Re-Imagining Urbanity:
Performance and Collective Disruption in Our Cities
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Advised by Professor Janice Ross
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**Krishna:** We start here. Come on.

**Arjuna:** Where to?...If we’re going somewhere I don’t like, I may choose not to go. Because I have a choice.

**Krishna:** You have a choice?

**Arjuna:** This is a free country.

**Krishna:** Is it?

~Excerpt from “Start Here” by Suzan-Lori Parks¹
Agradecimientos

I began these wonderings and excavations having not the slightest idea of how very little I knew—about how systems of oppression work on our lives, about how my privileges and my marginalities intersect to position me both within and outside of this work, about the many blessings of finding a creative community. I don’t pretend to depart from this project having crystallized any of these understandings, nor would I want to pretend such a thing, but I do know that I have many to thank for pushing me closer to a place of honesty and humility within myself. I know that the art that I make and the justice work that I do in the future will be stronger because of the ways of thinking the following individuals have helped me to uncover and articulate.

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Abstract

I investigated community-based performance as a means of centralizing the experiences of marginalized people in urban political discourses. While community-engaged city planning takes heed of citizens’ experiences in order to create more equitable cities, community-engaged art has the potential to steal through the cracks in regimented and exclusive institutions, transforming them in quiet but commanding ways. I argue that performance works to elevate the voices of oppressed communities in three major ways: it invites unlikely participants to remember and act upon their citizenship, allows those participants to experiment with modes of resistance against oppressive institutions, and finally, allows for the envisioning of new social fabrics through the act of collective imagination. I approached community-engaged performance through three primary channels. Firstly, I worked as stage manager for a multi-city, audience-participatory play called *City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy*, which is based upon actual transcripts of city legislative meetings and reflects and scrutinizes the way city governments address the issues that affect their residents’ lives. Secondly, I co-facilitated the creation of dance and spoken word performances with incarcerated youth at Hillcrest Juvenile Hall as the teaching assistant for a Stanford course called “Dance in Prison”. Finally, I drew from my personal experiences with organized political protest, understanding public demonstration as a form of cooperative performance. This research spanned the course of September 2013 through May 2015.
Introduction

We Hurt, We Heal, We Pierce:
Conjuring a Resistance Without Casualties

On the evening of my arrest in January 2015, I saw unfold before me a string of orchestrated acts: a line of vehicles trailing one another like shadows across the San Mateo Bridge; a carefully timed deceleration and a collective halt; the rushing out of cars and the slamming of doors and the formation of a rehearsed choreography—the bodies of 68 Stanford students side by side with feet planted and arms linked. We chanted from scripts—too Black too strong (repeat × 1), too Black too strong (repeat × 1); it is our duty to fight for our freedom (repeat × 1), it is our duty to win (repeat × 1), we must love and respect each other (repeat × 1), we have nothing to lose but our chains (repeat × 1); Black lives matter (loop until throats sore). We spoke to officers just as we had rehearsed (there would be no risking improvisation) as they fastened our wrists—Am I under arrest? Under what charges? Something about the right to remain silent.

And as with any living performance, there were moments in which our rehearsed choreography snagged on the unforeseeable textures of the world, moments that jolted us out of our performance and into contact with an unpredictable, sometimes violent and all-too-real actuality. Helicopters filmed us from the sky and put us on the evening news, nationally broadcasting our resistance; some drivers rolled past us with fists up in solidarity, validating our decision to act; those of us who were arrested, even those of who had never met prior to that day, came to share a raw and necessary kind of community.

There were other jolts, too, rude awakenings that shook me of my sureness, and made me ask, what is the worth of putting our bodies on the line like this? The seemingly endless brigade of patrol cars that manifested suddenly, without warning. The way the police officers touched our bodies, a tender discomfort we could not have prepared for. The transgendered Asian woman among us who stared blankly into space as we awaited processing at the police station, petrified, I later learned, of the consequences of her inevitable misgendering. The months of legal proceedings, the possibility of ineffaceable marks on records, years on probation, hundreds and hundreds of dollars owed in restitution, that would follow our momentary demonstration. Folks were saying a little girl on her way to the hospital had gone unconscious in her parent’s car while we held up the bridge. This was revealed later to be rumored, but I reckoned painfully with its plausibility as if it had been
truth. The protest emerged out of a profound grief and rage on behalf of the countless named and unnamed casualties of a system which criminalizes and collectivelypunishes Black and brown, trans and poor bodies, but it also brought forth casualties of its own. I recognize, too, that our relative privilege as Stanford students has protected us still from the brutality and consequences protesters in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Oakland continue to face.

I have begun to reflect on the casualties of this particular act of resistance as well as those around the country and world from which it is inseparable, always weighing them against the gains, for I do not write with the intention of devaluing political protest. On the contrary, I have experienced marches and other public demonstrations to be enduring and incomparably direct means of communicating unrest. When we march, we perform for one another our strength and unity, and we perform for the public gaze our refusal to accept the conditions of our lives. Still, I emerge from this past year—the year of my first political arrest, and not incidentally, the year of my first original scholarship into issues of protest and performance—with a growing interest in community-based performance. I recognize performance as a space of collective resistance that does not ask oppressed individuals to put their bodies more on the line than they already are.

In an essay titled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Black feminist and poet Audre Lorde writes, “Women of today are still being called upon to reach across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.” In other words, the oppressed among us are expected to bear the burdens of injustice as well as the responsibilities of educating the rest of society about the nature and mechanisms of such injustice. In marching, we knowingly make our bodies vulnerable to a violent and dehumanizing police state as a means of communicating our resistance, and invite, sometimes strategically, the same kinds of racialized violence that we march in order to protest. So often that communication line is faulty, allowing those with racial, socioeconomic and sexual privilege to see protesters as rioting masses rather than collectives of individuals shouldering specific experiences and traumas.

For me, community-based performance comes into focus as a hopeful space of exchange across the margin that exposes the rawness of conflict and disparity as it heals us of the wounds of those same conflicts and disparities. While both political protest and performance ask participants to put their bodies on the line, the stakes are highly
differentiated, for while protest puts physical bodies in harm’s way, performance asks for emotional and bodily honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability. I believe that art is unique in that it nourishes us at the same time as it forces us to look upon the most fraught and often painful aspects of our lives. Drawing from Augusto Boal, Tobin Nellhaus and Susan Haedike’s work, I understand a community-based performance as one created in collaboration between trained artists and community participants. These undertakings often revolve around issues central to the lives of community participants, and invert expected power dynamics, blurring the lines between facilitator, spectator and participant. I am interested in community-based performances as risky but lower-stakes spaces that have the potential to challenge us to confront that which we fear about ourselves and about those different from us, and to imagine new modes of navigating those differences.

I believe that we are more wanting for these kinds of spaces for confrontation, exchange and collective imagination that we have been at other moments in history. In his book *Who We Be: The Colorization of America*, art and cultural critic Jeff Chang reflects upon an America that is deeply delusional, an America in denial with regard to notions of progress and power. Chang writes,

> There had never been a time in American history when nonwhite people were more visible. President Obama and his beautiful young family were the apotheosis…Yet all of our social indexes show rising rates of re-segregation and inequity. In other words, there is a growing gap between what we see and what we think we see.³

In interviews I conducted with artists and city residents involved with the San Francisco-based performance projects I use as case studies for this honors thesis, I found the same deep levels of disillusionment with the city and its purported inclusivity, multiculturalism and commitment to democracy. An arts administrator and journalist named Robert Avila told me, “So people go around throwing about democracy and representation but you know who they actually represent…it has to do with money and power.” When I asked a screenwriter named Brandon Williams if he felt represented by the city, he told me, “I definitely don’t feel represented here…. If you're asking me how I feel as an American Black man in this city…people know who in this city holds political capital. Your city, I have to say, has
broken my heart.” I found these responses emblematic of the sentiments of many people of color living in the Bay Area, my hometown and the geographic focus of my research. At this moment in history, San Francisco’s Black population has dropped to just over 5%, a 35% decrease since 1990, and eviction rates have risen by 417% since 2012.  

As Chang suggests, we now find ourselves contending with subtle but reinvigorated strains of discrimination and inequity. He writes,

“This was the way racial power worked… It sorted difference into vast systems of freedom and slavery… investment and abandonment, mobility and containment. Then it drew a veil over these systems. It pretended not to have even seen difference in the first place. Racism, in other words, was supported by a specific kind of refusal, a denial of empathy, a mass-willed blindness.”

Chang argues that this delusion is of a more insistent nature than has existed at any other point in American history. The question then becomes, what kind of spectacle has the capacity to move its white liberal audiences when the white and liberal have grown afflicted with, as Chang articulates so well, a refusal to see, “a mass willed blindness”? Oppression lives in the floorboards and foundations of our institutions, which is to say that it is ingrained, veiled and taken for granted, and unlike the white liberals of the 60’s who saw racist violence embodied on television and were often startled into action, this same demographic appears now dangerously familiar with our system’s unjust institutions. This sentiment of familiarity is espoused without intimate engagement with those who bear the burden of these injustices, and results in an overwhelming tendency to settle into the role of passive spectator.

In what follows, I wish to explore the ways in which community-based performance opens the door to, nuances and activates political discourses through a close investigation of two community-based performance projects. In the first section, I use the notion of “invitation” to explore questions of who is in the room, how they arrive there, and how disparate voices are received, accommodated and validated. In the second section, I will examine the role of artistic structure in community-based performance as a force that both restricts and enables expression. In the final section, I investigate the imaginative act in
community-based performance, exploring the ways in which performance allows for community empowerment through collective imagination.

These two projects differ immensely in approaches, populations, and aesthetics, but share the common intention to temporarily model and enact not-yet-existent communities that centralize and elevate marginalized experiences. My hope in comparing and evaluating these undertakings is to locate those elements of community-based performance that hold the promise of transforming its participants. I believe that at its best, community-based performance empowers marginalized participants to honor, communicate and politically activate around the issues that impact their lives, and urges non-marginalized participants to see the experiences of their co-participants as intimately intertwined with their own lives and senses of justice.
Methodology

My research manifested in participant observation of two distinct community-based performance projects—a play called City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy and a Stanford service-learning course called “Dance in Prison”—and interviews with project participants and facilitators. These case studies alone do not near a comprehensive reflection of the current work in the field, but do in their comparison and contrast allow for informative glimpses into the potentials and limitations of such collaborations. I selected these projects as the nuclei of my research because of their distinctive but mutually instructive conditions with respect to site, population, and facilitation. Participant interviews were used to augment and deepen my own analysis, as well as to reflect not merely my own perceptions but also those of the collective.

Participant Observation

I draw heavily from my experiences in the rooms in which these projects took place, as working as an active collaborator in each setting was without a doubt the most revealing means of investigation for me. I engaged with each project in a leadership capacity in order to gain insight into the generative processes of the project facilitators. However, as I was as new to each project as many of the participating community members themselves, I was often able to observe with a greater degree of distance than were the principal facilitators. This dualistic perspective—that of a core collaborator and a community participant—allowed me a more holistic understanding of how such collaborations are experienced by all participants in the space.

Field notes played an integral role in my research, taking the form of daily reflections in a journal, scribbled during creative meetings, group rehearsals, on bus rides home, before going to sleep. In my work at Hillcrest, my field notes took the form of email correspondences between my mentor and the lead facilitator inside, Freddy Gutierrez. After almost every session in Hillcrest, we would share our reflections with one another over email; I saved these correspondences and later folded them into my field notes.

1. Hillcrest Juvenile Hall

I worked with three groups of incarcerated teenage boys at San Mateo County’s Hillcrest Juvenile Hall on two occasions: every day for two weeks in
September 2013 as a teaching assistant for a Stanford Sophomore College course called “Journeying In and Out: Creative Writing and Dance in Prison,” and once a week for three months as a participant in the Spring 2014 course, “Dance in Prison.”

In my teaching assistant capacity, I collaborated with Professor Janice Ross and PhD student Joy Brooke Fairfield of Stanford’s Theater and Performance Studies Department, Stanford Creative Writing Department Lecturer Harriet Clark, and Adjunct Professor in the University of San Francisco Performing Arts and Social Justice Department, Laurel Butler, to create the framework within which the Stanford and Hillcrest students exchanged with one another. As individuals with varying degrees of dance, creative writing, and art facilitation experience, we each brought forth our own approaches in order to create an aggregate repertoire of exercises and activities to share with the youth on the inside.

We brought twelve Stanford sophomores into the Hillcrest gymnasium to work with a more or less consistent group of fifteen incarcerated boys, ages fourteen to seventeen. For two hours every morning for two weeks, we facilitated dance, movement, improvisation and creative writing workshops for Stanford and Hillcrest students. Throughout the two weeks, we worked towards building material, both spoken and gestural, for a final performance, collaboratively devised and performed by Stanford and Hillcrest students.

In “Dance in Prison,” lead facilitated by teaching artist and prison abolitionist Freddy Gutierrez, the Stanford students visited Hillcrest once a week for one academic quarter, working with two classes of varying young men each day on the inside. Each week, a small group of Stanford students would be responsible for creating and facilitating that week’s curriculum and choreography. Stanford students would then receive feedback from the teaching team on the effectiveness of their lesson plans.

Throughout my participation in each of these courses, I observed closely the responsiveness of the young men to the exercises we shared with them, the effectiveness of different facilitation styles, the interactions between Stanford, Hillcrest students, and Hillcrest staff, and how the creative opportunities we introduced into the space were adopted or rejected by the youth.
2. City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy

I worked as Stage Manager for the San Francisco production of City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy from June to August 2014. My role in the production was to execute the non-tech logistics of the show and to attend all production meetings. Because City Council Meeting is an audience-engaged performance, stage managing included keeping hundreds of scripts, instructional cards, and props in order. Through this role I came to intimately understand the behind-the-scenes and inner-workings of the production.

More significantly, I was brought into the project’s artistic leadership team. I worked closely with the director, Mallory Catlett, the writer, Aaron Landsman, and the choreographer, Erika Chong Shuch. Landsman and Catlett deal in their work with theater as a site of social collaboration and inquiry, Landsman a company member with Elevator Repair Service, which devises its works based on extended periods of collaboration. Together, we worked to develop the central themes, tensions, and aesthetics of the show’s final act, referred to as the “local ending”. The show travels from city to city, the script unchanging despite these migrations—an amalgamation of transcripts from actual city council meetings around the country as well as original writing by Landsman. However, the “local ending” is the one aspect of the performance that is created on site in each city, in collaboration with local artists.

I attended all rehearsals throughout the month of July with the three production leaders and 5 local contributing artists, referred to as “staffers,” who also act as facilitators during the performance itself. All rehearsals were open to the public, and therefore several community members or friends of collaborators were often present at rehearsals. As a San Francisco native among New Yorkers, my role included publicizing the performance to local communities through outreach to non-profit organizations in an attempt to engage the public in the project (not merely the arts community). I played both a behind-the-scenes and on-stage role in all three performances in the month of August, facilitating the movement and participation of audience members and assisting “staffers” in fulfilling their roles. Throughout all stages of the production process, I paid close attention to the relationships and dynamics between the directors, collaborators, and audience/community members.
Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews with four individuals: two audience members from City Council Meeting, one lead collaborating artist from City Council Meeting, and one teaching artist/prison abolitionist with whom I worked in Hillcrest Juvenile Hall. In order to recruit interviewees, I requested interviews from the facilitators of each project, and individually approached audience members at City Council Meeting.

I recorded and transcribed all interviews, each of which lasted between one and two hours. I then analyzed all interviews for common themes (which included subjects such as access to the arts, citizenship, artistic collaboration, imagination, political resistance, political representation, and perceptions of the role of art in society) using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

When interviewing facilitators, I asked questions regarding how they situate their work within various struggles for social justice, how they conceptualize collaboration with the communities with whom they work, and how they think about making space for unheard voices—in other words, what democracy in art truly means to them. When interviewing audience members and project participants, I asked questions regarding their relationships to local government, their understandings of their own citizenship and sense of home, and how involvement in these projects has impacted these views. These interviews profoundly deepened my understandings of the intentions and potentials behind this work.
Literature Review

“Who are better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society… the necessity of liberation?”

~Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

It is this line of thought from which the literature on community-engaged arts practices stem. In this honors thesis, I argue for the learning that we must do from marginalized people, and for performance as a particularly promising site of centralization of this firsthand knowledge of injustice and inequity. Thus, in what follows, I link the literature on critical pedagogy with that on performance as a transformative, political undertaking.

Paulo Freire, widely considered the father of critical pedagogy, envisions a model of education that values lived experience over distant scholarship, emphasizing that disenfranchised people must critically reflect on the conditions of their lives in order to create a pedagogy for their own liberation. Richard Shaull, a student of Freire’s teachings, writes in his foreword to Pedagogy of the Oppressed,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

Shaull here calls attention to a major facet of Freire’s ideology: that education at its best allows oppressed people to deconstruct their worlds and imagine what better ones might look like. Freire recognizes that “…history is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined…the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically,” refusing to accept that the reality we live in is the one that must be. He suggests instead a model in which "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world…they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation". Implicit in this vision of education is an equal emphasis on practice and theory. Freire writes, “They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of
their quest for it…” asserting that we must activate and embody theory in order to make it our reality.

Understanding Freire’s emphasis on praxis as embodied and enacted theory, one can see how performance and theater emerge as promising venues for such manifestation to take place. Xicana playwright Cherríe Moraga writes, “Experience first generated through the body returns to the body in the flesh of the staged performance...theater requires the body to make testimony and requires other bodies to bear witness to it,” situating performance as a site of realization of the sociopolitical critiques and imaginings of its creators.

The physicality of performance is particularly salient in light of Foucault’s analysis of the role of the body in systemic oppression. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes, “The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power… the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces,” indicating that the body itself becomes, in its subjugation, a force of confinement of the self. An extension of the institution that confines him, the confined individual’s own body turns against her. Foucault elaborates, “The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it…it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property”—the body and the institution, then, cooperate to contain and defeat the person’s spirit and sense of humanity. Foucault describes the confined body as “…a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits…,” and thus, through its use of the body, confinement alienates the body from its beholder.

Performance, then, can work to re-activate the body, and thus the psyche, of the oppressed individual or community. Dance historian and scholar Janice Ross writes, “In its own way, the body is as instructable as the mind. It can be just as resistant to certain lessons, and readily absorbent of untaught ones,” she writes, going on to articulate the ways in which the body deeply internalizes certain kinds of knowledge. The performing body, therefore, is capable of learning that which it rehearses.

The theater director and activist Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* comes into focus as a framework that revolves around this corporeal capacity to learn revolutionary modes of being. Boal calls for a framing of theater as “rehearsal for reality,” as a practice that allows participants to experiment with and practice new, creative ways of engaging with oppressive people and systems.
In the 1960’s, Boal began experimenting with audience-participatory theatre in which audience members could interrupt a performance with their own objections and visions. He coined the term “spect-actor” to describe the activated spectator, “the audience member who takes part in the action.” Writes Arvind Singhal, scholar of communication and social change, “Thus, passive spectators are changed into actors who become transformers of the dramatic action… spectators assume a protagonist role, change the dramatic action, propose various solutions, discuss plans for change, and train themselves for social action in the real world.” Boal also developed a series of improvisational exercises, called “cops-in-the-head” exercises, that encouraged participants to identify and overcome certain internalized oppressions they experienced. Thus, as Singhal writes, “The theatrical act by itself is a conscious intervention, a rehearsal for social action based on a collective analysis of shared problems of oppression.” It is the collaboration between teaching artists and community participants, here, that results in the creative production of real anti-oppression strategies.

It is important to note, as Tom Finkelpearl does in his book on socially cooperative art, What We Made, that collaboration does not necessarily mean equal authorship. He writes, “…collaboration is simply too far-reaching a claim to make; not all of the participants are equally authors of these projects, especially in the initiation and conceptualization.” He offers instead the notion of cooperation, the idea that people are working together towards a common end. He describes the works and projects that he explores in his book as “socially cooperative works that examine or enact the social dimension of the cooperative venture, blurring issues of authorship, crossing social boundaries…” He recognizes that all involved parties bring their own sets of skills, knowledge, and intentions to a project, and it is this interplay that makes the participatory experience so fruitful.

My research focuses on the cooperative performance venture as a mode of urban place-making. I am interested in spaces where highly dissimilar peoples from urban places come together and envision possibilities for new social landscapes, for new negotiations of racial and socioeconomic differences. In Performing Democracy, Bruce McConache writes, “Grassroots theater grows out of a commitment to place. It is grounded in the local and specific…” saying that theater inherently echoes and influences perceptions of the spaces to which it pertains. Furthermore, Professor of Theater Jill Dolan writes, “...performance can prompt audiences to see themselves as citizens, to participate in a democracy that takes ethical responsibility for tears in the social fabric,” understanding how performance links
participants to one another as neighbors in an intimate web of geographical and political interconnectedness.

How can we apply this interconnectedness found at the theater to the making and re-making of our cities? While I understand that there are multitudes of municipal initiatives such as community-engaged planning that proactively include underrepresented populations in important decision-making processes, I also understand that participants more often than not feel like unwelcome visitors in these spaces. Where community-engaged city planning fails to meaningfully incorporate marginalized citizens’ experiences of urban places into the transformation of cities, where does cooperative theater succeed? What intimate capacity does community-based performance have to creatively reflect, challenge, and reconstruct the urban social fabrics in which we live together? These questions guide me as I reflect upon and compare my experiences working with *City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy* and “Dance in Prison.”
Part I: Performance as Invitation

“...For other people...particularly young men of color, to come into a space where there’s another young man of color who’s facilitating from the outside, who has a desire to work with them—I think it’s a grand invitation.”

~Freddy Gutierrez, Teaching Artist in Hillcrest Juvenile Hall

In this section I investigate performance as a truly democratic invitation, one that creates and expands access to space in which a city’s multitude of voices can enter into discourse with one another. My point of departure is the Freirian belief that socially transformative artwork, that honestly reflects, confronts and critiques societal injustice, must be created in collaboration with individuals who understand first hand the consequences of such injustice. In what follows, I will look at the ways in which the facilitators of City Council Meeting and “Dance in Prison” stumble and succeed at inviting authentic engagement from the populations with whom they collaborate.

City Council Meeting opens with an orientation video, introducing the audience to the premises and ground rules of the performance in which they are about to participate. As the video comes to a close, the audience hears a woman’s voice say, “This is the city we make together every night.” In this simple statement, the creators of City Council Meeting communicate a central tenet of the work they aspire to make: that whatever is created reflects the diverse experiences and perspectives of those in the room. In concept, by allowing the performance to be enacted by city residents, and by offering local artists free reign over the “local ending,” the project ceases to belong to the creators alone. It comes to belong instead to the collective, a collaborative creation that can only exist the way it does because of the choices of each individual in the room. A participant named Robert Avila told me,

They really handed it more or less completely over to somebody else to let the local have their response...they're confident enough to also leave things open ended and to give over parts of what they're doing to other people, to give agency to other people...

In other words, opening up a creative endeavor, inviting the public to pick it up and sculpt it as they see fit, has the potential to make that endeavor more expansive. It is no longer about
an individual’s aesthetic, politic, or worldview but about how all of our visions and understandings intersect to create the fabric of the cities in which we live.

When I speak of invitation, I am not only speaking to the question of who is in the room, but also to the question how they arrive there—a question of access. This section’s epigraph, a quote from of my co-facilitators in Hillcrest, a teaching artist and prison abolitionist named Freddy Gutierrez, reflects on this question. He shared with me his own trajectory towards self-realization as an artist, explaining, “The theater bug that I got bit by…was seeing people who look like me, who talk like me, presenting issues that were funny and accessible on the stage.” He understands how much of a gift it was in his own life to be shown by Black and brown performers that theater was not merely an arena for “Anglo-Europeans”; to be shown that his insights and experiences were equally as worthy of stage time (as well as off-stage time). While the Black resident I mentioned in my introduction spoke to me about the hurt that poor representation in formal government has caused him as a Black man, Freddy reflects on how representation in the cultural world was positively influential for him as a Latino.

As I focus on the potential of community-engaged art to provide an inclusive and transformative space for civic engagement outside of formal government, Freddy’s early experience with theater strikes me as deeply meaningful. His experience of being represented by performing othered bodies made him cognizant of his relevance to cultural and political discourse despite his overarching experience as a marginalized identity. In his work in prisons and juvenile facilities, then, the gift of representation is one he intends to share with his students. It is the most basic way in which he invites the incarcerated people with whom he works to participate, to engage, to view their experiences as worth sharing.

In contrast, when participants did not feel themselves reflected in their facilitator, the losses to the projects in which I worked were highly perceptible. The facilitator in many ways represents the project, and in working with both City Council Meeting and “Dance in Prison,” I felt the work suffer in circumstances where disparity between participants and facilitators was present and perceived. As I mentioned in my methodology, I worked in Hillcrest on two separate occasions, each time under the direction of a different primary facilitator. The first course was facilitated primarily by a white woman named Laurel—another teaching artist, trained in the same tradition as Freddy, and trained, in fact, by the same mentor, a dance professor at USF named Amie Dowling. Freddy was the second facilitator with whom I
worked, and the difference in the receptivity and authenticity of the Hillcrest students’ engagement was apparent both in the short and long run.

Between Laurel and Freddy, Laurel was undeniably the more experienced facilitator, having led collaborative creative courses on the inside for ten years. Her gifts as a facilitator were undeniable, her charisma and versatility permeating each of our sessions in Hillcrest. Despite these strengths, it was obvious to me that the young men in the course facilitated by Freddy took instantly to the material in a way that those in Laurel’s class never quite did. There are admittedly a great number of variables to consider in comparing the two courses—the particular Hillcrest students present, the particular Stanford students present, the course schedule and curriculum. But I do know that while Laurel facilitated an intensive course that met every single day for two weeks, Freddy facilitated a group that met once a week for eight weeks. By the second or third meeting of Freddy’s course, the Hillcrest students had reached a level of comfort and engagement that I would argue was never reached with Laurel as a facilitator. I will specify later on how this comfort and engagement manifested.

I do not attribute this disparity to any failing on Laurel’s part, but I do clearly recall Laurel’s students looking at her with a kind of distant awe. Behind her back, they would refer to her as “Taylor Swift” and laugh uncontrollably when she surprised them—and yes, they always appeared to be deeply surprised by her—by breaking out a hip-hop step or using slang as if it were second nature. And so even, or perhaps especially, in her best efforts to naturalize herself to the young men, the distance between their distinct identities inevitably revealed itself and distracted from the work. In contrast, Freddy’s greatest gift was his corporeal presence as a large, typically masculine, Latino man. He explained to me, “Oftentimes, particularly the younger guys will ask me why I do that work, and the first thing I tell them is that, well, “Where you’re at I could have been.”

There are different ways to explain why a statement like this one spoken from the lips of a person of authority resounds powerfully for young incarcerated people. Even spending the limited amount of time in a juvenile detention center that I did, it became clear to me that the facility in so many ways is a place of masks and posturings, as are many of the communities from which these young men come. In an essay called “Condemned Men: Compulsive Masculinity and the Convict Ethic,” scholar Howard Cunnell writes, quoting anthropologist Roger Lancaster,
...it is only “through the competent performance of certain stereotyped gestures” that prison masculinity may be read, “both by others and the actor himself...To lose in this ongoing exchange system entails a loss of face and thus a loss of masculinity”...The performance may be so sincere that it is literally a matter of life and death.²³

The deterioration of such facades is indeed essential if incarcerated young people are to tell their stories, to imagine together, to dare to dance, with any kind of sincerity. In order to permeate the accumulated facades that the detention facility perpetuates and indeed, necessitates, a reordering and reframing of the system’s hierarchies must take place. For a stranger to enter into this space of discipline, fear, obedience, and control, and for this stranger to ask young people for their vulnerability, a deep-seated distrust of authority must be breached in some way. I by no means wish to imply that a facilitator whose background is distinct from her that of her participants cannot cover this distance, but rather that the layers of distrust will likely run deeper the more “other” the participants perceive the facilitator to be. In Laurel’s case, her whiteness, her woman-ness, and her unexpected and perhaps contrived well-versed-ness in Black culture kept the Hillcrest students from fully crossing over to the imaginative space into which she invited them.

The makers of City Council Meeting are far from unaware of this issue of representation and creative hierarchy in community-engaged performance. Three white New Yorkers take the lead in the facilitation of City Council Meeting, though wherever they take the performance, they make a concerted effort to recruit local artists of color as collaborators. Such collaborators work to build a city-specific “local ending,” which ruminates on the ways in which the themes and tensions presented in the first half of City Council Meeting manifest in their particular city. In San Francisco, City Council Meeting recruited seven local artists, five of whom were people of color. These collaborators included two female Asian-American performance artists from San Francisco, an African-American storyteller and teaching artist from Oakland, and an HIV+ singer and songwriter from the Pacific Islands now living in an SRO in the Tenderloin. These community artists were folded into the making of the “local ending,” culminating in a closing act that reflected on issues of gentrification, eviction, and
loss of community identity in San Francisco. Aaron Landsman, the playwright, writes in his introduction to the project about the problematic nature of a homogenous collaboration:

On each of the other two nights we had a church choir perform… On top of that, the audiences on those two nights tended to be arty hipsters, whiter, younger. The choirs had, respectively, Latino and African American backgrounds. This perpetrated, unintentionally but perhaps not subtly, a form of cultural politics that happens all too often in art: the white guy got to articulate himself, becoming the locus of realization; the people of color provided soulful music to accompany that revelation. Although we were aware of this danger and attempted to mitigate it in our staging of their interaction, we were not able to entirely escape this set of problems.  

Acknowledgement on the part of lead artists of retrogressive dynamics in their work is essential, but only insofar as those self-critiques are considered and acted upon in future iterations of a project. Despite being socially conscious enough to note and analyze the faults in the Houston iteration of City Council Meeting, Landsman and his team did not make it their focus to ensure that the same detrimental dynamics did not emerge in the later San Francisco iteration.

Considering how crucial to City Council Meeting a diverse audience is, I was disappointed to find how little attention was given to public outreach. As a San Francisco native, I took it upon myself to reach out to a number of individuals and organizations that I know work closely with marginalized communities in the city. I assisted Landsman in setting up several visits to youth programs such as Health Initiatives for Youth and the Mural Music and Arts Project in order to invite young people to attend the performance at no cost. Still, as I felt myself taking the lead with regard to outreach, I came to feel that audience was, in fact, of secondary concern.

While the project facilitators speak passionately about the moments in previous performances in which a young black boy read the words of a mayor, or when an older white woman read a testimony originally delivered by a teenager on Houston’s Youth Action Team, these compelling tensions between the reader and the read can only emerge when
those tensions actually exist among those present in the room. As a result of this peripheral focus on audience, the audience that ultimately materialized and participated represented a primarily white, upper-middle class, liberal art crowd. While I look back and feel that I could have done more to share the project with the marginalize communities to which I have access, I also remember telling some of the youth with whom I work at the Mural Music and Arts Project about *City Council Meeting* and being met with disinterested, blank stares.

It strikes me that underlying the failure to garner an audience that represented the diversity of San Francisco was partially an issue of the intellectual inaccessibility of the project itself. Though *City Council Meeting* aspires to question city government and its purported dedication to democracy and representation, it fails to question these systems in common terms that are comprehensible to the majority of city residents. Because the show is based on actual transcripts of city council meetings, the same exclusive political jargon permeates the performance.

In revolving around these transcripts, does *City Council Meeting* replicate the same exclusivity it wishes to critique? All rehearsals are open to the public, a plus for accessibility, and I once brought along a 16 year-old mentee and friend of mine named Harmony, who has herself spent some time in detention at Hillcrest. She read the part of an audience volunteer council member, giving the seven local artists an opportunity to rehearse their particular roles and duties. Afterwards, as we rode the bus home together, I asked Harmony how the experience had been for her. She told me that the experience of sitting on the stage, reading and acting, had been a novel and exciting one, but that she had understood very few of the words that had come out of her own mouth.

*City Council Meeting* attempts to poke at the mundanity and inaccessibility of governmental jargon by using and repurposing that same jargon out of its usual context, making it strange as art often does. If one is educated enough to follow bureaucratic language, then perhaps she is well-positioned to understand some of the ironies and absurdities that *City Council Meeting* strives to spotlight. If not, one gets caught in the mire of it all, now thrust to the margins of both formal government and its artistic echo. Thus, I believe that City Council Meeting unwittingly perpetuates some of the same exclusivity and incomprehensibility of formal government that it aims to criticize. Even if formal invitation takes place—that is, even if people are told that they are welcome—the language and culture of the creative space can be as alienating as a sign that reads “educated white people only.”
Just as city council meetings are purported to be open to the public but are attended by a minority, the ways in which these gatherings are structured and facilitated send strong messages about who is welcome and who is not.

When I speak of invitation, I refer not only to who is in the room and how they arrive there, but how participants are free to contribute once they arrive. How are individual voices welcomed into a space? How are those voices centralized and honored? Freddy shared one exercise in particular that he likes to use early on in his work with a group of incarcerated individuals as a way to communicate that their voices and stories matter in the space they create together. It is a simple exercise that involves each participant stating his name and sharing a short narrative about it. Freddy tells me that many of the men often express that they have never been asked about their names before. They are also asked to entertain the question, “If you could change your name, what would you change it to and why?” It is common knowledge among those who work with incarcerated populations that names matter. Freddy believes that working with names is important because of “the reality that many incarcerated people face having their names replaced by numbers and something as simple as acknowledging someone’s name could do service to their sense of self.” Thus, the act of inviting individuals into a creative space, and communicating to them that their whole self, with all of its history and complexities, is welcome, is a political act.

*City Council Meeting* welcomes its participants’ individualities in its own ways, one of which is inviting audience members to participate in whatever capacity they find fit. On the City Council Meeting website, the project introduction reads, “Maybe you’ll be reading the words of someone real who said something important or trivial, somewhere in the US. Maybe you’ll speak your own mind. Maybe you’ll just watch and listen. We would be happy to see you,” emphasizing the freedom of the participant to engage as she wishes. As I previously mentioned, at the beginning of each performance, the audience watches an orientation video (narrated in the San Francisco production by Supervisor John Avalos), which gives them basic information about how the performance works. Because the performance is basically placed in the hands of audience members, with the support of several trained facilitators (of which I was one), this informational video includes most of the logistical and conceptual information that audience members need in order for the show to move forward.
At the end of the video, audience members are told that there are four major ways in which they can participate. They can volunteer to serve as one of 4 councilmembers, roles which involve being on stage for the duration of the show and reading from scripts handed to them by facilitators; they can volunteer to be ‘speakers’, a role which involves receiving a testimonial delivered by an actual person at an actual city council meeting, and reading it aloud at the podium; they can volunteer to be supporters, a role which entails receiving a card with specific instructions regarding when to stand in support, when to clap, when to leave the room, when to make a call on their cell phone, etc.; lastly, they can volunteer to be bystanders, a role which involves nothing but acting as a passive spectator for the duration of the show. These roles clearly range from high to low levels of involvement, and audience members have the liberty to choose the extent to which they would like to engage. Robert Avila, one of the local project collaborators, believes strongly that the entire piece hinges upon this non-restrictive approach. He explained,

I kind of like that the piece just let people, gave them a wide range to do whatever they wanted, you know? To make up their own minds, make their own decisions, and decide how they were going to rise to the occasion…even when the choices weren't the choices I would have made.

In this way, participants are faced not with an imposition of engagement, but with an invitation to meet the experience as they are—to rise to the occasion in a capacity that feels safe but hopefully challenging.

Beyond welcoming participants into the creative space, how are their experiences and proclivities centralized in the making of the performance? In Hillcrest, I learned that creating space for honest reaction and feedback in the moment of creation is an essential element of any meaningful invitation to collaborate. Freddy shared with me his belief that working with incarcerated communities is only effective insofar as participants feel ownership over the work that is created. He explained,

I think everyone needs to be able to participate in some way….I think part of the nature of the work on the inside…is coming in with one's
toolkit, let's say a set of exercises…and then understanding that those may evolve depending on how content arises and how participants are producing content with those specific tools,

highlighting the importance of flexibility as a facilitator. He believes that by allowing the creative undertaking to be sculpted by the environment and participants—by their needs, preferences, aversions—one makes room for transformative work to take place. He shared an anecdote from working with a group of Latino youth in Oakland, wherein he quickly realized that his creative writing exercises were not meeting the needs of this population.

I was like ‘they don't need this right now, this isn't gonna do shit for them… Let's get them other stuff to do. …I brought in some beading stuff and got them to make necklaces, and that was a trip… They were like, "Oh can I help you?" like talking to each other really cordial and stuff. And one of the guys even goes, "Man this is funny." And I said, "What's funny?" And he goes, "You got all the thugs in here making necklaces and stuff."

And I feel like part of meeting people where they're at as a facilitator is gauging that they may not care for what it is you're bringing in….is understanding that they have a large need that your art-making is not doing anything for.

Freddy acknowledges the reality that art making, as a teaching artist originally conceives of it, can often be out of touch with the needs of the population the artist aspires to serve. Once he opened up his curriculum to the wants and proclivities of his students, he saw self-proclaimed “thugs” soften, he saw relationships develop. When the creation process itself becomes an open dialogue between facilitator and participant, even authoritative spaces such as detention centers can become instead temporary communities, where individual voices are valued, taken into consideration, and unified.

Thus, engagement can never be imposed--only its possibility offered. Freddy told me, “I think the creative work, the performing arts work, primarily focuses on the
individuals on the inside, not with the intended purpose to change them but to offer a new possibility of creative imagination, and offer a creative means for self-exploration, because change is ultimately up to the individual.” City Council Meeting and Dance in Prison attempt to do just this—extend invitations towards those who are ready to engage with their own imaginations in ways that are transformative to themselves and, perhaps, to the systems of which they are a part. I will explore in the following section the constraints inherent and instrumental to these invitations, which work to simultaneously restrict and unify communities of performing bodies.
Part II: Invitation Qualified: The Role of Creative Constraint

“There is always gonna be a certain constraint to a certain freedom.”
~Robert Avila, collaborating artist, City Council Meeting

“Can freedom in confines be truly free?”
~Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed

“You can’t have art without resistance in the materials.”
~William Morris, 19th century English artist and socialist

In the previous section, I discussed some ways in which invitation, as embodied in both the facilitation and structure of a political project, has the potential to yield authentically inclusive spaces for community participants. But when I speak of invitation, I speak of invitation within certain constraints. Constraint—quite literally confinement—is an inescapable component of working with incarcerated people, but it was also a central element of City Council Meeting. 19th century artist and socialist activist William Morris wrote, “You can’t have art without resistance in the materials,” and while constraint in many cases poses an obstacle to creative liberty and honesty, it allows for focus and intentionality in others. In this section, I will discuss the role of constraint in community-engaged performance processes, looking at the ways in which it both restricts and necessarily structures creative work.

To begin, I am careful not to equate the constraints in effect when working in a juvenile hall to those in effect in a creative space such as City Council Meeting. Throughout my work at Hillcrest, I never questioned the centrality of constraint to our creative project, as it is at the center of the lives of the young men with whom we worked. Every time I entered the facility, I was struck anew by how heavily kept under surveillance these boys were during our creative sessions together, how self-conscious the gaze of the guards made the inmates, how self-expression—even when invited—felt so incredibly restricted. I often wondered how any kind of authentic dialogue or commentary could possibly come through in such a highly regimented, disciplined space.

As Stanford students, and thus transient and privileged visitors in this space, our experience of the prohibitive nature of Hillcrest hardly begins to reflect the constraint over every element of his life that an inmate experiences. What we did experience, however,
began even before we entered the space, and pervaded as we traveled through and beyond the walls of Hillcrest. We began to feel these constraints as women, directed to wear only clothing of a certain length and shapelessness; as teachers and facilitators, revising curriculum proposals rejected for involving physical touch between participants or hip-hop music of any kind; as bodies, waiting in sally ports for the authorization of staff on the other end of surveillance cameras, waiting for the buzzing of remotely controlled doors, feeling the strict gaze of guards as we attempted to create space for play and imagination with Hillcrest students. In each of these restrictions, we felt reflected not any suspicion of our intentions as visitors but rather a deep distrust of their own inmates. Our work took place not merely around but in spite of the limitations inherent to this highly disciplined space.

Constraint in *City Council Meeting*, on the other hand, was primarily a creative choice made by the artists. In the context of this creative project, constraint and structure were nearly synonymous. In the show’s pre-recorded orientation video played at the start of each performance, the question-answer portion goes as follows:

> “Wait a minute, I thought I’d get to speak my mind. I thought I’d be engaging in dialogue.”
> “You know what? You do get to engage in dialogue. But it’s a dialogue that has already happened among other people somewhere else. You’re just filling their shoes for a little while. Why? Because we think it’s more interesting.”
> “Hey, didn’t you say I was in charge?”
> “The fact is you are in charge. You’re deciding at every moment how to participate. And that’s a kind of power, isn’t it?”

In this way, the makers of City Council Meeting, Aaron Landsman and Mallory Catlett, offer up from the very beginning the truth that engagement may not be as open as audience members may have expected or hoped. In this moment, they define more narrowly what audience engagement means to them—it means allowing participants the freedom to choose among several defined ways to engage with defined dialogues.

Landsman and Catlett emphasize that the responsibility and individuality of each participant comes through in the act of “representing another person’s experience”—in the
space between the speaker and the text they read. This model of meaningful but structured engagement calls to mind French scholar Michel de Certeau’s ruminations on the relationship between the pedestrian and the city:

...if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities...then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves about them and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements.26

Here, de Certeau writes on the creative agency of the pedestrian in spite of, or rather in cooperation with, highly structured urban places. Similarly, in City Council Meeting, because participants are not creating the script but rather choosing what to say and how to say it, the artistry of the individual lies in her navigation of the disparity between the speaker and the spoken for.

In working closely with the artists behind City Council Meeting, however, it became clear to me that allowing space for the artistry of each audience member was not a priority of the project. On the contrary, Landsman and Catlett emphasized actively suppressing those participants who attempted to take more agency in the performance than they were invited to take. While the seven local artists recruited from the Bay Area played integral roles in envisioning how the performance would unravel in their home city, audience members were expected to read their assigned texts as written, and to return to their seats directly afterward.

In an early meeting meant to orient core collaborators to the project, Landsman and Catlett spoke of the inevitability of “hams” in the audience who centralize themselves as agents in the performance. They discussed with collaborators what to do in the instance of the performance being co-opted by an overzealous audience member. For instance, there is a moment in the script in which the secretary asks if anyone in the audience would like to voice objections to a proposed change to a water sewage bill, but because no one in the audience has been given a script to read that pertains to water sewage, this is a moment of programmed silence. However, in the case of an audience member taking this invitation to object at face value and ad-libbing a response, core collaborators are trained to respond, "You have something to say about water sewage?" and if the answer is yes, to ask, "Can you
hold your testimony until the end of the meeting?" If an audience member insists upon speaking, the secretary is told to ask them to “Please state your name for the record,” and allow the participant to speak for 2 minutes maximum. Thus, facilitators are taught to minimize the disruption and integrate it into the show as much as possible. This attitude toward the agency of audience members in the performance raised important questions for me around the purpose of structure—where does it focus a piece, and where does it stifle it?

It is important to note here that unlike our work in Hillcrest, City Council Meeting is first and foremost an artistic, rather than civic, undertaking. While I hold any project that seeks to engage civic issues in collaboration with a broader community to a standard of engaging those issues and those communities with a certain level of thoroughness, authenticity, and give, I also recognize that these are artists carrying out their particular aesthetic vision. Scholar on learning and creativity R. Keith Sawyer writes, “Disciplined improvisation...always occurs within broad structures and frameworks...the most effective...interaction balances structure and script with flexibility and improvisation,” illuminating the reality that creative work that opens itself to a public as City Council Meeting does must provide some firm edges, else run the risk of unraveling entirely.

Indeed, the training described above shows a commitment to creating a constructive space that is not dominated or derailed by any one entitled or egotistical individual. The same social and political dynamics present in an actual city council meeting, that cause certain socially dominant voices to make themselves loud and marginalized voices to remain quiet, are present at a theater performance. For example, white cis-gendered men and women are usually are the first to raise their hands to play the parts of mayor and city council members, and are often the first to attempt to ad-lib their lines. Landsman and Catlett seek to minimize this hierarchy of comfort and power that so often emerges, by asking participants to limit themselves to the texts and roles provided.

More significantly, as a rumination on municipal government, City Council Meeting’s attention to structure lends itself to the project’s broader aesthetic and politic. City council meetings revolve, at their core, around order and regulation, even with regard to the issues that most intimately affect city residents’ lives. To contend, then, as artists and audience members, with artistic constraint—to come up against the edges of one’s liberties and agency as a participant in this creative project—is highly pertinent to the larger political ideology of City Council Meeting.
How exactly is the constraint that pervades political and bureaucratic dynamics reflected in this artistic rendering of a city council meeting? In speaking and writing about the project, both Landsman and Catlett return again and again to the theatrical moment that inspired, and was eventually folded into, *City Council Meeting*. In 2009, Landsman was dragged to a city council meeting in Portland, Oregon by a friend. Landsman was sitting in the audience, overcome by an intolerable boredom when, as Landsman describes it, “some theater magic happened.” A city resident named Pete Colt approached the podium and Landsman describes the scene as follows:

He said, “Now. The reason I want to talk to you today is this, and I’m sorry to say. . . .” He stood, opened up his briefcase and carefully emptied a plastic bag of drug paraphernalia, used condoms, and other trash onto the table in front of him. “I picked up these in the kids’ zone,” he continued, “the Catholic church, the Episcopal learning center.” He was jokey, courteous, forceful, and he’d broken the rules of the form...A council member told him they’d have to clear everyone from the room and disinfect because “what you’ve just placed there might just be considered hazardous materials.” “Thank you for agreeing with me,” Mr. Colt said, without missing a beat, “thank you for making my point better than I ever could have.” Security herded everyone out, while a bailiff sprayed the table down with Lysol. A few minutes later, everyone was allowed back in and the meeting continued as if nothing had happened.28 [Italics my own]

This scenario, as described above, was written into the final version of *City Council Meeting* and serves as the climactic moment of each performance. It is one of the few sections of the script that is performed by a professional actor, and results in the clearing out of the audience from the theater for intermission.

The centrality of this moment to the project reveals the primary tension to which *City Council Meeting* seeks to draw attention. Centralizing this scene allows participants to bear witness to a moment of political constraint, transgression, consequence, and transcendence. Participants witness Pete Colt coming up against the firm edges of the system, but they also
see him working with and through those constraints, manipulating them, in order to transcend the highly structured nature of that space and speak his raw political truth. In this moment, because audience members experience the consequences of this act of political/theatrical transgression (being forced to “evacuate” the room for intermission), the theater becomes the courtroom, thus providing a meta-commentary about the shared constraints and possibilities of both spaces.

The Pete Colt moment struck Landsman not only for its theatricality but because the act itself of coming up against a structure illuminated the ironies and faults of the system. Colt came to the meeting to communicate the injustice that some have access to safe clean spaces while children from poor families play in playgrounds littered with used needles and condoms. His attempt to bring the reality of the city into the governmental sphere resulted in a literal shut down of the city council meeting, thus revealing the limitations of that space. What are the breaking points of this system? Landsman seems to ask. What degree of authenticity can it withstand before collapsing?

The artists’ intention is to draw focus to the act of participation itself—to create a space in which audience members ask themselves what meaningful participation and democracy might really look like. The theater acts as a stand-in for other spaces of political and social discourse. Landsman explains, “The issues we use in our transcripts are often not “hot-button issues,” because we want people to think about the form instead, about structures of participation. We had to find a way to keep it clear that no one in the room has done this before, that they are making something together, even if just by their simple presence.”29 In other words, Landsman and Catlett attempt to focus City Council Meeting primarily on moments of tension between structure and individual participant, rather than on content. Using the Pete Colt moment as the exemplar of structural confrontation and transcendence, City Council Meeting asks, where in the system, as it now exists, are the places with potential for truth-telling?

The question that remains for me is whether or not the artists leave enough space in the performance for participants to meaningfully explore and encounter this tension. Pete Colt broke the rules in a controlled bureaucratic space, creating a dramatically interesting political moment. Did the audience in City Council meeting receive the opportunity to play with the rules they were given and come up against the walls of the imposed structure, as
Some would argue, the creators of *City Council Meeting* included, that the unique arrangement of variegated bodies in the room is enough to meaningfully challenge political realities. According to Landsman, the symbolic weight of certain bodies in certain spaces is enough to call attention to invisible but highly consequential aspects of our social and political lives. He believes that “when people read lines in someone else’s voice, it can close a gap,” recalling a performance in Brooklyn in which “this German woman got up, and her accent reading the line ‘I do not want to be classified as a bad black child from the East Side,’ made everyone listen in a different way” (Dirks, 2014). He identifies this as the central “point” of the play, explaining, “How do you take someone whose way of speaking or obvious demographic might be very different from yours and respectfully put it in the room? How do you give voice to someone else’s language? For me it’s like walking a mile in their shoes – verbally.” Landsman believes in the act of representing another’s words as an act of deep empathy and deep engagement with the mess of voices and procedures that make up our democracy.

Like Landsman, I understand how our bodies in space tell stories, but I also understand that those stories are often fictions and projections. Like many others, I cried what felt like historic tears when Obama was first elected, and I believe that what moved many of us was less about the words he spoke of change and hope, than about the symbolism of his brown body in that place of political power. It was about the centuries-awaited strangeness of seeing a Black man and his family in the most esteemed position of political representation. I understand that our bodies tell meaningful stories, but I also understand that the stories bodies tell often move us primarily because of the assumptions we make about those bodies.

As I once heard former Black Panther leader Elaine Brown say, “The president of the United States will always be the president of the United States,” and she said this to punctuate her point that Obama had not betrayed Black people in America, but rather that too much sociopolitical meaning had been projected upon his Blackness. She communicated that regardless of his unfulfilled promises, the immense disappointment Americans of color felt in Obama was the result of assumptions that had been made about what his Blackness meant to him. She conveyed that a president of the United States, no matter his color, is an
advocate, rather than a resistor, of the existing order; she conveyed that the president will likely never be an individual looking to dismantle white supremacy or to overthrow a capitalist system. Landsman is interested in novel juxtapositions of text, body, voice and experience—he is interested in seeing a black woman read the words of a white man, in hearing a child read the words of an adult. But to consider these juxtapositions substantive is to reductively see participants for what they represent rather than as individuals with idiosyncratic sets of experiences, ideals and philosophies.

I understand this reductionism as a kind of silencing, perhaps one comparable to the silencing that takes place in the political system City Council Meeting attempts to confront and criticize. While our bodies hold cultural and historical meaning in themselves, I would hope that a political project about “participatory democracy” would engage more of us than our skin and the sounds of our voices. Is my body enough to make your performance interesting? What about my words? What about my experiences?

I spoke to some audience members who experienced the highly regimented structure of City Council Meeting as a kind of betrayal. It is a betrayal that stems from being told, “Maybe you’ll be reading the words of someone real who said something important or trivial, somewhere in the US. Maybe you’ll speak your own mind. Maybe you’ll just watch and listen. We would be happy to see you,” as Landsman writes on the project’s website, but finding that to actually “speak your own mind” would be to fundamentally resist the structure of the performance. In this way, City Council Meeting replicates some of the same betrayals of access that formal government does—the betrayal of professing open, democratic engagement when engagement is in fact exclusive and narrowly defined.

Perhaps in replicating this political betrayal, City Council Meeting draws attention to and sheds light upon it—a kind of Brechtian defamiliarization. The difference between an actual city council meeting and City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy reveals itself here, when confronted with questions of success and collapse. Landsman writes, “One thing that could become a failure is if we didn’t really communicate or embody our own interest or curiosity about this material. If people go through it and are like, “huh.” Thus, because City Council Meeting is a creative, social and political experiment, failure is understood as the absence of tension, discomfort, or discovery. The realm of politics, on the contrary, revolves around the maintenance of order and normality.
In their creative work, Landsman and Catlett pursue moments of tension above all else. They understand boredom as a kind of tension, they understand the accentuation of difference as a kind of tension, and they understand frustration and restraint as kinds of tension. These same tensions exist in actual city council meetings, and to allow audience members to look in on the bureaucratic process from an artistic and aesthetic standpoint is to invite them to participate in the process not as city residents but as Boalian spect-actors and cultural critics. The local ending of the performance, then, serves as a critical moment of response to the tension accumulated in the meeting portion of the performance. Contrary to an actual city council meeting, the closing performance provides for a kind of cathartic acknowledgement of the restrictive and repressive nature of city government, without attempting to essentialize or resolve the tension. I will discuss the significance of the local ending at length in the final section of this paper, which deals with the role of imagination in creative political discourse.

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Working at Hillcrest, the restrictions imposed by the facility did not serve as the only constraints for our work together; we as facilitators, too, intentionally introduced elements of structure into our curriculum. Structure in the context of our curriculum manifested itself in the formal choreography we brought into the space each week as Stanford students. Like in City Council Meeting, it became clear to me that the structure we imposed both impeded and enabled the creative and social work we attempted to do.

On our second day at Hillcrest, Freddy divided the students into three groups and had them march to a single rhythm. He shouted out commands—forward, backward, 90 degrees to the left and forward, 90 degrees to the left and backward—and we did as we were told. He had aimed to introduce a simple rhythmic choreography for the purpose of warming the students up, but in its wake, I felt the energy of the entire room shift. The boys began to fidget with restlessness and share mutterings of distaste under their breath such as, “I feel like I’m at boot camp.” I felt that the room had instantly reverted back to a fearful space of submission and control, undoing whatever progress we had made towards creating an environment of trust. Quiet mutterings were suddenly the boys’ only defense against
imposed obedience. All in a moment, I glimpsed choreography’s power to restrict the sentiment of liberty in a creative space.

Foucault’s writing on the symbolism of marching articulates what felt so intuitively wrong about this exercise to many of us in the room. We felt the discomfort as Stanford students, as Hillcrest students, and even as facilitators, as Freddy communicated to me in retrospect. Foucault writes, “…it [marching] is rather a collective and obligatory rhythm, imposed from the outside; it is a ‘programme’... it controls its development and its stages from the outside.”

Not only is marching an act laden with cultural and historical associations of control, but it is also, as a rigidly delineated and executed choreography, an inherently repressive action. It unsettles the marcher but simultaneously traps her within that unsettled action, creates in her, to use Foucault’s word, a powerful docility. Foucault elaborates on why an act such as marching carries this power, writing, “The act is broken down into its elements…to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration’ their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power.”

Marching, in other words, forces the body to internalize external forces such as time, once abstract but now highly concrete and regimented.

The question, then, arises again around the balance between imposition of choreographed movement and invitation of truly free, individualized movement. Like in *City Council Meeting*, I came to understand that it is in the space between the taught movement and the way a Hillcrest student dances it, where the self comes through. Part of the duty I felt while working in Hillcrest was to harness and expand that space between structure and participant, and to encourage the young men to enter it with courage. One of the ways in which we attempted to maximize this creative liberty was through the curricular structure. Each week, a different group of Stanford students would prepare choreography to share with the Hillcrest students. We would spend 15 minutes teaching the choreography, before splitting up into smaller groups. In these small groups, Hillcrest students and Stanford students had the opportunity to collaboratively create customized renderings of the choreography to then perform for the larger group.

Customizing the choreography meant transforming the material in any way one saw fit—restructuring, stylizing, augmenting, or even discarding. Because the choreography we taught came from dance traditions such as swing, salsa, and jazz, it felt important to many of the Stanford students to encourage the Hillcrest students to teach and incorporate
movement from their own dance traditions and cultures. This often meant mingling the
taught choreography with elements of hip-hop and Bay Area street dance. The taught or
imposed choreography, then, provided the structure, and the space between that
choreography and those who danced it served as space for creative exploration.

On our last day teaching at Hillcrest, we bore witness to a moment that modeled
what a positive confrontation with structure can look like—perhaps comparable to a “Pete
Colt moment” in *City Council Meeting*. We arrived at Hillcrest having planned our final lesson
for the course, but were told by several guards that the Hillcrest students had in fact come
up with their own curriculum and wanted to surprise us by facilitating the final class of the
program. The lesson the Hillcrest students had prepared for us fell completely within the
bounds of Hillcrest protocol, but was also profoundly personally expressive. The young men
had appropriated the teaching structure we (the Stanford students) had been using for the
past 10 weeks—circle-up, warm-ups, teaching of choreography, break-out session into small
groups, personal stylization of the choreography, and performance—but had completely
 customized the content. They had built in movement styles that differed entirely from those
we had brought into the space as Stanford students, drawing choreography from their own
backgrounds, choreography that was expressive of who they were and where they had come
from. We were suddenly the institution and they were the artists, cultivating growth in
unlikely conditions.

While I have been discussing creative expression as being generated *despite* significant
constraint, it is critical to be clear about the ways in which constraint *enabled* creative
expression in the context of Hillcrest—made it possible. As with any kind of formal training
or the learning of new languages, literacy allows us to extend our range of expression and
communicative power. If our goal in Hillcrest was not merely to teach dance but rather to
allow Hillerest students to access the power of their own self-expression, knowledge, and
leadership, then it seems that the structure itself rather than the choreography served as the
primary implement of empowerment. Because we presented the students with a flexible and
customizable structure of creative expression, they were able to appropriate this structure for
the purpose of honoring and sharing their own expertise. In her book, *The Meaning of
Freedom*, Angela Davis writes of her experience taking her students from San Francisco State
to the San Francisco County jail,
They [the inmates] taught the students about life in jail...this reversal of assumed hierarchies of knowledge created a radical and exciting learning environment...most of the students...sought ways to continue their work on issues helping imprisoned people,\textsuperscript{35}

beginning to articulate the greater value of these collaborative and differently hierarchicalized spaces. In the third and final section, I will speak more to the transformations that took place on the part of the Stanford students as a result of this distortion of predictable hierarchies.

I would like to conclude by engaging with larger questions about freedom and confinement. In his \textit{Theatre of the Oppressed}, Augusto Boal poses the question, “Can freedom in handcuffs be truly free?”\textsuperscript{36} questioning the impact of constraint—be that constraint the regulations of a detention facility or the regimen of a dance choreography--on creative work. Like Boal, I understand that true freedom for these young men will not and cannot be brought about by working within the constraints of a repressive system. As any prison abolitionist will tell you, rehabilitative work on the inside does not undo the system of oppression that is the prison-industrial complex, Angela Davis writing, “... one of the really bizarre aspects of the prison system is the way it so easily assimilates “prison reforms” into processes that strengthen it and render it even more repressive...”\textsuperscript{37} I do believe, however, that creative and imaginative engagement with incarcerated people is closely linked to a personal sense of dignity, empowerment and self-knowledge—a meaningful counter to the immense dehumanization incarcerated people undergo. Thus, instead of questioning whether or not “true” freedom can be achieved, we must ask ourselves how we can work \textit{with} and \textit{from within} the inflexible confines of these institutions to open up spaces for healing, empowerment, and collective imagination.

In this section, I have discussed the ways in which constraint in creative settings provides participants permeable structures against which to push, allowing them to test the limits of their own voice, agency, and expression. These structures are more permeable than the constraints in actual governmental or carceral settings, and thus create venues for creative and political experimentation with resistance and restraint.
Part III: Extending Beyond: The Role of Imagination

“Violence is a lack of imagination.”

~Luis Rodriguez

In the last section, I discussed creative freedom and creative restraint, and some of the different ways in which they can interact to limit, structure or focus community engagement in creative work. In this section I look at imagination as the aspect of this work that is cultivated within and transcends beyond its structures and limitations. I will investigate the ways in which performance allows for collective acts of imagination that counter oppressive political realities—that allow individuals and their communities to resist and rewrite existing narratives.

The notion of imagination as a foundational political force rose to the surface of my research in my interviews, literature reviews and experiences as a participant observer. In her *The Meaning of Freedom*, Dr. Angela Davis writes,

> Whatever we are doing, wherever we are, it is imperative that we believe in the possibility of change. We cannot allow ourselves to be ensconced in the present, so the very first step is to actively imagine possible futures—futures beyond the prison and beyond capitalism. 38

In a conversation with Robert Avila, the San Franciscan writer and *City Council Meeting* collaborator, about the dialogue between art and politics, he too emphasized that for oppressed people, to imagine is to reject the inevitability of their oppression. He understands our political system as one that is geared towards disempowering its own people, towards making us believe that “there is no alternative, what you have here is the best possible system, the best possible arrangement, the best possible world.” He describes this kind of political system as “the politics of keeping people in their place and keeping a...very unjust system in place, the politics of anti-imagination, the politics of quashing imagination,” and because of this, art and creativity inherently become sites of political resistance. He told me, “And its art, real art I mean good art, insightful art, that is much more politically powerful,
relevant, persuasive if it if it overturns notions like that and reveals them for the bullshit they are, the fallacy of that thinking.”

In what follows, I hope to explore the ways in which both City Council Meeting and “Dance in Prison” not only allowed for momentary instances of imagination, but sought to construct infrastructures of imagination that participants could carry beyond the walls of the theater or detention center gymnasium. Augusto Boal, in his Games for Actors and non-Actors, writes, “When does a session of The Theatre of the Oppressed end? Never...its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists,”39 speaking to the temporal and spatial transcendence of creative work. He argues that it is the transformed sense of self—as artist, as creator, as agent in perceiving, depicting and responding to the world—that travels beyond the walls of the creative space. When a project is successful, it is this understanding of self as agent that participants carry with them into their relationships and communities.

A primary means by which community-based performance extends beyond its own limits is its blending of fiction into reality. Boal writes, “The Theatre of the Oppressed is located precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality – and this border must be crossed. If the show starts in fiction, its objective is to become integrated into reality, into life.”40 He perceives theater as existing in a liminal space between the fictional and the real—an invented space within which participants can be courageous enough to act out alternate visions of what their communities and society might look like. It is also a space in which the imaginative act itself is taught. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see a dance piece where the dancers danced in the first act and in the second showed the audience how to dance?... a musical where in the first act the actors sang and in the second we all sang together?” asks Boal, articulating some of the intentions of both City Council Meeting and “Dance in Prison”. Boal conceives of this use of theatre as “rehearsal for reality.”

I first learned of the concept of “rehearsal for reality” at a Theater of the Oppressed NYC workshop I attended in Queens, New York. The Theatre of the Oppressed NYC is a socially-engaged theatre troupe founded by Augusto Boal that holds community-engaged workshops and performances. As they see it, practicing the performing arts with individuals from marginalized communities allows those individuals to experiment with new, creative modes of engaging with the seemingly unsurmountable, oppressive forces in their lives.
One of the activities we played with at that workshop articulated for me what “rehearsal for reality” might mean in practice. In this exercise, participants began by collectively brainstorming basic rights that all people should be entitled to—health care, shelter, transportation, and so forth—and were then instructed to individually make a sound and a shape that embodied each of those rights. We were then told to move around the room, holding these shapes and making these sounds, and to interact with others. The facilitators singled out two participants to pit against one another: myself, crouching with my arms wrapped around my head saying, “No no no no no,” and an older man in an athletic stance with his arms out before him like a wrestler, yelling aggressively. The facilitators invited the watching participants to “dub” our interaction with dialogue. The man’s character was dubbed with the line, “I’m going to protect this little girl,” and my character was dubbed with the line, “Don’t tell me what I need.” The man and I were then instructed to improvise a scene based upon those two lines, and the two of us organically developed a fictional relationship between an aggressively patriarchal father and his teenage daughter. After several minutes of this scene, the facilitators said, “Anyone else in the room who has personal experience with a relationship that resembles this one, or who feels they have a helpful perspective to offer, switch places with Natasha at any point.” Six people immediately lined up behind me and took turns assuming my place and engaging with this man, our now collective father.

It dawned on me, then, that this was an exercise of collaborative problem solving. I was struck by the ways in which all participants drew from their own experiences as children, as parents, as differently-gendered individuals, in order to explore, in solidarity, potential strategies for tackling challenging gendered, patriarchal dynamics. After leaving the workshop and dispersing into our individual lives, each of us had this rehearsal experience to draw from and apply to relevant circumstances in our own lives. This “rehearsal for reality” exercise, then, fosters the construction of collective ethics and relational strategies around fictional but highly relevant narratives.

How does this same blending of fiction into reality play out in City Council Meeting? Most immediately, I think of the “local ending,” the second half of the performance, which follows the procedural, “meeting portion” of City Council Meeting. After the Pete Colt moment, the audience clears the room for intermission. When they return, the theatrical landscape has shifted. The council tables and administrative decor, originally placed in front
of the stage, have been removed, and the entire depth of the stage has been revealed, now
occupied by five of the core collaborators, or “staffers”. They are dispersed across the
entirety of the stage, each flooded by spotlight amidst an otherwise dark theater. They sit in
folding chairs and sit across from one empty chair, each. Each of them holds an iPod and set
of over-ear headphones. The audience, guided by ushers, streams onto the stage itself and
wanders among the sitting sculptures.

They slowly begin to notice the different dimensions of this theatrical moment. They notice that the
man on an elevated platform at the center of the stage is, unlike the others, not sitting across from an empty
chair but instead at a large wooden desk, scribbling on note cards and tossing them to the floor around him.

Some audience members (though no longer a part of any easily discernable audience—they are now more like
pedestrians) pick up the cards as they fall to the ground and see that each of them reads, “Remember___, but
forget___,” the blanks filled in differently on each card. “Remember me but forget my fate.” “Remember the
Black Panthers but forget Black people.” “Remember Freddy Mercury but forget he died of AIDS.”

“Remember you’re beautiful but forget you got a boob job.” “Remember Twin Peaks but forget the drive-in.”
“Remember to buy organic but forget to wash behind your ears.” “Remember you’re sad but forget why.”

Some notice that the cards are filled out in many different handwritings, and notice stacks of blank
“Remember___but forget____” cards and black pens dispersed throughout the stage. They begin to fill out
these cards themselves and add them to the pile forming around the man at the desk. A woman’s voice begins
to read these cards out loud. “Remember me, but forget my fate. Remember the song but forget the singer.
Remember the Fillmore but forget urban redevelopment. Remember me but forget my fate.” Some turn to her
and listen; others continue to meander around the room and write. Some people will hear their words read
aloud.

Meanwhile, the empty chairs across from each staffer begin to fill with audience participants. Four at
a time, participants take seats, each face-to-face with a staffer who hands them a set of headphones. The
staffer presses “Play” and so begins a pre-recorded monologue in his or her voice about his or her life
experiences and relationship to San Francisco (co-written by each individual staffer and Aaron Landsman).

Audience participants sit and listen to these monologues, sharing or avoiding eye contact with the staffer across
from them, who does not speak but whose voice they hear playing in their ears.

After about twenty participants have had the opportunity to listen to these monologues, the
performance shifts again. These same monologues begin to play out of the overhead speakers, getting louder
and louder and overlapping over one another until one unfamiliar monologue emerges out of the cacophony:
that of Dwayne Calizo, the man sitting at the desk at the center of the stage. We hear him speak about his
upbringing in Okinawa, his career as a vocalist, performance-maker and drag coach, his diagnosis with HIV/AIDS, his transition into living permanently in a single-room occupancy hotel, and his sense of alienation from the city that has been his home for so long.

When the monologue has finished, the stage goes dark and a new soundscap[e] fills the space; we hear birds, children playing at a playground, a violent clanging sound. Spotlights begin to shine, one at a time, on performers intermingled with audience members around the room, and after ten or so people have been illuminated, they begin to reach for the ground. As their bodies finally collapse onto the stage floor, the stage goes dark a second time. Now, from the very back of the empty seats where the audience once sat, burns a light like a giant sun, and in front of it is Dwayne Calizo singing the haunting lines of Dido’s Lament: “Remember me, but forget my fate.” When his song is over, the room goes dark for the last time, and the performance is over.

Though the local ending is meant to serve as the theatrical, aestheticised portion of the performance, in my experience, this is the moment in which the show becomes real. Suddenly, we are hearing the stories and experiences of people sitting before us— in the same room, in the same city; we can look them in the eye; we can hear them breathe. Instead of trying to breathe life into already delivered testimonials spoken by strangers in strange cities, we are confronted by real life, before us. Though the meeting portion of the performance is directly borrowed from actual moments of political exchange, it strikes one as removed from reality. It imitates a largely procedural and mechanical process, a process that indeed talks about some of the critical issues that affect our lives, but one that codifies and depersonalizes interactions regarding these issues.

In this way, City Council Meeting reveals what is unreal about city government. In Landsman’s words, “The meeting is restrained, it’s not a big spectacle, then the ending is surprising, beautiful and on its own terms. It might catch people off-guard.” In the first half, “democracy” is acted out in tightly controlled and delineated ways: the allowance of differing opinions on political issues, the equal allotment of time to each speaker, the “aye”-ing and “nay”-ing of council members. In the second half, the ending, unheard stories are given time, voice and value. If truly incisive art teaches its audiences to look with fresh eyes at and problematize normalized aspects of our society, then perhaps it is in the juxtaposition of the meeting and the ending, wherein audiences navigate what is authentic and what is constructed, that City Council Meeting finds its success.
The meeting portion of the performance allows audience members to watch and perhaps cursorily engage with the discussion of local issues in as objective, measured and diplomatic a manner as possible. The ending presents a different kind of forum. Landsman writes,

Mallory came up with a basic template for the ending: as a counterpoint to the procedural nature of the meeting, we want to make twenty minutes of material that is lush and beautiful, and in which people on opposite sides of a local issue perform together. We want adversaries to cooperate in the creation of something, explaining how the two parts of City Council Meeting play off one another to highlight two very different modes of engaging difference. The ending swathes audience members in a imagined, intimate kind of engagement with a city’s most contentious issues. Audience members wander across a stage, sit three feet from another human who is offering anyone who takes the time to sit his or her story—his or her vulnerability—and listen. Perhaps this is an envisioning, and a rehearsal of, a new way of engaging with fellow city residents. Perhaps it is a rehearsal for what meaningful empathy towards neighbors might feel like.

I am here reminded of a #BlackLivesMatter direct action tactic that began in Oakland, California and has since spread across the country: Black Brunch. Black Brunch is certainly a performance of a kind—a tightly orchestrated and choreographed movement of particular bodies through particular spaces. It involves large groups of Black-identified people entering popular brunch spots in gentrified or gentrifying parts of their cities, standing above or sitting at brunchers’ tables while they eat, and reading aloud the names of Black people murdered by police. Like the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960’s, Black Brunch holds its audiences accountable to the protesters before them. It means something immensely different to turn a blind eye to a highway shutdown, which holds one in traffic miles out of sight of chanting protesters, than to disregard a Black Brunch protester sitting at one’s table, reading the names of the murdered. What does it mean to ignore an anonymous mass of protesters from within the isolated nest of one’s car? What does it mean to ignore a person who may as well be sharing your meal, asking you to hear that she is grieving, tired, rageful?
Neglect in the second case requires the “willed blindness” that Jeff Chang speaks of, for to not see in this case is a conscious act, a resolute attachment to what is known, what is comfortable. It is in this same vein of requesting empathy from an audience through creating intimate but vulnerable, imaginary but real, spaces that City Council Meeting (which Landsman calls “a performance of empathy, democracy and power”*) seeks to make its impact.

At Hillcrest, too, the act of collective creativity creates a space that is simultaneously real and fictional. The created space is real because there are real bodies in a room together, carrying out real movements and practices, but imaginary in the sense that these modes of interactions and community-making are being constructed in the moment, towards a vision of collective expression and power that do not usually exist. Freddy Gutierrez told me, reflecting on his work with incarcerated folks,

The sort of main goal is challenging dominant narratives and dominant myths about who is incarcerated, and some of the myths that we do work towards debunking when we develop personal narrative and social commentary are that incarcerated people are incompetent, incarcerated people are inherently violent, and incarcerated people have an immense capacity for mendacity—that they're outright liars.

Working with youth in these institutions, it quickly becomes clear that these “dominant narratives” are largely internalized by incarcerated people themselves. Many of our Hillcrest students would speak about juvenile hall as if serving time there were inevitable, a birth right of sorts. When asked what they were interested in doing when they got out or grew up, many voiced that they expected to end up in state prisons. Freddy explained, “I've often talked to people who are locked up and they talk about violence as the only thing they know how to do with their bodies.” In this context, I understand the encouragement of self-expression and imagination as inherently counter to the repressive space of the detention
facility. It takes a valuation of the self as somebody worth expressing, and a valuation of one’s ideas and insights as visions worth manifesting, in order to engage oneself in any creative process.

How does a facilitator begin to encourage imagination and creativity in a group of individuals who have been taught to believe that they are built for violence and discipline? In conversations with Freddy and in our work together at Hillcrest, he emphasized the importance of “re-physicalizing the body to go from a tool for violence to a tool for creative corporal expression.” In looking back upon the curriculum planning materials for the first course at Stanford on which I collaborated, I recall that many of the group exercises we considered and/or implemented revolved around the asking of questions about participants’ beliefs and dreams, and finding ways to then help them translate those into movement. Some exercises suggested by two of the primary core collaborators, a teaching artist and a creative writing instructor at Stanford, included:

- “Come up with our own collaborative class definition of a hero. I have the Oxford definition of a hero, which sucks (all about being male and divine and fearless); so we could say some reasons why this definition needs to be changed/cut/expanded…”
- “We could generate two collaborative poems, one called Powers We Want; the other, Powers We Have.“
- “If I could have one superpower it would be []; but one power/skill/talent I already have is [].”
- “If I wrote a book, it would be about . . . (I like to do this at some point in some classes just to establish that we all, by this point in our lives, already have enough to share/explore to fill a book but we could do this mid-way through instead of at the start).”
- “Tell the person next to you your name and one thing people might not know about you just by looking at you.”

Each of these exercises call for, albeit implicitly, the participants’ taking seriously of their own abilities, identities and dreams.

These exercises promoted an honoring of individual ideation, while seeing it as an integral and essential part of the whole. One collaborator involved in my first experience at Hillcrest, a creative writing instructor at Stanford, suggested, “And since I like thinking
about the self as part of various collectives, we might also do a prompt that plays around with the We voice, as in We want/ we know/ we are taught/ we believe/ we hope.” This exercise culminated in a final performance that included a group poem called “I Want,” which mosaicked together lines each participant had written regarding his or her desires and dreams. The poem was performed in tandem by one Stanford student and one Hillcrest student, who spoke on behalf of the group as a whole.

This idea of collective expression of individual truths and wants, then, was central to our work with the young men at Hillcrest; equally as central was the physical embodiment of these truths and wants. We would often follow the above exercises with a movement activity called “build-a-phrase,” in which participants were asked to translate their stories or thoughts into a series of movements. They were then asked to share these movement sequences with a small group of their peers and Stanford students, and then create one collective sequence that incorporated elements of each individual participant’s phrase. Build-a-phrase became such an essential staple of our work in Hillcrest because it brought each participant’s private ruminations into his physical body, and then brought the movements of our individual bodies into one larger, collective body.

I believe that in these processes of collectivizing and embodying the visions, dreams, and wants we so often keep to ourselves, they come to feel more real. While a lone dream within the confines of a cell can feel like mere fantasy, to deliver these dreams as a collective of both Hillcrest and Stanford students felt more like speaking something into existence. Many of us shared the same dreams. Many of us shared that we wanted love in our lives, wanted our families to be safe and healthy, wanted to break patterns of violence. While at the beginning of the course, Hillcrest students shied away from questions about themselves and their hopes for their lives, always diverting those questions and asking us about life at Stanford, the self-possession in their voices grew collectively louder as the weeks progressed. This self-possession culminated in the course they taught on our final day in the facility.

This acquired sense of self through the act of embodied, collective imagination is the substance that transcends the structures imposed on the lives of these young men. A group of incarcerated, teenage, mostly Latino and Black boys came, over the course of eight weeks, to have the self-assurance to position themselves in a teaching position over fifteen older, predominantly white Stanford students. This self-assuredness, I came to understand, subtly permeated the rigid structure of the facility itself. Perhaps the most moving aspect of being
taught that day by the Hillcrest students was seeing how supported they were by Hillcrest staff. At one point during their lesson, the young men were struggling to explain the instructions for a warm-up activity they had planned. A staff member came over to me and whispered, “They tend to have trouble explaining this one—feel free to step in and help them out.” In that moment, it became apparent to me that this particular staff member had been involved in the process all along, had supported them in conceptualizing the activity, had been there while they practiced in their free time. The Hillcrest students’ teaching plan, in other words, had been created with the support and collaboration of the institution.

This moment of give in the system, this institutional shift, this making room for the Hillcrest students’ leadership and creativity, to me demonstrated the transcendent nature of this work. Because, as Freddy says, “the core of the work that [we] facilitate and lead as teaching artists is to debunk and challenge those three myths that we have found are rooted in racial stereotypes,” the fact that the Hillcrest staff recognized the capacity of their inmates speaks to the potential of this work to transform not just incarcerated participants, but everybody in the space.

This transformation, of course, included us Stanford students. In the context of Hillcrest, we were the privileged outsiders, like the Silicon Valley commuters who drove by as I was arrested that evening in January, like the affluent liberal San Franciscans in the audience at City Council Meeting. We had the honor of entering into the vulnerable space that was Hillcrest Juvenile Hall, and we were also transformed. Angela Davis writes,

Students, teachers, community activists, artists, and cultural workers can gain entrance into jails and prison. By teaching classes, and especially by querying the usual hierarchies, the inside-outside traffic can be transformative. Since the people who are inside are not allowed out, the people who are outside need to knock on the gates of the nation’s prisons and jails," 44

speaking directly to what I perceive as the role of privileged visitors. We must listen deeply, allow our understandings to be radically transformed, and carry our new understandings beyond the thresholds of contained creative spaces. Freddy told me, “I think that part of that responsibility and privilege of my access to these spaces is to share these stories from
the inside.” Sharing out what one has witnessed in honest and responsible ways is, I believe, is what bridges transformative work in isolated spaces and the transformation of larger systems. These realms are often separated but can be stitched together by the stream of cultural workers, threshold crossers, moving in and out on unfrequented trails.
To Conclude

“The saddest part of performing...was that it didn’t mean anything once you were offstage.”
~Nina Simone, I Put A Spell On You

I began many pages ago by reflecting upon a political protest—its worth and its casualties. As I tie up the loose strings of this project, I, along with the 66 others with whom I protested on the San Mateo Bridge, consider pleading guilty to a violation of Penal Code section 647c—the willful and malicious obstruction of the free movement of any person in a public space. This is a painful consideration for many of us. For though contesting the charge and taking the case to trial means that another audience, this time a jury, might for a moment in time engage with the reality of racial injustice in this country and perhaps, even within the constraints of the courtroom, be moved, it also means that those of us who protested might pay a greater price still. Did our performance begin and die on the stage of the San Mateo Bridge? By pleading guilty, do we succumb to the state forces that wish to disappear our resistance, ensure that, as Nina Simone wrote, “...it didn’t mean anything once you were offstage”? How can our movements transcend momentary actions if the state forces us to repent and recompense once the performance is over?

Miss Simone calls this transience “the saddest part of performing,” and I think that it is this transience that community-engaged performance seeks to defy. The resident who emptied his bag of toxic waste at the Portland city council meeting, Pete Colt, as well as my fellow protesters on the San Mateo Bridge resisted the constraints of and consequently shut down major municipal operations. But where do we go to further explore the possibilities presented by these real-world disruptions? English artist and socialist William Morris wrote, “You can’t have art without resistance in the materials,” and I believe that these moments of resistance necessitate the creation of imaginative spaces.

In each of the projects in which I participated, I came to understand performance as a space for us to collectively consider acts of resistance, large or small, against the institutions that regulate our lives, institutions that thrive on the silence of dissenting voices. City Council Meeting drew its audience’s attention to the Pete Colt moment, defamiliarizing an instance in which a tightly orchestrated system broke down, asking, what does this tell us about the restrictions and possibilities of democratic participation? The Hillcrest students
used the creative space of our class to experiment with and invert existing hierarchies of authority, recognizing that the creative pathways the Stanford students laid out might serve as gateways into the flexible belly of the institution.

These experimentations are of a substance that transcends the walls of courtrooms and detention halls. Weeks after City Council Meeting: Performed Participatory Democracy had closed in San Francisco, I spoke to an audience member who told me, reflecting on what he had gleaned from participating in the performance, “...obviously the system is flawed or whatever but we can actually go and be heard. And how many of us actually use that power...ultimately there's something still experimental in the process that we're not engaging.” This art, then, reveals that there is greater movement, elasticity, or fragility in a seemingly rigid and indestructible system than had been previously thought, and engages marginalized people in the act of revealing those spaces. For this reason, I believe that it is this art that is essential to our collective liberation.

Philosopher Herbert Marcuse writes that art can invoke “…an image to the end of power, the appearance of freedom. But this is only an appearance; clearly, the fulfillment of this promise is not within the domain of art,” but I ask, where else do we so courageously re-imagine hierarchies of power, re-envision ways to dignify the experiences of our neighbors? As Landsman writes, “This is the city we make together every night.” In cooperative performance, we weave new social fabrics together. We enter into intimate and specific agreements of trust with our fellow participants, embodying not-yet-existent urbanities together. And by embodying them—both for that moment and beyond—we make them real.
Appendix

Image of the Stanford 68 shutting down the San Mateo Bridge on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2015. 47

Video still from Kron 4 coverage of the San Mateo Bridge protest. 48
Works Cited


7 Ibid.

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