**Chapter 11**

When Prison Blossoms into Art: Dance in Prison as an Embodied Critical, Creative and Performative Criminology

*Sylvie Frigon*

*YouTube*, July 2007: Clip of 1,500 inmates at the CEBU Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center in the Philippines dancing on the trademark zombie routine of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* in an immense prison courtyard. Since its creation in 2007, this clip was downloaded more than 25 million times on the net. See the clip at: [www.koreus.com/video/thriller-prison.html](http://www.koreus.com/video/thriller-prison.html).

**Introduction**

How does prison permeate culture and how does culture penetrate prison? How can artistic propositions be transformed into criminological propositions? How does art intersect with prison? Can art transform prisoners’ experiences of incarceration? How can art (and dance more specifically) impact on teaching criminology? What is the relevance of art and dance, in particular, in thinking the discipline of criminology? How can one envisage a ‘performative criminology’?

Through my work on dance in prison (Frigon 2009, 2012), fictional writings about incarceration (Frigon 2006, 2010), theatre in prison and through our teaching and conducting writing workshops in and outside prison (Matteau 2012a, 2012b), I begin to create a ‘grammar’ or trace some of the contours of critical creative criminology; hence, providing some actual artistic performative piece in the more general project of what some term *cultural criminology*.

In this chapter, I will tease out some of the themes emerging from one of these creative criminological performative pieces. I will decipher the meanings of dance in prison by attempting to explore how *choreographic* propositions translate into *criminological* propositions with my work with a Paris-based choreographer, Claire Jenny (Frigon & Jenny 2009). The aim of this chapter is not to theoretically discuss cultural criminology, critical creative criminology or the distinctions between the two; in fact, in this exposé of a specific criminological art piece, I hope to modestly open spaces of dialogue within academe by conceptualizing *criminology* in a different voice. I also aim at presenting ‘prison’ in the wider public debate by addressing *culture in prison and prison in culture*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**When a Criminologist Meets a Choreographer**

Dance in prison *is* subversive. This carnal art invites prisoners with constrained bodies to reconnect, blossom and liberate themselves from the physical and mental ‘shackles’ of confinement. Dance may also constitute a singular analytical tool of prison itself – highlighting its corporal, spatial, temporal and relational dimensions. Hence, it can offer a unique entry point for analysing carceral space and questioning the discipline of criminology (Frigon 2008; Frigon & Jenny 2009, 2010; Jenny & Frigon 2012).

I met Claire Jenny, contemporary dancer, choreographer and director of the Parisian dance company *Point Virgule* in 2004 when she contacted me because of an article I wrote on self-injury, the body and imprisoned women (Frigon 2001). Claire came to Ottawa and our shared vision on empowerment and politics quickly emerged. Her professional Paris-based dance company, *Point Virgule*, created with Paule Groleau in 1989, has offered dance workshops in prisons for a decade.[[2]](#footnote-2) Through 50-75 hours of dance workshops, the team of dancers offers prisoners a unique opportunity to reconnect with themselves. Building on her dance experience at Fresnes prison in France in 2000, Claire Jenny, accompanied by her group of French artists, led a project in the provincial prison for women in Montréal, Maison Tanguay, in 2004. On October 18, 2004, dancers and prisoners performed for other prisoners and outside guests, including us. This was a fascinating moment that echoed my work around the criminology of the body (Frigon 2012). Another performance led by Point Virgule and Les Productions C took place at Joliette federal penitentiary for women in Québec in 2006, featuring prisoners and dance students from the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Our 10-year collaboration led to two main projects described in this chapter. The first is the dance workshops in prison with prisoners and the second, with students. The first project examined dance within prison as a form of catharsis, a method of learning, a site for critical reflection and an outlet for artistic expression. To understand how dance affected the participants, I conducted interviews with dancers, artists, prisoners and ex-prisoners on their experiences. The study included seventeen (n=17) interviews with choreographers, dancers, actors, video and sound artists, professionals, prisoners and ex-prisoners. The interviews touched on their experiences of dance within prison and how this affected their identities and prison experiences. This led to the publication of our book (see Frigon & Jenny 2009). Two groups of University of Ottawa students also engaged in dance workshops in 2007 and 2012. I will explore the second experience, run in 2012, which has been posted as a clip on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/FYfQ65sHf1g>.

#### Contemporary Dance and *Critical Creative Criminology*

A modernist approach to dance emphasizing freedom, the individual and progress was born in the 20th century, but as early as the end of the 19th century, choreographers and dancers were exploring new ways of thinking about movement and the body. Unlike how classical ballet shapes the body in a perpetual quest for verticality and the maximum elevation, contemporary dance plays with the multiple phenomena of gravity. Representations of imbalance, gravity and suspension are common elements of body language in modern and contemporary dance. The ground is considered a ‘partner’ who draws, or instead, repels. Finally, a major characteristic of contemporary dance is the use of ‘ordinary’ bodies. According to Marion Rousset (2006), this is an eminently political approach. Like him, many choreographers choose to use different artists of all shapes and forms: fat, thin, short, tall, young, old, dancers with heterogeneous bodies, or simply amateurs, with diverse backgrounds and experiences. In 2002, for example, he revisited *Kontakthof*, a play by the German choreographer Pina Bausch (1940-2009). *Kontakthof* was created in 1978 with amateur dancers aged 58-77 years. Closer to me, Gina Gibney Dance has held dance workshops for abused women living in ‘La Dauphinelle’ shelter in Montréal, Québec (Canada) (Gina Gibney Dance 2010), to help the women develop resilience and overcome trauma. The Point Virgule dance company in Paris with whom I work has produced several productions *on* and *in* prisons, including *Resilience* produced in Fresnes, France and also performed in Montréal, Québec; *Cheminement* (Solo) produced in Paris, France and also performed in Ottawa, Ontario; *Prolongement* (produced at Maison Tanguay, Montréal); and *Dé-Tension* (at Joliette Institution in Joliette, Québec).

Dance as a carnal art provides the researcher with new perspectives, transcends set categories and questions existing knowledge and practice. Within the prison, dance provides a stark contrast to the physical environment and institutional practices. How does the prison shape the dancers and the dance? How does dance reconfigure penality? How can dance be used pedagogically in criminology to address prison, theoretically?

This project transgresses orthodox criminology and is inspired by *cultural criminology[[3]](#footnote-3)* which ‘builds upon the tradition of transgressing social construction of order, directing attention to understanding the intersection of culture and criminalization’ (Landry 2013:5). Kenneth Burke’s heuristic approach known as ‘dramatism’, which attends to the range of explanations that justify social order in collective communication, also seems to be an interesting lens through which I could give meaning to our collective creative projects. According to Deborah Landry, dramatism is a theoretical framework ‘that sensitizes social critics to the use of cultural productions in order to trouble social order claims’ (Landry 2013:4). To further explore these questions, I now examine how contemporary dance can be linked to an (embodied) creative criminology project – *embodied,* in the sense that the *body* plays a crucial, central role in both dance and prison.

#### The (Embodied) Criminology Project

Corporal order is important in prison and in dance and is, in fact, reproduced and produced in any social order. This corporal order mediates a cultural and symbolic system of any given society at a specific historical moment and in a specific political context (Frigon 2012; Frigon & Kérisit 2000; Préjean 1994; Frigon 2012). At the dawn of the 21st century, the *body*, both men’s and women’s, has increasingly become a central part of rethinking theory and practice in many disciplines including sociology, psychology, medicine, anthropology, geography, history, law, psychiatry and criminology.

In this chapter, I describe how the confined body can achieve some spaces of ‘freedom’ through performance and reclaiming, albeit temporarily, the space of confinement. To do this, I use the pivotal concept *body*as a parameter in exploring gendered bodily practices through dance because the institution’s power manifests directly and indirectly through its hold on/of the body and is reinforced by practices of subjection and the *political technology of the body* (Foucault 1977). Dance, this carnal art, disrupts and transcends this.

In this chapter, I see the participants’ physical bodies (prisoners’, artists and students’) as sites where their individual, social, theoretical and discursive understandings of confinement, imprisonment and the prison are explored and negotiated.

**Edgework: Notes from the Field[[4]](#footnote-4)**

This first section chronicles different aspects of the encounter between artists and prisoners and I will let them speak at length in order to get their sense of the first contacts, the impact these contacts on the dancers personally and professionally, their experiences of the body, space, sound and time in this confined space, performance and the transformative potential of dance in such a troubling setting, for both dancers and prisoners.

At first, the artists were excited to meet the prisoners, but as Paule Groleau recalls, serious questions unfolded:

Am I able to exist in this singular context? How will I be moved emotionally? When I found myself there for the first visit, we had a tour of the cells immediately, I was not expecting it, I told myself: ‘I'll never be able to’. How will I control my emotions? (Paule Groleau, dancer; my translation).

The artists also speak about the tension and fatigue experienced after the first day spent in prison. These experiences are not merely emotional or sensory; rather, they affect one’s entire body. Anita, a sound artist, and Jean-Pierre, an actor, testify to the physical and moral impact of the first experience in Fresnes in France:

I did nothing that day, I did nothing, but I have never been as tired in my life as after that day. It left a huge impression on me. The weight, like lead, like a ... constant strain ... And I don’t know, something palpable, very heavy, [sigh] terrible, when in fact nothing was happening ... It was an uneventful day, I imagine, for the women, for Claire and her team. It marked me, physically I was broken (Anita Praz, sound artist; my translation).

Jean-Pierre Poisson, an actor, recounts:

Really, the first day, it appeared to be surprisingly easy. I remember when I left, I said to Claire: ‘It went well and everything’ and I went home. I slept for two hours. Really, I was exhausted. I wasn’t aware at the time ... the energy that it took, was completely unknown to me (my translation).

In fact, the new experience of prison imprints the artists’ bodies with stress and exhaustion. In their connections with the prisoners, one sees the cumulative effects of the prison environment. While the experience physically exhausted the artists, its prolonged effects on the prisoners were also apparent. Given the unsettling nature of the location and the women’s varied and tenuous relationships to their bodies, the artists’ first connections with the prisoners were drawn from the context in which they live and the movements of their bodies:

The body is what translates the problems, tensions ... We see them immediately in the body ... It’s written on the body, on the face, the expression, tension, on the back, walking, the gaze ... So if the body becomes more harmonious, we can say that we are getting harmony inside as well ... That’s what’s better after dance, it’s that things happen with the body, with the look, with sensations ... and it is more than words. And in fact, it happens. There’s something happening (Fanny Tirel, dancer; my translation).

In the early sessions, the women’s bodies reveal their suffering through movement. According to Paule Groleau, they bear the stigmata and damage of their life journeys and of imprisonment, impeding the physical and vital needs that are essential to their current well-being and their futures:

Sick bodies moving. They look hollow because their sternums are a little loose, their backs bent, they are looking down, their knees ... Their entire bodies, their motor skills are constrained as they are forced to follow the same paths, the same schedules and then there is no projection, so obviously it has an impact on body posture (Paule Groleau, dancer; my translation)

I remember it was very difficult, they were very sick in their bodies. They were very rigid; for others, mutilated. There were some who had struggled with body image, that is to say they had gained weight or were not well in their bodies. Walking while looking straight ahead, it was impossible. They would look at the floor or they would break the gaze. No balance. To touch themselves, very difficult too. To be touched. Dancing barefoot. Yes, it was very strange (Juliette Vezat, dancer; my translation).

When studying dance, as I have discovered that we are attending also to the exploration of bodies through performance and space in a very special setting.

#### *Performance and Space*

What is ‘performance’? Performance involves putting culture in motion, privileging action and experiential thought, knowledge and understanding. Performances – from everyday acts and interactions, to theatrics, to critical explorations – open spaces for critical thought, challenging categories and structures by connecting actions and events (Bell 2006). Sociologist Norman K. Denzin (2003) notes that performance texts are multifaceted: they are cultural processes; a form of ethnographic praxis. Performances utilize varied media, including narratives, spoken words, physical movements, written texts, stories and dramatic productions or plays. Performance as a method of inquiry is also linked to autoethnography, where autobiography and ethnography converge. Autoethnographies embrace situated researchers, dismantling their privileged positions above subjects by combining the roles; the researcher becomes the researched (Spry 2001). It eschews ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’, instead synthesizing postmodernism, autobiography and ethnography to open new ways of understanding the social world. In practice, autoethnographies include narratives, performances, and reflexive theorizing investigating identity, culture and communication.

In the domain of dance, more specifically, Maarit Ylonen (2003) merges performativity (creation through doing) and autoethnography, examining meanings and narratives in dance. She is both observer and participant, watching the dance ritual from a distance, then dancing herself and constructing meaning with the dancers. Similarly, Sondra Fraleigh (2000) studies dance through phenomenology and autoethnography, examining both the dance and her engagement with it. Both authors build on Deidre Sklar’s (1991, 2000) work on dance ethnography, which uses a kinesthetic language to describe the dance process.

The context of imprisonment is a revelation for dancers. The prison permeates them; their postures and artistic works explore their feelings and emotions. In this context, the dancers begin to question the distance between their experiences and the realities of everyday life in and outside of prison, relationships with others, time, space, sound and sensuality. In prison, particularly in detention centres (remand), the time passes strangely. There is limited space to stand, to breathe, even a little. Between the obsessive waiting for an unknown tomorrow and the unchanging pace of the daily routines, instability and insecurity set in:

What also struck me is the relationship with time. In prison, I had no idea that everything is so rigid, that one could only work from this time to that time. Then the women would have to leave. Then they would come back. So, the slightest movement ... The rhythms are very overwhelming (Pierre Cottreau, video artist; my translation).

This singular relationship to time, uncertainty and the inability to anchor oneself somewhere, even in the most mundane acts, contribute to the heavy tension felt in prisons.

**INSERT FIGURE 11.1 HERE**

**Figure 11.1: Photo: © Patrick Berger**

While the environment is undoubtedly destabilizing and disorienting, dance can reinvest the sensations of balance and being anchored. One of the fundamentals of modern dance lies in the notions of body weight and transferring support. In prison, it is hard to let go of weight. Given the restrictive nature of the space, the body is often unable to rest, to settle; any movement from one foot to the other (any step), while balancing on one leg, can be difficult. For many women, this difficulty was present before incarceration: their lifestyles, and often their experiences of marginalisation and exclusion, left their bodies in a poor physical state. Inversely and maybe paradoxically, for some women, imprisonment can be a time for reconstruction; a warm place to stay, regular meals, medical care and safety all make prison a relatively attractive option compared to street life (Robert et al. 2007). For example, the search for a sense of balance and calm is experienced through supporting one’s body with the ground. In the various movements developed with the help of Nathalie Schulmann, a contemporary dancer and professor, there is always a search to devise exercises to reconnect with the joy of feeling relaxed or even a sense of abandonment. At the beginning of each session, the members of the dance company and the prisoners share a time where they massage themselves and give massages to one another; hence, a moment to share perceptual explorations. Sometimes, these exercises are part of the final performance. These movements seek to ease the uncertainty, the vulnerability, of the body and anchor one’s feet on the ground:

With dance, I don’t know how to say this, I leave everything that’s inside. And then when I’ve finished the dance, it is quiet. I feel calm (Rosa, Joliette; my translation).

At the time, I was in a period where it was a bit critical, where I was always having problems with this and that, so obviously it helps you to breathe a little. You’re no longer in this constant struggle that feeds on you inside and that you have with you all the time, it’s a permanent tension, really (Audrey, Fresnes; my translation).

Through dance, women can reveal themselves without baring too much, to propose another understanding of themselves outside their status as ‘inmate’, to exist differently in the eyes of others:

I learned that I was beautiful. I realized that your weight didn’t matter, there are plenty of things you can do. I also learned that I liked being with other people and creating friendships and learning to know them. I also learned to be happy as a woman. I feel fine, I feel strong (Tessie, Jolidette; my translation).

It’s really good because it shows the good side of our fellow prisoners. Because here we’re not friends, we don’t know each other, so everyone judges each other. But after the show, they greet us – you did a good job – everything positive, you know (Lany, Joliette; my translation).

The artistic process generates other perceptions of self, a reconnection with one’s emotions, one’s interiority. It allows some expression of intimacy:

I lived in a pretty negative way, it was sometimes revenge, sometimes self-destruction … I didn’t feel good about my body, I was expressing myself with words and that made me want to write. It has given me back that little inner voice and my emotions ... Dance, it really connects you with your childhood emotions. Because this freedom of movement, you have it when you aren’t just being judged, that social judgment, a corset. You just let yourself go (Audrey, Fresnes; my translation).

INSERT FIGURE 11.2 HERE

**Figure 11.2: Photo: © Patrick Berger**

Through performance, the prisoners and artists gain new connections to themselves and to one another. While the actual workshops can provide only a temporary diversion from the prison, the prisoners are moved and changed by it. In this vein, I now examine mobility and space, exploring the broader meanings and significance of movement.

*Reclaiming Space and Mobility*

Space and mobility are central to dance in prison and, I will see how they are recent additions to criminological inquiry. For example, in relation to homeless women’s presence in and use of public spaces from which they normally are excluded (Casey et al. 2008; Shantz 2012), the criminalization and regulation of public and private spaces (Kilty & DeVellis 2010; Moore, Freeman & Krawczyk 2011), or male ex-prisoners’ efforts to resettle and develop networks and belonging within their new communities (Munn 2009). In her inspiring study of ‘flashmobs’, Deborah Landry (2013) has explored the issue of transgression in the context of a criminology class. These themes also appear in my chapter.

The prison, with its imposing physical structure, regimented movements and monotonous days, brings space, mobility and time into sharp focus (Foucault 1977; Wahidin & Moss 2004). Claire Jenny spoke of the different spaces in France and in Québec. These forces are intertwined and blurred. The space remains constant, yet its rhythms and the motions and movements it contains ebb and flow, with time appearing to stand still or wildly accelerate. In French prisons in particular, there are empty spaces, vast spaces, and crowded, confined tiny spaces. This gives the strange feeling of dizziness and spinning. Pierre Cottreau, video artist, eloquently explained this sensation:

Fresnes is a very old prison, very old. It is very impressive to see the controls, doors, locks. And finally the little spaces that are reserved for each prisoner. And that’s very striking. There is a huge central hall which is always empty. And there are tiny cells, which are very decrepit. So the conditions are quite terrible ... The show took place in the corridor, what they call the corridor, a kind of huge space in the middle, like a vessel, like that, there is a huge gap in the middle where there is never anyone (my translation).

Pierre highlights how the prison shapes and constrains the mobilities of these women. Its physical structure compresses and constrains movements in small cells with fleeting movements connecting these spaces to other areas of the prison. Linked to the space, there is a universe of sound that both creates and mediates the extreme tension of the prison. The ever-present noises of the prison provide a soundtrack to the space, making it come alive and echo within the consciousness of the prisoners and artists. The mobilities of this sound – echoing, piercing and ever-present – shape the corporal experience behind the walls. Anita Praz indicated that the impact of reverberation and the silence of that aural universe still bother her:

Extremely reverberant, a very very long reverberation. There is a lot of noise, impact sound and something which constantly resonates. Nothing dull, nothing soothing of course. Something like silence, always perturbed, always mixed with a hard echo, metallic, on metal, on hard materials. … The carceral space always echoed. It never left us in peace. This marked me (Anita, sound artist; my translation).

By entering these difficult, confined and forbidding spaces, the artists attempt to conjure an alternative space, free of the constraints of the prison. Dancing encourages the women to utilize and own the space, reclaiming the institutional space as their own. How, though, can one create an imaginary space beyond the prison’s walls when you know that often, in France, it is forbidden to look a guard in the eye?:

So it was on ... initially, the gaze. Watch the horizon, look away. But also to have space. Even in a small room. How can you begin to take space without having 200 square meters? (Fanny Tirel, dancer; my translation).

INSERT FIGURE 11.3

**Figure 11.3: Photo: © Patrick Berger**

In the prison, women’s mobilities become restricted as does their vision and the movement of their gaze. To relax and improve their horizontal vision, the prisoners explored dancing and performing two by two, eye to eye, studying the movements and travel released by their desires and the direction of their gazes. Here, the prisoners examine their own mobility to relearn seemingly simple actions as well as to gain new understandings of themselves – from *denied* space to *reclaimed* space.

**INSERT FIGURE 11.4**

**Figure 11.4:Photo: © Patrick Berger**

*The Body in Criminology – the Body in Dance*

Evidently, the body is central to dance. It is also central to prison. Women in prison have been and are often betrayed and abused, leaving women with a negative self-image of their bodies. Linked to this, is the phenomenon of self-injury which is also very present (Frigon 2001; Kilty 2008, 2012). In that sense, dance also offers itself as a way to re-appropriate the body by allowing victimized women to reassert ownership of their bodies (see Gina Gibney Dance, 2010). Dance in prison is subversive: working from a denied space to reclaimed space. Through space, rhythm, contraction, release, fall, recovery, rebound, the dancers find a balance: holding in place, straightening one’s back, looking up, going toward the other, being in themselves, recapturing a sense of self.

The dancer’s body (skin, muscles), the choreography (solos and trios), the sounds (clanking keys, slamming doors, screams), and the music bring me to the prison setting, highlighting the mechanisms and logic of confinement, control and resistance. The act of dancing, in juxtaposition to the prison structures, demonstrates dance’s potential for resistance and individual transformation. For example, one of the difficult concepts in creative work in prison is in the often passionate and sometimes conflicting relational phenomena. A dance piece involves a number of people (performers and creators) in a troupe, which is particularly important in prison dance projects as it allows prisoners to work as equals with dancers, experiencing autonomy and agency, both of which are absent from much of their lives. For instance, an intimate male-female relationship was constituted and performed at Maison Tanguay, where the only male artist of the dance company danced with a female prisoner. She had asked to dance a waltz in a flowered dress, like a princess. Jean-Pierre remembers:

And the first time was incredible, I don’t know, sensual but at the same time not sexual. We had a blast. It moved me enormously because it just added so much. Completely (my translation).

For this prisoner, the dance had a very strong meaning: the thirty-second duration of the waltz marked the first time a man had treated her so well. Jean-Pierre’s modesty was excessive, even in his own words:

What connection could I make with women who never see men? What does this put into play? What is assumed? And how to behave, with what attitude? In fact, it wasn’t planned, modesty worked to protect us. You could have gotten away with anything, really. I didn’t have to say: ‘Careful ... I shouldn’t touch you like that, don’t ...’. I could give her what she wanted, there was no risk (my translation).

The depth of the workshops with the prisoners caused some artists to reflect on their own paths as people and as artists. Three positions were expressed, the first referring to a relative confusion of roles, the second to a sense of confinement. The third – the proximity of the prisoners’ suffering – became the mirror of one’s own confinement, thus releasing or revealing one’s own vulnerability. Being an actress and not a dancer herself, Agnes reflected on this experience:

Me, I was really aware of my own confinement … Ultimately, I was maybe, in my movements, closer to being trapped than some people we met in prison. But this difference is not a construction, this difference is a fact. And for a performer it’s hard to accept this fact (my translation).

This game of reflection can also change one’s vision and perspective on the construction of the other and the permeability of space(s) through mobility and corporality/corporeality, as Juliette Vezat, a dancer, suggested:

I no longer have the same outlook on people. And what I also realize is that I could very well go to jail. I feel a bit borderline too, not far from the edge. There is a fine boundary between being inside and out (my translation).

There is also the question of how to become reacquainted through touch (self and other), one body to another. In prison, the rare moments of relaxation and intimate connections with the senses are experienced intensely. As noted, each session begins with massage, exploring the sensation of touch. Many women prisoners have only had violent contact with others; many have been the victims of serious assaults in their lives (see Comack 1996; Comack & Brickey 2007; Frigon 2001, 2003, 2012):

It’s so serious, the relationship with the body in prison, among girls who were violated or others who sold their bodies. I think that dance proposes linking oneself, body and spirit, one’s sensitivity, to reestablish contact. Simply learning to live. To no longer have this suspicion, to let go a little (Audrey, Fresnes; my translation).

Prisoners must move from touching themselves (arms, face, etc.) to touching the other (the other’s face and torso), from the banal to the most intimate. For some it is extremely pleasurable to regain contact with the skin, but at the same time extremely disturbing. It requires a journey for them to realize that it is not serious, not dangerous, not deviant, to touch oneself and to feel good massaging oneself. And when one passes that stage, one can also massage the other and be massaged by the other. These body-to-body relationships develop knowledge of the other. The women must live in extreme restraint, with confidence and respect, as they often rouse a lot of trouble. And in the processes implicated in supporting the other, the women continue these self-projections**.** It is not just to ‘support’ the other, but through the other’s support, they explore sensations of floating or flight:

Yes, yes, you can climb on my back, don’t worry, I'm used to carrying people. She said to me: ‘But I’m too heavy’. Weight is very important, it was a problem for her. I told her: ‘Well, no, no. Me, I can carry you, it’s not a problem’. The moment where she ended up on my back, I felt there was a fullness, as if she really began to fly. And then she started to close her eyes and take her time, to look (Fanny Tirel, dancer; my translation).

INSERT FIGURE 11.5 HERE

**Figure 11.5:** **Photo: © Patrick Berger**

The *intensity of the ephemeral* highlights the challenges of reconnecting with oneself. This amazing experience – the personal success – juxtaposed against the women’s circumstances and the public calling for restitution, offers a new way of thinking.

Dance can transform both public perceptions and the prisoners themselves. Although the sessions do not have a therapeutic goal, some women have made this link, as evidenced by Vanessa’s testimony:

This project has touched me as much as seeing the shrink. It makes you discover things about yourself. It makes you keep in touch with your inner self, your child (Vanessa, Joliette; my translation).

This approach to choreography also encourages new ideas, offering another vision of the future:

I took out a lot of things that I knew that I had inside. I expressed myself a lot. And I think if I could do that, I can do more now. With this show, I said: ‘I can do that, I can do anything I want’ (Rosa, Joliette; my translation).

In prison, many women build a shell around themselves. They protect themselves:

You anesthetize your senses. You really blind your spirit. Your body, it must also be armoured. Because every time you must win (Audrey, Fresnes; my translation).

When we discuss touch, these self-protections are especially felt by the artists. This can harden you, create a shell, you can sense it through touch. It is perhaps more obvious through touch than sight. But at the same time it is a protection system. I think it can provide a lot of protection, when you’re in there (Agnès Fréjabue, actress; my translation).

This questioning can be very destabilizing because it contrasts two experiences: one with the artists in the troupe and the other that is regularly suffered in prison:

The fact that there, one has to speak with one’s body while one usually always represses ... Here it’s the opposite movement, so obviously it’s difficult. And yes, that warmth and authenticity that you can find in working with these groups ... After the evening, I had a difficult relationship with the guards for sure: they searched us all the time. They slammed the doors in our faces, small pettinesses. The contrast was even greater. It further brought us back to the inhumanity of the guards in any case (Audrey, Fresnes; my translation).

Thus, female prisoners can be very vulnerable during sensory exploration and improvisational dance, as their sensitivity is again requested:

It awakens the things I feel at times. Well, being listened to, being watched, working on the body, it awakens things may be hidden and they can sometimes be painful things (Pierre Cottreau, video creator; my translation).

The violence of these states, even their outbreak, can destabilize the women. The ephemeral dimension of the projects incites women to stop avoiding violent outbursts, states that are inconceivable for most women during the limited time the artists are among them. As such, dance transforms the environment as well as prisoners’ understandings of it, allowing them to transcend their self-conceptions, roles and the space.

I now turn to the second project – the dance with university criminology masters students.

**Dance in a University Setting: The Intensity of the Ephemeral**

In 2007 and 2012, I invited Claire Jenny to invent spaces of creation with my graduate criminology students at the University of Ottawa. During her first visit, she conducted 12 hours of contemporary dance workshops with 3rd year criminology students and graduate students. In 2012, Claire Jenny returned to present her choreographic work in prison to my 4th year students and did two conferences in 2nd year and 4th year courses. More importantly, however, was her work with my graduate students. The creative process used differed greatly from the process described with prisoners. Evidently, Claire could not rely on the lived experience of incarceration as it was not really appropriate in a university context. In fact, the goal was to convey the phenomena of manhandling: the way students’ life experiences affect their bodies, to learn along with them about sensorial embodiment and the physical sensations that are too often experienced in prison.

These experimentations took place first in a classroom setting at the University then in the Old Ottawa Prison (now converted into a Youth Hostel).[[5]](#footnote-5) This space had an impact on how the students were in their bodies, outside their bodies and the choreographic propositions of the five female students[[6]](#footnote-6). This charged context significantly impacted on the creative process.

The show was entitled : *J’aimerais pouvoir qu’on m’aime debout* (*I Would Like to Be Loved Standing*) which was constructed from the following four sources: (1) Excerpts of texts created in creative writing workshops in prison and in the community in a project that we direct with an Association of Francophone authors in Ontario (AAOF) (Frigon, 2014). Each student was invited to ‘read’ a brief excerpt in a mirror (identical to those currently in prison which are unbreakable, and offering a somewhat distorted reflection). (2) The spectators were also given an opportunity to participate to begin to understand those times in the courtyard where the only possible activity is to continually walk in a circle; the times of isolation; and the times of (over)crowding with five or six (bodies/people) in a tiny cell measuring only two metres by one metre. (3) Duos evoking phenomena of instability, gravity, the absence of relation. (4) Two solos interpreted by Claire Jenny extracted from her choreography *Chairs (de) femmes* created in 2010 by her dance company. I was involved in this creation by providing some poetic texts around the body which accompany the show. The first solo evokes violence committed against women and the second questions space in a female voice.

INSERT FIGURE 11.6 HERE

**Figure 11.6: Photo: © Guillaume Ménard-Lebel**

INSERT FIGURE 11.7 HERE

**Figure 11.7: Photo: © Guillaume Ménard-Lebel, 2012**

*From Doubt to Enchantment[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Despite the fact that this collective project sparked great interest and fascination among the students, it has to be noted that from the onset (when I presented the course syllabus) students were somewhat uncomfortable to undertake this journey. This is quite understandable. As this is a not a compulsory course, students could withdraw. Also, they did not have to take part in the show presented.[[8]](#footnote-8) Annieclearly speaks to this uncertainty:

I arrive in class with, perhaps, as much apprehension as the prisoners: I don’t know how to dance, what will she [Claire Jenny] ask me to do? I hope that I will be able to hide during the show … I try to rationalize things by telling myself that when Claire does dance workshop in prison, she does not deal with professional dancers, either (my translation).

Barbara also captures this:

I really did not know what to expect. I do not have any dance experience and the fact that we do not know really what we will be doing stresses me. In fact, I don’t think I’m the only one to feel that way. When I arrive in class I feel the uncertainty in the other girls, the smell of palpable thrill (my translation).

Caroline recounts:

For us, it is troubling in a strange sense since we are not dancers, but we had to sit on the floor. It wasn’t difficult, but it’s certain that without having registered in this course we would not be deliberately choosing to do contemporary dance (my translation).

The prison setting also adds to the tension/apprehension as Annierecalls:

We enter the Old Ottawa Prison and we feel the tensions of the space … The afternoon finishes and the reflections burst forth in my head. These productions about incarceration in this particular place leave me filled with a feeling of unease/unrest (my translation)

For Caroline:

It was cold, the space was empty, dull and dirty. To be five in a tiny cell was effectively not the best situation (my translation).

However, for Barbara, the space was inspiring:

We arrived in the old prison and everything happened very quickly. First, I had never been to this prison and I was stupefied/amazed by the size of the cells. They were really small. I found that the place was special and I said that it would surely give something original (my translation).

And then came the actual ‘hands-on’ experience of dance. For Danielle:

These different exercises might seem insignificant to us, the public having not experienced the dismay of prison. However, these exercises help in illustrating the forms of controls, and in this way the *rapport* and trust between the keepers and the kept (my translation).

For Elise:

Certain activities permitted us to understand the invasive nature of incarceration. Claire asked us to hold a pose while the other students examined us, for long lengths of time, closely and from a distance. We felt uneasy in the context of this course. From this, we can imagine the felt experiences of incarcerated women … A sequence of the five of us in small cells. The rhythm was determined by Claire, and we changed position in a brisk fashion to demonstrate a bit the idea of despair, of closed space, of panic, etc. (my translation).

The actual performance was extremely well received:

… the effect of seeing Claire dance behind the bars of the prison was particularly impressive … to share some of the things we have created, even with/in a certain uncertainty is gratifying, to know that students [spectators] appreciated our show gave me a great deal of pleasure (my translation).

The choreography highlighted a space that tightly envelops, that constrains, that shrinks: no possible exit except to turn and turn and the morose repetitive nature of time which seems endless. Annie recalls the exercises proposed by Claire Jenny:

Claire Jenny uses the approach of the famous choreograph Cunningham. ‘Claire throws a dice and this will determine in how many movements we will reach the floor … six … our bodies twist slowly. First, on a shoulder that leans toward the floor, a knee, a hip, the other knee, the top of the body, the head … We apprehend the sick body in prison (from my research our book) ... We also do an exercise that requires our partner’s trust. We close our eyes, one hand on our shoulder which guides us, to go forward, to retreat, to move backward, to turn ... (my translation).

As Annie notes, Claire does not do this exercise in prison because of the trust required between prisoners. Annie recalls her experience of a duo in a cell:

Reach the floor, we use the wall to highlight the narrowness of the space and the uneasiness linked to incarceration. Our bodies dislocate and the walls slow down/slacken our fall. A slow look from the ground to the horizon … Our bodies dislocate and the walls shrink in our fall (my translation).

We initiated the ritual of the walk/stroll, eyes lowered, our steps light. The moment felt long to me because of the unease it created … We begin the ritual in the courtyard promenade, eyes lowered, slow walk. This moment seems very long because, in my view, of the malaise it sparks (my translation).

On a personal level, this experience will have definitely brought another perspective of confinement – the one that manifests itself in and by the body. Dance will have allowed us to feel the incarceration but also to express it during a public representation (my translation).

Annie’s comment encapsulates the deepness of this bodily experience:

We make the links between our exercises and imprisonment then we stop. Contemporary dance makes me appear like the generating and interlocking force within the group. But it is also the rapport with my body that is different, I was never more conscious of its existence (my translation).

The students were very conscious of the filming and concerned about its outcome. However, they all loved it**.** Barbara summed up the group’s feeling:

To be honest, I was really wondering how the video would be done. I was positively surprised because the video is very well made. The images are beautiful and the montage is really original! (my translation).

Student dancers as well as student spectators have commented on the significance of this sensorial and physical experience as a complement to their theoretical knowledge concerning lived carceral experiences. In fact, dance permits us to envisage prison and prison permits, in turn, to highlight some of the fundamentals of dance.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored and exemplified some of the contours of an emerging creative criminology project or something we could call *performative* *criminology*. I attended to the meanings of dance in prison by attempting to explore how choreographic propositions translate into *criminological* propositions with my work with a Paris-based choreographer, Claire Jenny (Frigon & Jenny 2009). The aim of this chapter was to open spaces of dialogue within academe by conceptualizing criminology in a different voice. By performing ‘criminology’, the discipline occupies the scene and makes itself relevant in culture. It permeates culture. In order to do achieve this (albeit modestly), two main projects were described. The first is the dance workshops in prison with prisoners in France and in Québec (Canada) and the second, with the master’s students at the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, Ontario (Canada).

This encounter with and collaboration between a choreographer and a criminologist leading up to a truly unique partnership opens unique spaces of possibilities for thinking prison and transcending orthodox knowledge formations. Dance not only brings us to a new way of understanding imprisonment and its effects, it also contributes to theoretical innovation, as the dancers – prisoners, students and professionals – learn about themselves, each other, and the carceral environment through the dance project.

In prison, dance is often experienced as therapeutic; it can also offer an innovative method of inquiry, a way of analysing one’s experiences, and a conduit for critically examining the carceral space as women reconnect with their bodies and the environment through movement. The dance project explores space, movement, bodies and sound, using choreography to highlight various aspects of the prison. Dance studies expand criminology, inserting women, mobilities, bodies and identities into the research frame. Connecting the artistic and the carceral provides a new lens of analysis, where movements, emotions and visceral reactions become the texts for interpretation, changing our conceptions of punishment, detention, and prisoners by translating *choreographic* propositions into *criminological* propositions. More broadly, it provides an examination of *prison in culture, culture in prison*. In fact, for the French Minister of Culture, Aurélie Filippetti, the watchword is: ‘Culture is a vector in the fight against inequalities’.

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1. I was awarded a Faculty Research Chair in Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa entitled ‘Prison in Culture, Culture in Prison’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The company has always worked with and for children, with imprisoned men, and with urban French youths who are considered ‘difficult’ by others. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a good discussion of some of the contours of ‘cultural criminology’, see Landry (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a discussion of ‘edgework’ literature, see Landry (2013). This following discussion of the first project has been presented originally in Frigon and Jenny (2009) and revisited for an analysis of methodological issues in Frigon and Shantz (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The last person to be hanged in Canada was hanged at this prison. This space is charged with history and its architecture is emblematic of the violation of basic human rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Unfortunately, one male student who was very keen about the project had to withdraw from the course early on as he was offered a job. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The five students were asked to keep a journal. The following quotations are excerpts from these. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The show was presented to my other fourth-year class students (N=20). Given the space, we had to limit the number of the spectators. The show was thus performed in front of my students in a course entitled ‘On the Construction of Deviant Bodies in Criminology’ in which Claire came to present and students were open to the question of the body as a tool of analysis in criminology. Fictitious names have been attributed to the students. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)