prisoners, whose testimonials to life on the inside offer a counter-narrative to *Oz*'s fictions. The vividness of their rage, as offered in plain yet insistent voice by the SLW performers, and the depth of their continued engagement with the ideas of systemic change and freedom, attest to their passionate desires to "belong," if not to the status quo to a society they help change. Their designation as "political" prisoners (and Thorne calls them that in the program) links protest with self-exile, dissidence with outsider status. The outsider must be made to go "in." This contradiction at the heart of our contemporary society—the lock-down on dissidence—is the theme of all the political spoken texts.

The other prisoners who speak in the Inquisition Sequences are, of course, the arbiters of "outside" justice, imprisoned by the implications of the justice they administer. Fantasies, paranoid delusions, very real contact with terrified and despairing people—these are all fuel for the furnaces of their unconscious. Thorne suggests, through the judges' disturbing asides, invocation of the Stallone film narrative, and clear quotation of television melodrama-style "realistic" acting, that the unconscious narratives revealed by the judges are hardly unique to their characters. Indeed, they represent the inside of the outside, the collective unconscious of the "free." What's imprisoned on the inside is both generative of, and generated by, the psychic imprisonment of the outside. This is not to level the conditions of inside and out, as if to say that
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prison is inappropriate for everyone doing time; SLW is, however, posing different questions than Lock-Up about what criminality is, what humanity is, and what constitutes redemption within an explicitly quoted context of Christianity and patriarchy and consumer culture.

Dance Sequences

Dance is the formal "break-out" from the silence that surrounds physicality and denies vocality in SLW. Though it shares with acting the procedures of formal inscription which make performance possible (the dancers' bodies submit to the choreography, and in silence), dance's contribution to the larger social meaning of SLW is to provide the performers' bodies with corps work, with ensemble movement that resists psychology, and asserts a human, and contextually female, desire to break the panoptic gaze. Dance sequences break suddenly out of each dumb-show acting sequence, retrieving violent gestures or encounters from the acting sequences and reworking them into abstract units of movement. The dancing unites all the performers (prisoners, judges, and guards) into contingent solidarity, as they rework encounters and work together on a new discursive plane. The performers leave their characters and dance out a suppressed social meaning of the ensemble: rebellion.

Thorne's choreography typically prefigures the aggressive, potentially rebellious, impulse lurking within mundane gestures and movements. "The pull of gravity, the planted foot, are what I respond to," Thorne says. In SLW, the women stomp and march and clap their hands in a choreography of simple movements which, in their unspecializedness, suggest the liberatory yearnings inside putting one's foot down or elbowing something out of the way. In sturdy boots and through slow movements, the women's dance emphasizes the ground they jump away from, the pull of gravity they succumb to and fight against. The dancers' faces are impassive and unstraining inside the dance. There is nothing virtuosic in the movement, no extensions or leaps displaying years of training or discipline. Indeed, the simplicity and heaviness of the dance defy the codes of body control that choreography—and commercial culture and prison—imposes and reinforces. The dance in SLW, like the music to which it is set, signifies high-art forms of representation and meaning while formally undercutting those modes of representation.

I have suggested that the dance foregrounds the context of the desire for freedom as female, even feminist. Certainly the dance sequences allow the women to rise up formally against the silent screen and physically express a narrative of change and even action. The dance sequences also allude to the imprisonment many women experience under patriarchy and its institutions. Being "woman" in the carceral society can mean being locked out of and locked down inside its institutions. According to some psychoanalytic theory, women are forever barred from the "symbolic order" of language and discourse that patriarchal society generates and perpetuates in its own interest. The designated place for women in society is to be seen but not heard; women's
speech-acts and intra-organization, therefore, are acts of defiance. Prisoners are granted similar status in the culture. They are rendered or re-rendered female (rape ensures these sex-role assignments to many on the “inside”), and are made to feel the humiliations attendant on that emasculated status.

SLW resists asserting an absolute equivalency between women’s capture by the spectatorial gaze and prisoners’ capture within prison. Rather, the piece links patriarchy’s construction of woman as “other” with society’s construction of prisoners as “other,” and suggests the urgency of examining and breaking those fixed categories. In the acting sections of the piece, women form cliques (or gangs), toy with each other, betray and viciously fight each other. The women’s enactment of brutal “inside” behavior is taken from movies, lore, even Christianity’s main stories—in short, the stuff of the “outside’s” fixed cultural narratives. In these acting sequences, the performers move silently inside a socially-constructed representation of prisoners as naturally deceptive and violent. These sequences also make the performers’ femaleness “apparitional,” to borrow Terry Castle’s formulation— the women are clearly “playing men’s parts.” Or are they? Slyly, while erasing the performers’ femaleness, the representation actually links their femaleness to the deception and potential for violence represented in the Stallone film narrative, at once defying the associations between women and meekness and reinforcing the patriarchal view that women should be contained lest their urges get out of control. The piece is skillful at displaying the contradictory role assignments made to women under patriarchy.

By contrast, the dance sequences re-associate power with the moving, seeming-spontaneous, “released” body of the performers. The performers are not characters in these dances; they are the workers of the production, stomping out the meta-narrative cry for “freedom!” in SLW. The women stomp and kick, meeting the gaze of the audience defiantly when turned front. The dance sequences allude to the perennial corps of women dancers in ballet and modern dance and Hollywood musicals; they reform that image, however, by also resembling contemporary shock troupes at a rally or demonstration. The dance sequences participate in what Sally Banes calls the contemporary “bad girl” aesthetic in dance, which is “seen as a salutary way to resist the bonds of social construction.” The dance sequences allow the performers to move together in comparative freedom as performers collaborating in political action. In SLW, dance acts out the urge to make noise, to rise up and fight back, despite repression by dominant cultural forces.

III. MUSIC

Haydn’s Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross:
1. Forgive them, for they know not what they do.
2. Today you will be with me in paradise.
3. Woman look at your son! And you look at your mother!
4. Why have you forsaken me?
5. I thirst.
Performing Resistance

6. It is finished.
7. Into your hands I surrender my spirit.

Thorne’s employment of Haydn’s *SLWCC* as the score for her *Seven Last Words*, reopens questions about the subject matter of Haydn’s music, and the disfigurements of music in contemporary cinema and commercial culture. Rather than using Haydn’s music as invisible dissonance haunting her own spectacle, Thorne revives the human beneath *SLWCC* by situating a small group of horn- and string-players and vocalists stage-right. The musicians wear black street clothes; the vocalists, all women, wear formal, unflashy black concert dresses. The musicians’ playing is collectively strong, though not dazzling; they cannot produce the textures, the lushness, of the Juilliard String Quartet version of *SLWCC* (1990) which Thorne and the dancers worked with in rehearsals. Indeed, the ensemble’s size produces a humble sound which in its roughness refuses the role of soundtrack, denies the romanticizing function of commercial movie-score music.

The history of *SLWCC* pits its composer, Franz Josef Haydn, against the performing aspirations of an ambitious Austrian bishop. The story of their struggle over the meaning and form of *SLWCC* (which Thorne researched) opens the space within which Thorne reconceptualized—and incorporealized—this liturgical music. Haydn, a man of peasant background whose court-supported music recapitulated many folk-music traditions, produced *SLWCC* in 1786 on commission from an aristocratic bishop for a Good Friday service. The cleric was planning a dramatic reminder of the crucifixion through his new commission: he himself would speak each of the seven last utterances of Christ, and the pauses in between his speaking would be filled by adagios intended to “represent the listeners’ emotional responses to the context of Christ’s utterances.” Haydn delivered the composition in 1786 without choral parts. Eleven years later, after many libretti had been produced without authorization by Haydn, he wrote a libretto himself. Haydn’s own libretto was intended to direct, and not to represent, listeners’ emotional responses.

The bishop’s commission put the focus on the last utterances of Christ, spoken by himself as lead actor in the ritual drama and central mystery of Christianity. In the bishop’s vision, Christ and he would occupy the same liminal space of supra-mortal imminence through the medium of performance. Yet Haydn had produced a piece of musical extremes, with wild key changes, fervent dynamics, and an overall “tonal restlessness” that describes vividly the context of the dying man’s utterances: mortal doubt and physical agony. The music works in a dialectical relationship to the libretto, straining restlessly toward the pictorial representation of which it is only partially capable. In *SLW*, Thorne retrieves the tortured subject within the music by revealing the human means of production of the music, and thereby making music and the other performance languages “common elements in the communicative economy” of the piece. The presence of the production of the music restores what Adorno calls the “truth-content” of music, that is, the human subjectivity
within all music, which plays with, though never harmonizes, the possibility of "objective content." Thorne's small ensemble retrieves the production of music as human enterprise, and in its recorporalization alludes to the subject of the music: the suffering human body. Again, the political implications of this dual capture lead back to the potential for the audience to recognize its own body as individual and collective, immanently free yet ambiently bound. By refiguring the Haydn oratorio with its humanness, Thorne points to the anatomy of society as makeable, and breakable, by its citizens. By invoking the image of the man on the cross, SLW (as had SLWCC) also asks what kind of death we collectively want to experience as a body. "The corpse is always approaching from within," declares Drew Leder. The figure of the corpse is immanent in every body, and despite efforts to wall off its presence nothing will alter its sureness.

IV. TAKING UP SPACE

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.

Brecht

As I remarked in Section I, the theatre event exists in a spatio-temporal domain that can well signify the material and psychic experience of incarceration. Thorne's design of the performance space in SLW contributes to her strategy of releasing the inner experiences of judge, prisoner, and audience into a political context which counts action against repression as its greatest aim. The first performance of SLW was on an outdoor stage at the Bread and Puppet Theatre, in daylight. Thorne retained many of the design elements for the production at Theatre for the New City in New York, where she could also make use of theatrical lighting. I saw SLW in both settings; however, the analyses of space here refer to the New York production.

The performance space in SLW is a bare floor. The performers bring any props or set-pieces necessary into each scene with them. At most these consist of a rough bench and a stool, a pack of cigarettes, a fake knife. As indicated in the section on "Music" above, the musicians sit stage right of the performing space. The lighting stage right is less hot than the lighting in the central performance space, although the musicians are clearly visible. A similar dimming of light exists stage left, where the judges preside in the inquisition sequences.

The enormous drop spanning the back of the stage is painted black, with a text by David Thorne in white letters. The text rolls from one side of the canvas to the other, leaving no margins (Fig. 1). The backdrop has an entrance cut out of its middle; all entrances into the performing space are made through this one opening.
Performing Resistance

The text on the backdrop reads as follows:

What is the crime? Choosing not to exercise the right to remain silent? Bringing up impolite subjects in public? Talking too loudly about white supremacist capitalist patriarchy or something else unspeakable and being right on the money? Too loudly but lacking the hysteria that makes for instant dismissability and easy vilification? Illegally possessing a clear voice that doesn’t respond to gag treatments? Having a voice at all? What is the charge? Breaking an unwritten law that says ‘opposition is useless’? Violating every standard of passivity? Raising a black fist instead of a white flag? Believing in people’s intelligence and ability to resist? Never thinking for a minute that that’s a stretch? Terrifying the few with a consistency of commitment to the many? Is this the charge? Never capitulating, buckling, caving, confessing to invented offenses? Copping no pleas? Not playing along with a blatant set-up so the hangmen can show clean hands? Is the crime not being a criminal? Failing to be an eager accomplice? A suitably spectacular fall-guy? A canary that hits all the right notes? Refusing to lick boots that crush heads? Knowing that to lick them is the same as wearing them, and same as getting kicked? Or is the crime being locked up but not kept off the streets? Defying neutralization time and time again? Not dying in solitary? Not dying there, but getting stronger? Not willingly self-destructing in the face of execution? Setting the wrong example by going on living? Simple being? Not being broken? Not even beaten after being beaten? Is this the real crime, flying in the face of every expectation, every assumption of selfishness, every supposed instinct for self-preservation? Having an unacceptably strong definition of integrity? Strong enough to never beg pardon? Strong enough to not sell anyone down the river? Strong enough to destroy a fantasy of how coercion should always succeed, a model of how terror should work? is the crime refusing to mean what someone else demands, refusing to mean nothing, to just up and vanish? Is it humiliating the shameless into a frenzy of desperation in which all that’s left for them to do is kill again, stage another public disappearance? Or is it the worst crime of all, inspiring others to fight back and forward every step of the way? What is the crime? All of the above? None of the above.

The backdrop, and the symbolic twin pillars of culture (musicians) and justice (inquisition) on its right and left, function as a framing device for the story. Together, these elements constitute the simple material universe of SLW. The frame demarcates a space of privileged seeing for the audience: what is represented within the frame is usually unseen, and in its silence is potentially unspeakable. The text on the backdrop flickers behind the action, like a political mural painted over but defiantly bleeding through.

The framing device is a material reference to the frame-up at the center of the Stallone movie and the Christ story. It is also a structuring device for relationships in prison. As Angela Davis writes, “it should be self-evident that the frame-up becomes a powerful weapon within the spectrum of prison repression, particularly because of the availability of informers, the broken prisoners who will do anything for a price.” The frame-up has become the master narrative for the entire carceral culture, Thorne suggests; falling for frame-ups—pursuing bargains, buying time, pandering to the powerful—is the plot of contemporary life. SLW allows the audience to look in on the unseeable;
however, the backdrop finally defies looking \textit{in}. It demands looking \textit{at}. Full of questions, the backdrop glares at the audience across the empty space during the final Haydn adagio, “the Earthquake.” \textit{SLW} implies that our collectively-made answers to the questions of our times will determine the severity of the earthquake which, like the corpse, approaches.

V. \textsc{Doing Time}

A narrow sense of time as a material entity, as a commodity like money that can be spent, earned, lost, owed, or stolen is at the bottom of the twisted logic of incarceration...Time pays for crime. 

\begin{flushright}
John Edgar Wideman\textsuperscript{47}
\end{flushright}

\textit{SLW} brings together the art forms of music, dance, and theatre which depend for their performance on collaboratively-designed experiences of time and rhythm. These agreements about time, within space, constitute the figurations of two related, out-of-time images in \textit{SLW}: the martyr’s life-through-death, invoked as the moaning body on the cross, and prisoners’ death-in-life, represented by the women/prisoners whose bodies can be seen, but whose cries go unheard.

These two out-of-time images meet on the theorizable terrain of representing history. The body of Christ stands as an icon of Western civilization: source of its ethics, font of its compassion, model of its courage. Christ’s body’s history, its experience of physical torture, is insignificant next to its ultimate transcendence of the material sphere, and its conferral of immovable mandates upon the material sphere throughout history. Thorne’s \textit{SLW}, as I have argued, retrieves the body of the man on the cross by making the human enterprise of the music present in the human enterprise of the performance. By connecting the words of Christ with the words of prisoners and judges, \textit{SLW} uses the concentrated spatio-temporal realm of performance to link the dialectical enterprises of suppression and rebellion. The piece is without apparent interest in the meaning of Jesus as commutable with the “one” body of humankind; however, \textit{SLW} uses the still-mortal body at the center of Christian iconography to dare the audience to look at the violent, dehumanizing bases, historical and contemporary, upon which it has built a supposedly unified society. \textit{SLW} “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,” to borrow Walter Benjamin’s image. “Instead [the piece] grasps the constellation which [its] own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”\textsuperscript{48}

One of the last dance sequences in \textit{SLW} illustrates well how Thorne’s use of dance interrupts the continuity promised by the storytelling of the acting sequences, and alerts the spectator to the “time of the now”\textsuperscript{49} of human bodies. At a key moment in the last scene, the women fall on the floor and roll onto their backs. They lift their ribcages and breastbones and let the crowns of their heads fall on the floor, eyes staring out at the audience. They appear broken-necked, strewn, violated. They begin to push their bodies forward toward the
audience with the heels of their boots, their eyes open. During this disturbing
crawl, the vocalist sings the words on the new book-leaf: "Holy Father I
surrender my spirit to you." The women's degradation, and their somber
stares, denude the utterance of the noble, eternal timbre it might still have for
the audience. The "surrender" seems newly horrific and total under the history
of patriarchy. The Christian martyr's mythical ascendance into life through
death haunts the pathetic, irredeemable crawl of the women on the floor. The
prison floor, the theatre floor, and this life on earth, are symbolically united as
the appropriate basis for "surrender" and service.

Importantly for its politics, SLW draws attention to the experience of time
for the body. The designation of the body as a time-feeling, potentially history-
making site refuses the elisions of history common to much postmodern writing
and performance that theorize ahistorical space and forget time. The body in
SLW, especially in the dance sequences, foregrounds historical consciousness as
immanent in human experience, potentially extrovertible in the material world.
Space cannot be dwelt in, moved through, without an experience of time.
Teresa Brennan's retrieval of the figure of history through psychoanalytic
theory finally argues:

Any sense of time has to be based in a feeling of motion. To feel motion, one has
to have a fixed reference point, fixed relative to one's motion. (Or one can be that
fixed point, and feel the other's motion.) The second ingredient is that this
feeling of motion has to be rapid enough to mean that there is a need to locate
events and experience. And these can only be located in fixed points of
reference.50

SLW presents the prevailing reference point—carceral culture—and asks that
the audience join in loosening that fixed point, feeling each other's motion.

VI. DOCUMENTS OF BARBARISM

SLW presents a consciousness of its own means of production—the theatre
apparatuses, the coercions of choreography, or directing—and links this
knowledge to its critique of dominant, patriarchal power relations in society.
This linkage not only raises the question of art's contributions to the
development of repressive cultural narratives, but asserts art's participation in
all cultural narratives, whether aesthetic or social. Through this critical
reflexivity, SLW advocates an ethics of representation in which bodies are not
only conscribed by the director/choreographer but themselves "write," through
performance, parts of the narrative which are fluid (though not necessarily
improvised). SLW repeatedly offers the image of "free bodies" amidst its inter-
texts, and releases the energy of rising up amidst the conventions of the master
narrative. In so doing, SLW offers the figure of an Utopian hermeneutic,
informed not by religious or moral transcendence but by materialist analysis of
contemporary power relations and cultural production. Art contributes to social
struggle by representing the hybrid character of social change, its progressive
and reactionary elements. One of feminism's reminders to political artists is to
be accountable to individual bodies, to their self-determination and defiance of heterosexist, racist patriarchy. *SLW* gathers images of contemporary civilization with roots deep in history—the legal system, Christianity, performance itself—and treats them as documents of civilization perpetuating in their totalizing civility barbarism against living beings. *SLW* re-links the condition of the audience with the condition of the condemned, and asks that the audience, which *can speak*, move against the imprisoning of its whole self, inside and outside.

**ENDNOTES**

5. Buck, 337.
7. Ibid., 109–111.
8. Ibid., 104.
10. Ibid., 131.
11. Ibid., 308.
16. Foucault, 131.
17. Ibid., 302.
26. Banes, 47.