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THE GRIND WAS ALL I WAS GIVEN

by

Daniel Rodriguez

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

Hollins University
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to David Ingram, a fellow Hollins MFA Graduate, for believing in me and my candidacy for this program almost a decade ago. You were right. I am good at this.

Thank you for always seeing the potential in me.

To Kevana West, my therapist, for helping me on this journey of self-discovery.

To my son, Rio, for pushing me to become a better man.

To my wife, Samantha, for sticking by me for all the highs and lows.

To the Hollins MFA Dance Program for supporting me in this tremendous work.

And finally, to my boundaries. I have neglected you for so long, but now I am ready to listen.

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Introduction: What Is Grind Culture?

For all my life up to this point, I have always believed in the value of hard work above all else, be it in my studies or my eventual career in dance. I could achieve my dreams if I accumulated more accomplishments through years of consistent hard work. Educators lauded a college education as the only path to success, creating high stakes in every course and extracurricular activity. My immigrant family reinforced these ideas, encouraging the highest quality work at all costs. Dance instructors would speak about my potential and say I could dance for any company. I just had to work. Work harder than the person next to me. The person across the country from me. Across the globe from me. You can win. Just keep working.

These ideas are born from a phenomenon called grind culture. Grind culture is “the collective agreement that to be considered a valuable human being, one must be economically productive.”¹ Grind culture is our capitalist American legacy, as we built this country rapidly through enslaved labor and stolen land. We created a society where production, above all else, is the measure of personal success. Grind culture compels us to compete with our labor, to be unsatisfied with what we have, and to feel guilty about not being productive. Grind culture has influenced America's economic and societal landscape to such a degree that it is mainly accepted as a signature cultural value; it is the American way. It influences our economic policies, societal expectations, and education system and is propped up and maintained with modern technology.

After years of engaging in this toxic culture, I was burnt out and trapped in this endless cycle of work and exhaustion. Once I started my mental health journey, I realized that grind culture succeeded in grinding away my very own sense of self. With this realization, I began to

¹Heather Archer, *The Grind Culture Detox* (San Antonio, TX: Hierophant Publishing, 2022), 2.

ask questions about how the intersections of culture, identity, and dance all weaved together to contribute to my eventual fall toward rock bottom. This ignorance of restorative practices has led me to physical and mental exhaustion and, inevitably, burnout. The grind was all I was given.

This research has made me aware that this was not a unique experience, as the wide-reaching influence of grind culture has led to a generation of burnt-out laborers who have yet to learn how to function otherwise. “Why am I burned out? Because I’ve internalized the idea that I should be working all the time. Why have I internalized that idea? Because everything and everyone in my life has reinforced it — explicitly and implicitly — since I was young.”² Grind culture is why, as a thirty-three-year-old man, I do not know how to rest or recharge my body, mind, or spirit. And while this widespread development of burnout is a defining trait of my generation, it is hardly purely a modern diagnosis. Herbert Freudenberger, a German-born American psychologist specializing in understanding and treating stress and chronic fatigue, formally recognized burnout as a condition in 1974. This affliction has a deep historical precedent, but Anne Helen Petersen, an American journalist who wrote the viral BuzzFeed article “How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,” argues it has become our contemporary condition, as there are now more millennials in the United States than any other generation.³ I am surrounded by a workforce of people conditioned to be willing to sacrifice their well-being for the sake of preferred life outcomes.

I seek to understand how to challenge these internalized values and help prevent the spreading of these harmful practices. This project is about me reckoning with what made me the way I am and charting a course for change. Fatherhood and potential career transitions have

²Anne Helen Petersen, “How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,” *Buzzfeed News*, (2019) <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>.

³Anne Helen Petersen, “*Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (New York, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2020), xx.

forced me to look inward and decide what I value while raising a family and moving on from my performing career. Unfortunately, the systems that uphold these toxic values are incredibly interwoven into our society, so contemplating proper rest and rejuvenation is incredibly challenging. Most people do not even consider a different approach to life, continuing to toil in this manner and remaining reticent to challenge our toxic relationship with overwork and production in this country.

The art form of dance exists in your body, and to pass it on, you must teach the next generation the same skills that were given to you. The problem is that this body of mine is irrevocably influenced by its commitment to the toxicity of grind culture. In gearing up for my future post-performing career, I have always said I would provide students with the tools I did not have as a dancer, but how do I do that when the very culture I wish to fight lives on in me? To effectively create change, I need to understand what happened to me, to choose a new path and show others that there is another option, one where we can respect our inherent value as human beings, not production machines.

Roots of Grind Culture

When examining the goals and strategies grind culture employs to keep its workforce focused on production above all else, a clear connection appears between chattel slavery and grind culture, as Heather Archer, the author of *The Grind Culture Detox* declares: “The foundation of American Capitalism was built on a viciously high-stakes environment of productivity or death.”⁴ American chattel slavery enabled the United States to build into the world superpower that it is today. The use of this stolen labor to produce and distribute the

⁴Archer, *The Grind Culture Detox*, 25.

number one cash crop of the time, cotton, enabled America's rapid rise and growth. Our need and willingness to turn a blind eye to exploitation and violence for the sake of production is our true legacy.

Ibram X. Kendi, an American Professor and racial activist, discusses the inextricable link between capitalism and racism in his book *How to Be an Antiracist*. He likens the two forces to conjoined twins, developing together from Portugal (during the creation of the transatlantic slave trade) and Spain beginning around 1450. “In the twenty-first century, persisting racial inequities in poverty, unemployment, and wealth show the lifework of the conjoined twins.”⁵ Scholars have named this intersection between these twins as racial capitalism. Grind culture, as a byproduct of capitalism, is influenced by this link to racism. It inherently is a tool of white supremacy and is used to uphold racist structures and support racial hierarchies.

The roots of the modern manifestation of grind culture began in the 1970s and 80s as postwar capitalism stagnated and needed modifications to remain in power. Before this time, America was in a period of great economic equality, known as the “Great Compression.” This was when middle-class Americans held 68% of the country’s wealth, and economic security was generally attainable for the masses.⁶ It is essential to recognize that this was utterly inequitable, as this primarily benefitted white male Americans over Black men and women who were still dealing with extreme prejudice and racism of the era. Even so, this period “briefly expanded the “fundamental expectations” of the American Dream to millions.”⁷ This period slowly started to

⁵ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 156.

⁶ Brooke Shuman and Anthony Mascorro, “How Milton Friedman Broke the American Economy | The Class Room Ft. @FDSignifire,” More Perfect Union, May 10, 2023, video, 3:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgXda61MtWE&t=212s>.

⁷ Petersen, *Can’t Even*, 8.

yield less returns, and to spur the economic system of the country, we turned to a new political project, as explained by journalist Sarah Jaffe:

The political project that brought us here is known as neoliberalism, though it sometimes goes by other names: post-Fordism, maybe, or just “late capitalism.” As political philosopher Asad Haider explained, “neoliberalism... is really two quite specific things: first, a state-driven process of social, political, and economic restricting that emerged in response to the crisis of postwar capitalism, and second, an ideology of generating market relations through social engineering.” The success of the latter part of the project depended on twisting those desires for liberation articulated in the 1960s and 1970s, redefining “freedom” away from a positive concept (freedom *to* do things) and toward a negative one (freedom *from* interference). Neoliberalism encourages us to think that everything we want and need must be found with a price tag attached.⁸

While neoliberalism’s roots trace to Chile in the 70s, the democratic superpowers of the world, England and America, turned to it to create economic growth. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan led the charge of this new era, transitioning the world out of the industrial era and into the future, where the government would not interfere with the masses. You were in control of your own destiny. “The best way to the collective good, according to Reagan-ism, was through the eagle-eyed focus of cultivation of me and mine, with little thought of how the reverberations of those actions would affect their children and grandchildren in the years to come.”⁹

Labor unions were weakened through right-to-work states and other policies. Social services like welfare and social security were heavily cut. Industrial work was outsourced to countries with little to no oversight and cheaper costs, leaving many communities without economic security and no unions to protect their jobs. Corporations began outsourcing non-essential labor and shifting the responsibilities of training employees to the individual, not the employer, as it became an individual’s responsibility to pay for their higher education and

⁸ Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won’t Love You Back* (New York, New York: Bold Type Books, 2021), 6-7.

⁹ Petersen, *Can’t Even*, 16.

certifications. These shifts changed the perspective of the working class from one of unity to one of competition, as the wealthy at the top of the pyramid accumulated more and more wealth. This never-ending production competition morphed into our modern-day grind culture. While slavery has been debatably legislated out of this country in our Constitution, neoliberalism grants capitalism a framework in which people are encouraged always to work and produce at an incredibly high level, against their own best interests instead.

As we entered the information age, the “labor of love” ideology began to rise in the public consciousness “to cover up the coercion that was, in fact, required to push people into the workplace at the origin of capitalism.”¹⁰ With this shift in perspective, work is supposed to be enjoyable in and of itself. We all know the maxim: If you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life. This is a grind culture in its most innocuous form, the very idea that labor is your purpose in life, that it brings you happiness. Americans have traded physical industrial factory labor for modern-day work that demands emotional labor because it is meant to be deeply fulfilling. You are expected to be happy to work, eager to offer more, to be a “team player,” and to sacrifice personal time if necessary. If you are unwilling to do all that, we will move on to the next person who will; there is always someone looking for the next opportunity. The freedom neoliberalism offers you also paradoxically justifies inequality by its current design. The mask of the “labor as love” framework is just another way to cover up the exploitation of laborers.

These policies were the roots of the current economic environment in which millennials are well-versed; This is the reality we were raised in and influenced by. Our responsibility was to succeed through rugged self-individualism, not due to the government or employer support of the

¹⁰ Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*, 10.

America of old. The American dream is still alive and well, and you will be rewarded for your faith in the system. Through cultural and educational norms, children are raised to be ready to grind and produce for their employers without any regard for what those values do to human beings throughout their lives.

Grind Culture and My Childhood

The Role of My Education

As a child growing up in the 90s, the message was very clear from my parents and my educators (of dance and general education): If you work hard, you can succeed in this country. General education was the vehicle in which I would push myself up the economic ladder, my ticket to the American Dream of seizing opportunities and making more money than my parents. Everything in my childhood was about accumulating accolades and good marks, and this slowly started to tie my self-worth to accomplishments and production, a crucial value to instill in young people to enforce the grind culture necessary to maintain our capitalist status quo.

As Tricia Hersey, poet, performance artist, and rest activist, explains when discussing elementary school's real goals, "Students are being trained to be workers who can follow orders, memorize facts, and be on time no matter what."¹¹ These goals disproportionately harm marginalized students, who have access to less resources and economic stability due to racial capitalism's discriminatory policies. Gathering marks and accolades to become better candidates for universities and opportunities in life robs our children of the privilege of being children, instead becoming miniature adults developing life skills and resumes. Grind culture has convinced us that no time should be left free of the need to create people who can produce in

¹¹ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York, New York: Little, Brown Spark 2022), 22.

modern-day society. This is not the only influence of grind culture in public education.

Schooling in this society inevitably gets molded to serve the goals of neoliberalism, as it becomes a training ground for engaging with the modern-day workforce:

When students are working, what they're working on is their own ability to work. Human capital's rough paper analog is the resumé: a summary of past training for future labor. At its most technical, human capital is the present value of a person's future earnings, or a person's imagined price at sale, if you could buy and sell free laborers—minus upkeep.¹²

Neoliberalism has turned childhood into a rat race, as families compete against one another to ensure the highest margin of success possible in the future. I had to become the perfect candidate for any opportunity to achieve better life outcomes, and I had to compete at a high level at a young age and never let up. As a high-performing student in my high school in Manhattan, I was mandated to take two advanced placement courses (designed to be college-level courses), even when I only needed one of those credits to graduate despite my wish to prioritize my dance studies. As the standards of being an exceptional student increase, children are working harder than ever before for the promise of a bright future, or at least that is what we have been told. "But Millennials' extra work hasn't earned them the promised higher standard of living. By every metric, this generation is the most educated in American history, yet Millennials are worse off economically than their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents."¹³ The reality of work in the twenty-first century was not what we were sold, and we are the first generation to make less than those who came before us despite our efforts.

¹² Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: The Making of Millennials*. (New York, New York: Back Bay Books, 2017), 22.

¹³ Harris, *Kids These Days*, 40.

The Role of My Family

I had internalized the American fantasy that working hard and following the rules would bring me joy and happiness later in life; my parents ensured that. Good times? Be good, work hard. Bad times? Be good, work hard. It would all pay off one day when I was a rich man, and all that success was brought to fruition by a proud family with strong values. I saw firsthand what hard work could do; my immigrant father modeled that behavior for me daily, and I got to live a lower-middle-class life in Manhattan due to his dedication. While I was privileged to live that lifestyle, his actions also helped me internalize the values of grind culture and linked my self-worth to production and value, not my inherent value as a human being. His commitment to grind culture also kept him at a distance from his family, further impacting my need for validation at any cost, leading to my acceptance of grind culture.

An important context for immigrant families is the mythology of the “Great Compression” that was discussed above. My father came to America in the 1970s, the beginning of the end of this era. The cultural iconography of the perfect middle-class life with the suburban home, white picket fence, and economic stability remain strong in the American consciousness, even though this has not been our shared reality for a long time now. Due to the collapse of worker protections and the embrace of neoliberalism, our wages have stagnated while housing prices, inflation, and the cost of a college education have shot up exponentially. That does not matter in the eyes of many older Americans, who reaped the benefits of good American legislation and refuse to acknowledge the current situation. As Peterson puts it, “But the myth of the wholly self-made American, like all other myths, relies on some sort of sustained willful ignorance – often perpetuated by those who’ve already benefitted from them.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Petersen, *Can't Even*, 15.

To achieve this middle-class life for his family, my father worked two laborious jobs as the superintendent of two apartment buildings in Manhattan. He had to always be on call and ready to work anytime. He did not ever rest properly, staying up late at night, drinking wine, and falling asleep in front of the television every night. He was always operating at a level of high exhaustion, so he did not have much energy for his children and had struggles with managing his anger. He, at times, engaged in physical abuse when disciplining his children. He has deeply unresolved emotional issues, which were only exacerbated by his commitment to grinding for success. With all the sacrifices he endured to create this better life, he had high expectations of his children. After all, what would this work for if we did not become ideal candidates for elite jobs and success? He had grown up independently while working as a child in Honduras and lived a harsh life without his father in the picture. His immigrant story also contributes to his emotional immaturity, as clinical psychologist Lindsay C. Gibson discusses in her landmark book, *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*:

As my clients and I have explored their family histories, they've often recalled evidence of great unhappiness and tension in their parents' early lives. Substance abuse, abandonment, loss, abuse, or traumatic immigration experiences hover in the family background, suggesting an atmosphere of loss, pain, and disconnection.¹⁵

The number of immigrant families in this country has steadily been increasing, reaching 90.8 million people in the United States, an increase of 20 percent from 2010.¹⁶ This is a huge population in the United States, and while we cannot assume everyone has the same family values and dynamics, the general cultural acknowledgment of this immigrant family conflict is

¹⁵ Lindsay C. Gibson *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 2015), 36.

¹⁶ Jeanne Batlova, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigrant Families in the United States" (Migration Policy Institute: Washington, 2024), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FRS-PRINT-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

not a coincidence. It is accepted that many immigrant families put more pressure on their children to succeed and to honor the great sacrifices that were made to immigrate to the United States. This is again tied to racial capitalism, as many immigrant families feel the pressure to assimilate to secure acceptance in a society that is built upon the sustained success of white people over everyone else. As my father's son, the only lesson he stressed to me was that you can have anything in this country if you are willing to work hard for it, and that was exactly what I would do. That was how we could join (white) Americans and have our slice of the American dream. The only thing he modeled for me was that negative emotions were not to be addressed or expressed in our household, lest we underappreciate the privilege we live in.

The lack of emotional intimacy—defined by Gibson as “knowing that you have someone you can tell anything to, someone to go with all your feelings, about anything and everything”¹⁷—in my childhood left me with a bevy of issues managing my own emotional intelligence, and no other channels to find a human connection. The only validation I would receive from home was from my good marks and effort in school, so I jumped at this opportunity to fulfill this basic human need. This irrevocably shaped my childhood (and adulthood) as I strived to be the best I could be by achieving the most of my siblings and peers. There were so many signs of my toxic relationship with my education, including being so stressed about a poor surprise quiz grade that I had a panic attack in class that I did not speak to anyone about. Not my teachers, not my parents. I was twelve years old.

Grind culture forces children to follow the rigor of an adult schedule to accumulate the proper skills to produce. There is no time to waste on a childhood in a society that demands quantifiable measures of progress and growth. Once you have tied your worth to production and

¹⁷ Gibson, *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*, 8.

not your own inherent value as a human being, you cannot help but drive yourself mad with the pressure to produce. Failing or taking any risks is punished heavily in this culture, as any demerits on your resume will surely destroy your chance to grab your slice of the pie. Indeed, there must be another choice we can make so that our youth does not have to conform to this pressure to produce at all costs, panicking at the idea of failure.

Grind Culture and Dance

As Chloe Angyal, journalist and former dancer, states below, the lifestyle and culture of a professional dancer are built on producing under great stress to maintain the desired outcome of fulfilling your passion:

For advanced students and professional dancers, ballet's physical rigors and injury rate, its fierce competition, and its precarious employment all take an enormous emotional and mental toll. And while one form of mental illness, the eating disorder, has become emblematic of the art form, the reality is that depression, anxiety, and burnout also run rampant in the ballet world.¹⁸

The dance world is a perfect facsimile of modern-day grind culture, as it again demands production and consistency at all costs. The problem within ballet culture is that it is never enough; there is always more work you can do and better outcomes that you can create. As someone seeking validation and connection, this was incredibly dangerous, as my whole self-worth was tied up into positive dance outcomes. That is not a healthy way to engage in any activity, and slowly but surely, it created very negative health outcomes in my life.

The elite competition for employment in ballet mirrors some of our fundamental economic concepts, such as the “problem of scarcity,” which states that “there are simply not

¹⁸ Chloe Angyal, *Turning Pointe: How a New Generation of Dancers is Saving Ballet from Itself* (New York, New York: Bold Type Books 2023), 103.

enough resources to satisfy everybody's wants.”¹⁹ While we can debate the reality of this theory in terms of general economics, it is a very real force in dance. This scarcity manifests in the reality of limited professional opportunities for only so many dancers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 3,000 jobs are available every year, on average, for “Dancers and Choreographers.”²⁰ This data does not even follow just the opportunities that are available to classical ballet dancers, or strictly dancers for that matter. The reality is those numbers are much smaller, and there are exponentially more people trying to dance professionally than there are positions.

Our pursuit of a career worth being passionate about led many to exploitable positions, including participating in “hope labor.” Hope labor is under-compensated work done to accumulate experience for future opportunities.²¹ This usually takes the form of internships, while in dance, it takes the form of second companies or trainee programs. I had to engage and accept these systems as “the way things are.” I was an underpaid laborer, conducting community outreach for the company at a discount, living with two teenage roommates in a two-bedroom apartment. We were all scraping to get by, and I was the “lucky” one with a salary in that apartment. The others had second jobs or were heavily financed by their parents to chase the dream of employment in the company.

The extreme odds you must overcome even to get a job are just the beginning of the stressors you will be subject to in the current paradigm of dance work. Griff Braun, director of organizing and outreach at the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), the union that is

¹⁹ James Suzman, *Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 4.

²⁰Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Dancers and Choreographers, at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/dancers-and-choreographers.htm> (visited July 15, 2024).

²¹Petersen, *Can't Even*, 71.

associated with dance professionals, discusses some of these mitigating factors in *Turning Pointe*. Stressors include how it is incumbent on dancers to maximize every opportunity they receive, no matter the cost, as your time in the field is short. Those anxieties are “inherent”²² to the field, as is the pressure on dance companies to get every ounce of production and labor out of their dancers. As the arts are devalued in America, most companies are underfunded and pressured to create value and profit, forcing them to operate in a “breakneck pace of churning out art and consequently churning through dancers.”²³ There is no respite or rest; there is only the next goal to accomplish until your body is used up and replaced with a fresh model.

It is well understood that dancers should get more resources to help bolster their mental health. “At the end of 2019, the editors of *Dance Magazine* put “access to a full medical dance team” on their wish list for the next decade in dance: a psychologist in the studios, as well as a dietician, and complementary care from chiropractors and acupuncturists.”²⁴ This is a product of our neoliberalist ideologies, relieving institutions of their responsibilities to support their workers. A dancer is expected to perform and produce consistently despite being under tremendous pressure and with little support to deal with their stressors inside and outside of the studio. Unfortunately, that is the price one pays for living their dreams.

As members of the artistic community, dancers have always been passionate workers. You must be passionate about dance to stay in a field with such high competition and low compensation. The main issue that arises from that passion is that grind culture has created a narrative that the masses have fully bought into, a romanticized view of passionate workers that enables problematic opinions that create an environment ripe for the exploitation of said workers.

²² Angyal, *Turning Pointe*, 103.

²³ Angyal, *Turning Pointe*, 103.

²⁴ Angyal, *Turning Pointe*, 104.

Data was published in the article “Understanding Contemporary Forms of Exploitation: Attributions of Passion Serve to Legitimize the Poor Treatment of Workers,” in which eight separate studies were conducted to understand further the relationship between passionate workers and the justification of exploitation of said workers. A meta-analysis of the data shows that society expects passionate workers to work harder and for longer and to accept that the work in and of itself will be its own reward.²⁵ When put into a dance context, this translates into immense expectations being placed on a dancer that is justified in most people’s eyes. Grind culture may allow artists to exist within its paradigm, but it skews the artist’s self-view: love what you do despite how you are treated. As Jae Yun Kim discusses in the above study:

Indeed, research on just world beliefs, system justification, and social dominance indicates that people are motivated to use various legitimizing rationales to maintain the status quo and downplay unfairness they experience and see in the world.²⁶

This is how I was a member of a professional dance company that paid 70% of its employees so little that they qualified for food stamps but got increasingly larger each year. No one questioned how money was distributed or even how much money the company had as an annual budget. It was our privilege to get to dance, and it did not matter if we were not adequately compensated for that. We were living a dream that many others would kill for, and if you did not appreciate that, that was your problem. These ideas keep dancers from collectively organizing and advocating for change in their companies, like many other industries that have had unions fall apart in the modern era of American labor.

²⁵ Jae Yun Kim et al., “Understanding Contemporary Forms of Exploitation: Attributions of Passion Serve to Legitimize the Poor Treatment of Workers,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1, no. 118 (2020): 142.

²⁶ Jae Yun Kim et al., “Understanding Contemporary Forms of Exploitation,” 124.

Despite how problematic the field of dance is, there is always enough talent willing to take on the work. The “labor of love” rhetoric of the modern economy ensures that there will always be a willingness to sacrifice anything to pursue a dream; that is the American way, after all. But conversely, this same rhetoric is used to justify the awful and exploitative treatment of workers, as the reward lies in the very labor itself. So which one is it? The reality is that this rhetoric is used to take advantage of people against their best interests and health, and the dance world can be quite a harmful place because of it. This is also a uniquely American dance issue, as European companies generally have different structures in place to offer support to their dancers.

Grind Culture’s Cycle of Trauma

The influence of grind culture on my life had led me to have a skewed relationship with my own body and mind as I tried to keep up with modern life’s unrelenting speed. To keep up and continue to produce, I ignored my physical cues and boundaries in pursuit of grind culture’s false promise. It took a mental health professional asking me what exactly I do for my care to trigger the journey that I am on, to ask me to pause and consider how to care for myself. In my initial shock at my reaction to the question, I wondered why I had no semblance of an answer. How could I not even have a single thought about this? How have I never rested for my benefit, not to be able to work harder or better? It was then that I found in Hersey’s work and connected with her framing of the consequences of grind culture: “Grinding keeps us in a cycle of trauma.”²⁷ This framework led me to explore the field of trauma research for possible solutions

²⁷Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*, 81.

for breaking this cycle. I found myself asking how trauma research can inform my anti-grind culture practices.

Bessel Van Der Kolk founded the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, and has been a leader in trauma research for decades. In his seminal book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, he discusses the imprint trauma leaves on the brain, forever altering functioning:

We now know that trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive. These changes explain why traumatized individuals become hypervigilant to threat at the expense of spontaneously engaging in their day-to-day lives. They also help us understand why traumatized people so often keep repeating the same problems and have such trouble learning from experience. We now know that their behaviors are not the results of moral failings or signs of lack of willpower or bad character—they are caused by actual changes in the brain.²⁸

This passage clearly lays out what I was going through as grind culture overwhelmed my life. I was trapped in this cycle of burnout, repeating the same mistakes repeatedly, incapable of finding a new way for myself. It also offers a reason to release the guilt or shame you may feel for continuing to participate in grind culture. Grind culture leads you to believe that if you cannot succeed, something is wrong with you and that you cannot take advantage of or keep up like everyone else. The reality is that this trauma genuinely alters you in a profound way, and it will take time and effort to address the issue.

How did this translate to my disconnection with my physical body and sensations? How was the numbness of my physical body a part of my trauma response? When research was conducted on the idle brain of 18 chronic PTSD patients, there was one startling discovery. There was almost no activation of multiple brain areas responsible for self-sensation. As Van Der Kolk put it, “What we witnessed here was a terrifying adaptation: In an effort to shut off terrifying sensations, they also deadened their capacity to feel fully alive.”²⁹ This trauma

²⁸Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York, New York: Penguin Books 2015), 3.

²⁹Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 94.

response explains how many traumatized people lose their sense of direction and purpose. By protecting themselves from the feelings of terror or pain, they also shut down other emotional sensations that everyday people use to propel actions or make decisions. This illustrates the grim trap the cycle of grind culture puts us in, as the grind is not only supported by the outside forces around us, like our educational and familial pressures but also leaves a psychological imprint on our brains, altering our function from the inside out.

How do we chart a course for change? How can I reconnect with my physical body and rediscover my boundaries? Acknowledging these influences in my internalization of grind culture helps contextualize my experience in the past and reveals that it is not unique. I am not alone in this journey to find solutions to dealing with this addiction to grind culture. To combat grind culture, there is a need to rediscover agency in the body, which will help foster the growth of healthy boundaries. “In order to change, people need to become aware of their sensations and the way that their bodies interact with the world around them. Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.”³⁰ This path to healing has led me to the Alexander Technique.

Embodied Resistance

Within this trap of grind culture, my brain lost connection with my physical body, and it is crucial that I cultivate that connection once again. In my research on finding a better connection to my body, I found the Alexander technique. Incorporating it into my physical practices has been incredibly helpful in creating awareness of my body and developing my kinaesthesia, and I offer it here as an anti-grind culture practice.

³⁰ Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 103.

When actor Frederick Matthias Alexander began researching his own functioning in response to persistent respiratory problems, he concluded that he had physical habits that he was unaware of affecting his physical body. As his own sensorial sensation became unclear, he argued that there must be a way to regain that connection and trust, and these early ideas helped propel him in the creation of the Alexander Technique. In this modern world of grind culture, we are even more affected by sensory overload and the added stress of maximum production at all costs, so we are even further disconnected from our ideal physical functioning.

My dance practice as a young ballet student was not about learning about my body but about creating the requisite lines, imitating the correct aesthetic, and working hard. I found progress as a young dancer only through excess effort, time, and tension. The Alexander Technique works in resistance to these ideas, as it focuses on finding optimal functioning and ease in all movements; the physical habits of my dancing body are so deeply rooted within me that I did not consider any other way of functioning, just like Alexander:

He realized that he had never taken responsibility for the direction of his Use of himself. Instead of employing his power of choice fully, he had always done what felt right. He had never questioned his unreasoned Use until he discovered that certain habits were interfering with his functioning. Then, when he did decide to exercise his power of choice, he came up against the almost overwhelming force of habit.³¹

This speaks to a fundamental aspect of the practice: the choice to change. It is essential to recognize and understand the patterns and sensations of your physical body and choose better functioning. As I recognize that grind culture is not how I want to live my life anymore, I choose to change, and that alone sparks change and ease of use, but how do we confront such deeply ingrained habits?

³¹ Michael J. Gelb, *Body Learning*, 2nd ed. (New York, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1995), 25-

After years of dance training and the stressors of modern-day life, I had a “debauched kinaesthesia,” which is defined as “a corrupted and therefore untrustworthy sense of position, tension, and movement.”³² My brain had internalized certain sensations and actions to the point that I could not trust my own perception of my body. The very technique of ballet can force you into a disconnected experience, as you are encouraged to conform and fit the mold required by the form. It can rob you of the feeling of autonomy needed to change habit; you are given combinations to dance, and you are trained to obey and execute. But what if we decided to approach it from a place of choice? Within the rigid structures of the choreography, can we choose ease and connection to oneself instead of just imitating lines to disrupt our habitual response deliberately? The ballet technique should be offered as a framework that encourages play within its shapes, allowing dancers to find agency and expression in their practice.

That awareness to challenge my habitual actions with intentionality is also key to respecting my physical boundaries and allowing myself to choose rest. I do not need to kill myself every time I engage in a rehearsal or class; there is a greater ecosystem I must attend to. Or as Michael Gelb, Alexander Technique practitioner, explains:

We have much more freedom to choose what we will do with our lives. To utilize this freedom constructively we must obviously learn to respond with discrimination to the massive stimulation we receive; we must choose those elements of our environment that are worth responding to.³³

We are creatures of habit, and the main goal of the Alexander Technique is for people to pause in reaction to stimuli and actively choose their next action instead of acting on physical habit. When working with a teacher of the technique, you are challenged to release your tension and to give your weight completely to the instructor. They instigate movement and influence

³² Gelb, *Body Learning*, 164.

³³ Gelb, *Body Learning*, 61.

physical alignment change through touch, and you must “inhibit” your natural responses to these cues. It is incredibly difficult in practice and is a doubt-filled process, in my experience. You must trust your instructor and believe that change is occurring; it can be incredibly subtle, but again, you cannot trust your own kinaesthesia. Alexander spoke about inhibition as the crucial practice of the technique; in this context, inhibition is defined as “conscious thinking that prevents interference with the natural alignment and best functioning of our equipment-for-motion.”³⁴ This definition offers us a framework to think about how to resist and fight our internalized grind culture.

In this overwhelming world that we live in that insists that we grind our bodies to dust, the Alexander Technique offers us the freedom to make a different choice. We must choose what we respond to in our environment and how we respond to it. The technique fosters the development of an awareness of oneself and embraces a process that takes time to correct internalized behaviors. There is no shortcut to detangle yourself from the web of grind culture, but this offers us a practice and a mindset to engage in the work. Now we turn towards the question that started this all: how do we rest?

Rest as Resistance

I have never considered what rejuvenated myself, only considering getting eight hours of sleep. Reflecting on how I manifest rest for myself, I look for knowledge beyond the material and objective things I was taught in school. I am looking for a connection with myself, my needs, and my wants for the first time in my life, and I seek rest not just as a restorative practice but as a spiritual one.

To understand that we are spiritual beings navigating life in a material world opens us to the possibilities of rest as a spiritual practice. Our entire living is a spiritual practice.

³⁴ Gelb, *Body Learning*, 164.

Much of our resistance to rest, sleep, and slowing down is an ego problem. You believe you can and must do it all because of our obsession with individualism and our disconnection to spirituality. Nothing we accomplish in life is totally free of the influence of spirit and community. We do nothing alone.³⁵

As someone who has been raised in grind culture and trained as a dancer, I am constantly reticent to ask for help or support. I have always prided myself on my ability to handle adversity on my own and to not inconvenience others, even those who are offering support. The unwillingness to accept community aid is an insidious form of grind culture that fosters resentment and anger toward the world when we should seek support in these difficult times. Together as a collective, we can create environments where rest and restoration can be valued and prioritized. Rest is so beyond our comprehension in this time of neoliberalism and grind culture that we must be ready to explore and experiment ourselves and find and accept support in our communities.

Acknowledging and enforcing one's boundaries in the workplace is an empowering anti-grind culture practice. There is no space for rest if you refuse to honor your limits and respect your own time. I have come to understand that in my life, I have become a codependent person in my search for validation, as discussed by Archer here:

Codependency is an emotional and behavioral condition that impacts your ability to have a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship... Many codependents place a lower priority on their own needs to support the needs of others. My codependent behavior was about seeking validation and affirmation through the care of others. Not seeing value in myself, I sought it in being a good friend, employee, boss, or daughter.³⁶

This ties right back to the effects of grind culture on my childhood and how that has influenced my actions and values up until this point. I never emphasized my own needs lest I inconvenience or bother anyone else. It was through my strong will and individualism that I would succeed because every opportunity was given to me to grind and make something out of

³⁵Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*, 18.

³⁶Archer, *The Grind Culture Detox*, 109.

myself. There has to be time committed to discovering my needs and then incorporating those priorities into my life. Grind culture keeps us from taking the time to investigate or dream of ways of restoration in our lives, and I reclaim that time for myself and my journey to live in resistance to its negative influence on my life.

Where do I go from here?

I am so tired of being tired. The attainment society we have built, where everything is possible and anything is obtainable for yourself, has wholly burnt me out. Anything less than absolute fulfillment is a failure, and the chase of that nirvana never ends. I'm tired of trying to optimize everything I do to win this rigged game of capitalism someday. I'm tired of being told that I need to work harder, to be grateful and positive despite it all. I am tired of being told what I should want while having no idea what I actually want. Or, more importantly, what I need.

I am not the only one making this choice. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the toxicity of grind culture and its need for production and labor at all costs. Even as the modern world was paralyzed in a crisis unlike any other in the twenty-first century, we were told that the economy must continue and that essential labor must be done. In the words of the lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, when asked about the dangerous risks of reopening our economy, "There are more important things than living."³⁷ A publicly elected leader told his constituents that a functioning economy is more important than their lives. This is what grind culture has demanded of our leadership: to ensure that the human cogs are constantly moving, producing more capital than ever before. Individual lives mean little to the grind; in fact, individuality and agency directly threaten its goals.

³⁷Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*, xi.

As I approach the end of this incredible endeavor, this thesis, I feel the moment's significance. This project has challenged me to question the long-standing beliefs that were reinforced to me by my education, my family, and my dance career. To investigate the forces that made me successful and threatened to destroy me. After all this time, I have rediscovered my agency and ability to choose a different way of functioning. There is no simple cure for what grind culture has done to me. Despite that, there is still a new opportunity going forward, which I will navigate with intentionality, mindfulness, and community. My grind ends here.

Creative Manifestation Documentation

This thesis was inspired by a straightforward question asked by my therapist as I sat in my car, hunched over my lunch while talking to my phone screen. “How do you rest?” my therapist asked earnestly. I almost choked on my bite as I sat in complete silence. I did not know how to answer that as an athlete, dancer, and person whose livelihood depends on my body's skill, energy, and limits, without a clue how to restore myself. During that time, I did not even identify as an artist; dance was not a creative endeavor but a job. It was all I knew how to do, and it slowly drove me mad as I eventually burned out.

As explained by Josh Cohen, a psychoanalyst specializing in burnout, a signature element of the condition is the “intense yearning for this state of completion with the tormenting sense that it cannot be attained, that there is always some anxiety or distraction that can’t be silenced.”³⁸ I was trapped in this grind, continually chasing this sense of completion or satisfaction, only to further my exhaustion. How did this happen? Why was I like this? How was I living my dream in theory, yet so unfulfilled, frustrated, and exhausted? How do I find that joy again in dance? Is it gone?

These were the questions I have been seeking answers to in my personal life, and when allowed to investigate and create a work of my choosing, I sought to dig even further within myself for answers. As a new father, I realize this current way of living is not sustainable nor what I want for my son. I must protect him from the exhaustion I cannot wrestle free from, which begins with my resistance to my internalized values and the external forces in the world that encourage engaging in grind culture.

³⁸ Josh Cohen, “Is There More to Burnout Than Working Too Hard?” 1843 Magazine, *The Economist*, June 29, 2016 <https://www.economist.com/1843/2016/06/29/is-there-more-to-burnout-than-working-too-hard>.

Charting the course of the creative manifestation and its evolution through this process will be difficult for me, as I still struggle to recognize my own creative abilities. Coming into this program, I had not made a dance or performance work of consequence in sixteen years. In the aftermath of its performance, I am still dealing with the extremely positive reception I have received about the work. I was prepared for every outcome except for it being a success, and now I have to face that and confront my own biases about myself. Coming into this program, I did not identify myself as a maker of dances or a creative choreographer with inventive ideas. Reflecting on how everything turned out, I feel like I mostly compromised on a loose vision or feeling I was trying to capture until everything lined up into its final form.

I have overheard comments about my decisions and their meanings, such as, “A brilliant choice; it adds so much meaning to the work,” when it was more of a matter of convenience. For example, the choice to use saddle sandbags typically used in theater or film productions in the work was because I thought they would be the easiest thing to clip to my body. (And the clips ended up not even working as intended.) It is interesting to watch people analyze my thought process and assign meaning to things that had little consequence for me. Again, it is all quite unfamiliar territory. I am glad the work resonated with people, and it achieved the goals I had set for myself, but I also think context matters in this situation. I am a classically trained ballet dancer, and some of my colleagues did not expect me to push the boundaries of what I consider a performance for myself to this post-modern place. These things stick out to me as I try to deflect from facing the fact that I might have more to offer than just a simple performance.

Origins of the Work

This work was initially conceived as an expanded version of a project I developed with Eliot Fischer for Intermedia Studio: Digital Media class. That work, titled *Burdens We Bear*, reflected on the day-to-day drain of my modern life, with digital elements projecting on the background. There was a green “health” bar, as it were, and as the piece continued, it slowly diminished as I slowly exhausted myself. The soundscape and phrase work I created was taken from the romantic ballet *Giselle*, as a man dancing himself to death felt appropriate for the subject matter I was trying to illustrate. While most of these elements faded away, the ending managed to survive, as the sounds of waves crashing implored me to pause, to rest. I assumed this was a bare-bones version of my thesis work, something I would expand upon with time. Honestly, though, it never begged a reconsideration as I started to think about the next manifestation of this research. As I began to work on this process with my thesis mentor, Molly Rogers, we started to figure out how we would express this grind I have internalized for an audience.

It was a good first step, but I had other ideas that I wanted to try, namely, experimenting with weight on the body, a weighted vest, or bags of sand to carry. I struggled with how exactly I wanted to execute this for a while. I thought about having a sandbox on stage, filling bags during the work, and adding them to my person; there was something in that work and the repetitive nature of the task. Eventually, I decided on a harness that I could attach weight to. A common thought I had to deal with was feeling like I had to fulfill certain standards. Because this is a theater show, the harness should be a costume piece; it should be designed to be sleek and functional. The reality is that that is not necessary, and I also tried not to put such standards into this work. Something I am trying to embrace is that work changes over time. This is the

manifestation right now, this is the form it has taken, which is more than enough. Every masterwork of choreography is constantly being shaped and changed with time. As I created to work, I tried to embrace that mentality of curiosity and play, not perfection.

As I stated above, I am not traditionally a maker myself, so to find inspiration for the creative manifestation, I looked to films and performances I have seen for ideas. This took me to the film *Pina* by Wim Wenders. Specifically, a moment from “...como el mosquito en la piedra, ay si, si, si...” where a performer is tied to a point off stage and runs as quickly as they can until the binding whips taut and restrains them. This moment, while being a relatively short part of the film, has always stayed with me. It seemed to grasp the feelings I was trying to capture: this strain and restriction. The performers keep running without any resolve or hope of freeing themselves, but they soldier on. I just had to translate it into my lived experience.

Another film that provided some inspiration and thought was *Man Who Dances*, directed by Robert Drew. This is a film I encountered as a young man while studying dance. It served as a stark reminder of where I was in my own journey, specifically where my perspectives have changed since I was a young man. The film follows Edward Villela, famed New York City Ballet legend, performing all his most physically arduous roles in one weekend. Watching Villela continuously put his body through overwork to the point of collapsing on the New York State Theater stage during a matinee performance is horrifying. A younger me saw this as inspiring, embracing the narrative of Villela as the martyred artist, willing to go through extreme physical pain for his art form. It is all presented as noble and inspiring, with a thick layer of American nostalgia in the narration. The narration interested me, as it encapsulated American ideals on overwork and the expectations of a passionate worker. I isolated audio of Villela discussing his penchant to add more and more to his plate while the people closest to him warned

him that someday this, too, will end. It was exactly what I needed to set the stage for the work, to introduce the audience to the experience I was trapped in.

Development of Bindings

My original idea for the restrictions played with an emotion I had often going through this program in times of stress or overwork. I felt like I had so many roles to play and was failing at most of them—roles like father, mentor, son, dancer, and student. I felt bound to these responsibilities and angered by my shortcomings, demanding more of myself. This led to multiple physical restraints—ultimately four, one for each limb—versus just one, attached to totems on the stage. For the purposes of the manifestation, the totems functioned as objects that had special significance or meaning tied to the roles discussed above. Each role would have a totem (signifying fatherhood, mentorship, a dancing career, and school), but this became logistically difficult. How would I get these totems on stage? What would they be? How would they be heavy or strong enough to hold my weight while running away? The idea shifted into a different shape as the dance studio barres became the focus of the work.

The challenge quickly became how does one choreograph with such tight restraints on the body? The body and all its capabilities for movement offer enough complexity and depth, and the restraints were another thing to try to manage on top of that. This idea shifted as I entered a studio space, as the easiest thing to do was to attach myself to the barres screwed into our walls at the Nashville Ballet. While at first, I did not love the idea, it did feel particularly relevant to my lived experience and journey as a ballet dancer. I was tied to this art form, and despite some of its negative effects on my life, I knew no other way than this grind.

Knowing next to nothing about fabrics, I reached out to our costume department to find options for my constraints. I wanted them to be nude/neutral because I wanted it to feel like an

extension of my own body. They had some excess “power mesh” used in costumes and cut me some sample pieces to play with. It was incredibly strong, as I have never managed to tear a strip. I also quickly realized I had no idea how to tie a single knot that could sustain my body weight, a skill I developed over the course of this work. Once the knots were sorted, I played with different lengths and widths to explore different possibilities and expressions of the fabric. Eventually, I decided to keep them all at uniform four-feet-long, that length offering the right amount of freedom and constraint. This choice to have nude fabrics did influence my costume choice, as I went with dark colors to help distinguish the constrictions on my body. While they never tore, they would sometimes pop off the barre they were attached to. That led to me creating an excess of bindings, so no matter what happened, I could still pull those barres. I did not mind having restraints stuck on me as I moved on to the next section; these internalized values are hard to lose, after all.

As I got closer to my return to Hollins, production had some concerns regarding these restraints. How exactly was the production team going to mimic the current setup I had? What would these bindings be tied to? Would I have a wall constructed with a barre attached to it? Is that even possible? When discussing this problem with Molly, I half-heartedly offered to use unmounted barres, insisting that that would be crazy, right? She supported the choice, and the rest is history. Being able to move around the stage and not be fixed to a single point was incredibly freeing, and letting the barre be an active partner in the work added an element of weight and struggle.

A striking quote that inspired my research was by Hersey, in which she says, “Exhaustion keeps us numb, keeps us zombie-like.”³⁹ This numbness she discusses struck me so clearly, as

³⁹ Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance*, 29.

this is how I felt in my work in dance as exhaustion took hold. I had to ignore it to fulfill the demands of the grind, and years of neglect led to a disconnect—that loss of identity and feeling led to the idea of covering my face. I had also played with the idea of wearing braces and supports on my body as the work developed, to illustrate the methods dancers use to continue pushing their bodies despite their pain. In practice with the bindings and barres, it was too complex and did not read effectively.

Molly was the one who encouraged me to embrace improvisation for the first section, which I will refer to as the barre drag improv. While constrained, the choreographed elements I was trying to make were not working, so she wanted me to embrace the unknown, creating moments I could never plan for. While I had my fears that this would not be interesting enough for an audience, I got to work developing an improvisation score to explore the possibilities. Eventually, a second barre was added to increase options, placed perpendicularly to the audience's orientation. This offered more possibilities in the manifestation, and by having the bindings not tied to the center of the perpendicular barre but rather only one side (the downstage side), the barre responded and interacted with being pulled differently.

One idea that Molly and I discussed was having a phrase within the barre drag improv, a series of movements established in the beginning of the work and repeated during the improv despite the added obstacles. These movements were inspired by simple center *tendu* combinations and were designed to be an anchor, a recognizable feat that would get noticeably worse as the piece continued and I got increasingly fatigued. It would help illustrate the repetitive nature of grind culture in my ballet dancer experience. I wanted the phrase to be recognizable in multiple orientations when developing it, so it would be recognizable if I were lying or sitting on the floor, as those situations did occur during the barre drag improv. It is also

repeated in the final section, free of the barres, where I had the four sandbags on my body. At that point, the exhaustion and weight morph the step entirely.

Development of Sounds

I still struggled to find ways to build material, especially without any soundscape or music. As I did for my intermedia work *Burdens We Bear*, I fully intended to develop a soundscape inspired by an Ohad Naharin work titled *George & Zalman* that uses a Charles Bukowski text that is repeatedly read, getting slightly longer each time. Bukowski's text triggered movements and gestures from the dancer, creating this satisfying loop for the audience. It also felt like an effective way to have a feeling of progressing time. There were multiple versions of this idea that I wanted to play around with various manifestations of grind culture, such as the gig economy and academia. Building layers through repeating text and steps. I also thought I could include audio from *Man Who Dances* to add dancer-specific context. Ultimately, it was a struggle to gain a clear vision, and the idea started to fade away. In pursuing musical alternatives, I stumbled upon "Clouded Yellow" by the Kronos Quartet. It immediately resonated with me, and I felt compelled to use it for the barre drag improv.

When trying to figure out what else I should do sonically with the work, I remembered what had started this journey in the first place. A question: how do you rest? This, alongside other questions asked of me during the process (like from the thesis advisory committee check-ins), spurred not only this project but also a lot of the research and discoveries I made along the way. I could have that play out in front of the audience. Watch and listen as my own internalized grind is challenged. I have had a lot of tough conversations during this work, and it still feels like I am constantly unpacking and contextualizing my internalized issues, even to this day. Why not let the audience in on that process? I do not have answers, mostly questions and difficult

realizations. That's what I want them to see. It is another layer of the struggle I am in. This also created an ending for the work, as I finally chose rest by the end of the conversation. To listen to my body is something I have been ignoring for so long. It was time to let the weight go and find a new way forward. This also harkened back to *Burdens We Bear*, as I once again found peace in the sounds of ocean waves crashing onto the shore. This became the final section of the work, which I will refer to as the questions and answers section.

Choreography of Labor

Once the questions and answers section was finalized, recorded, and edited, it was time to put together some movement to finish the piece. I had made many fragments of movement in explorations of exhaustion and the refusal to rest throughout the year, and now it was just a matter of deciding what movements fit best with which texts. I played with the idea of incorporating some physical fitness exercises, such as planking, sprints, and jumping jacks into this section. I wanted to touch on these movements because it was relevant to address other movements I and others engage in with grind culture.

There was an interesting symbiotic relationship between developing the text and the movements to go alongside it. As new ideas came and went on either side, it led to new explorations and possibilities. I made a fair amount of material in the studios at Hollins; it felt right to build on the work in the place where these ideas first manifested. In some ways, returning to the intense workload of Hollins set my body up to be in a place to move from a place of overwhelm; working on the thesis and portfolio along with my regular class load quickly got unwieldy and very stressful, but it served as a jumping-off point.

While finalizing this section, there was an interesting tug-of-war between the need to produce the end of the work and the need to let it come to me organically and honestly. I would

take breaks from moving and just read the text, remember those times in my life, and fantasize about the work. At one point, I thought of having a treadmill onstage and trying to dance on that, even acknowledging to the audience that I was trying to “get it in” while in a live thesis performance. I liked the absurdity of that idea, exploring the insane things we justify putting our bodies through in practicing grind culture. I still honestly like that idea, which is another investigation into the absurdity of grind culture. When engaging in active meditation over how I would want this piece to end, I was brought back to *The Burdens We Bear* and the idea of waves and the beach comforting and rejuvenating me. I already wanted to have bags of sand on stage; what if I finally stopped the work, poured out the sand, and laid myself to rest? I loved the idea and decided that would be the conclusion of the work, my body returning to its ancestral roots and sleeping as the lights faded to black.

Embracing the Unknown

A concept I had to embrace while developing the work was the unknown. For this to feel like labor and not a performance, I wanted to know as little as possible about how this work would affect me. I did not rehearse with any of the piece's physical elements (i.e., the barres, constraints, harness, and sandbags) until the first tech rehearsal, two days before the scheduled performance. Part of this was logistical; I knew rehearsing with sand would cause a mess, and I could not drag any barres through the studio floors on campus. While it was terrifying to leave these elements as a mystery, it helped preserve the reality of the work. In my mind this kept the performance more authentic in its labor, it was something I was not fully prepared for, so the exhaustion hopefully read as more realistic and less performative. I wanted the audience to see and feel my struggle. Molly and I discussed the labor the work should create and that it was worth witnessing someone struggle for that long. I resisted the improv and debated how long it

should last. Surely ten minutes was too long? The audience cannot be entertained for that long. I am just crawling around. It was not too long. It was the right decision to let the idea linger, develop, and manifest in front of the audience.

While that tech was terrifying, it also was very educational. I learned what worked and what did not, what I needed support with, and what I needed to reconsider. Covering my face led to some interesting visual issues, as I underestimated just how dark it was up there on stage, and with no legs in, I had fewer markers in the space to understand where I was. After a second run in tech in the lights, I was more comfortable as I collected data to inform myself of my orientation in the space. The barres were different than the ones I used in Nashville, slightly lighter and elevated with a different base structure. This was mostly fine, except for realizing that the gap between the horizontal barres was wide enough to slip through my body. My rehearsal barres would not slide past my shoulders, leading to some issues in the work. In the improv, it was difficult to keep the barre from sliding off my body and all the way to the floor, and with my compromised mobility, my foot was hit more than once. (This led to the sprained toe incident during the actual performance.) The carabiner clips that my sandbags came with were too small to easily attach to the harness, especially in the dark and with obstructed eyesight.

In my first tech run, I started the question-and-answer section without any weight attached to my harness, which was not ideal. I intended to clip the bags to my harness with carabiner clips, but with my decreased visibility with the face covering, I discovered it was easier to shove the sandbags in the harness straps. That proved to be a reliable method of adding and maintaining the extra weight on my body throughout the question and answers section. By dress rehearsal, I was more than confident that I had enough information to achieve the piece's goals; I just needed confirmation that it all worked in a real run. Once I got that confirmation, I was off

to the races. It was intense to realize that this concept was real after all this time. I had a piece with a beginning, middle, and end. It was hard not to be excited about sharing it with my peers, and I was so protective of my little secrets.

Pre-Performance

The morning after my dress, I stretched my toes on my bed when the lights went out. I figured something was wrong in my room and walked into the hallway to see if anyone else's room was out of power. It quickly became apparent there was a larger problem at work as more and more people woke up to a blacked-out campus. Everything was put into question, and the excitement I had just built up was to be put on hold due to this situation. All throughout the day, I waited for an email or a text, hoping to hear that the problem had been solved and all would be well. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as the campus did not have power that whole weekend. While it was obviously disappointing to be stuck in this stasis, I also found comfort in the fact that my dress rehearsal had gone very well. I was ready and confident in my work, and after all, I have been in this business for a long time. When the curtain goes up and there are butts in the seats, I know how to execute, delays or not.

My only frustration with the blackout situation was learning I would perform an 8 o'clock performance at 5:30 pm on Monday, June 17th. I suddenly had two and a half hours to prepare all my elements for the performance, including eating dinner, filling my sandbags, and bringing them to the theater. I ate as much as possible while also understanding the gauntlet I was going to put myself through in a couple of hours and ran back to Tinker House, the dorms for the MFA dance program at Hollins University. I frantically reloaded my bags with new sand, as they were emptied out during dress rehearsal, and I did not fill them during the campus blackout. Grey clouds were collecting in the sky, rain was possible with the forecast, and I had to

figure out how to keep this sand dry on my walk back to the theater. The sandbags are plenty heavy; I did not need them to get even heavier with water weight. I tied some plastic bags into a tarp of sorts and loaded up a cart to transport my bags. I was past ready to share the work, and it was finally my time, as the power stabilized at the Hollins Theater.



Figure 1 The Grind Was All I Was Given, Photo by Edgar L. Page. June 17, 2024.

Performance

It was so hard. My legs were like jelly from the second the music began, and I knew this would be an arduous task. Upon realizing the physical condition I was in, I did have some nerves, but that was quickly sorted by the adrenaline that was shot into my system in response to the performance. I stumbled through the anchor phrase with as much clarity as possible, fighting through the binds without moving the barres in place. Once I shared that motif with the audience, it was time to start the barre grind improv section, beginning with dragging the horizontal barre as far downstage as I could.

I do not know exactly when the barre fell and landed on my toe, as I had no sensation at all during the work. I sat in my sand and stared off into stage right at peace, finally, at rest. It was not until I came off stage that I felt tremendous pain in my left big toe and was concerned I might have broken it during the performance. I had never considered hurting myself during this work, and that hubris came back to bite me. There is a hilarious irony to it all: despite my deciding to resist my internalized grind, I still managed to hurt myself in my thesis dance performance.



Figure 2 Swollen Toe, Photo by Daniel Rodriguez. June 21, 2024.

Post-Performance

Several members of the thesis advisory committee advocated that I not go through this physically arduous task, that I had put myself through enough work, why put myself through more? I was resolute about accomplishing the physical task, so I framed it to myself as a sort of coda, one last extreme showing of virtuosity and grind as I moved forward with my life. This

framing leads me to my initial trepidations about performing the work again, even though I have received excellent feedback about it. If I am willing to put myself through this crucible for accolades repeatedly, is that not complicity in grind culture? Does this piece justify that because it ideally confronts an audience to challenge their connection to grind culture in their own lives? This experience and program have reconnected me to my creative self, and I want to choreograph more works, something I never said I would be interested in. There are so many possibilities to express something special, so why not allow myself to create in this arena?



Figure 3 The Grind Was All I Was Given, Photo By Orfeus Skutelis. June 14, 2024

The Aftermath

Life on the other side of this piece and this program is both exciting and terrifying. Hollins has pushed me to grow and challenge everything I have thought about myself and my capabilities. But that is now over, and I am left with the ephemera of the memories and

experiences of my two summers in the program. I now return to the real world and its harsh realities, like needing a second job to pay off my college education while still raising a family and trying to invest in my own skills and creative fulfillment. I must still negotiate what exactly I am willing to do and sacrifice to take care of my family—returning home after everything fills me with anxiety and fear.

While moving forward and trying to change is scary, I can also see the tremendous opportunity to build a new life. Up to this point, my life has been very much shaped by the expectations and demands of the capitalist society around me, and it has cost me dearly. I became an instrument of grind culture, pursuing affection and validation from the world around me through hard work at all costs. I still feel the pull away from ease and support in my day-to-day life, actively choosing to continue to trudge forward on my own, to shoulder all my burdens, and to continue to push myself too far. I must constantly challenge myself and ask, is this necessary? Do you really need to push through? Can you truly not accept help for this task? Why not take the time and effort to refresh yourself? There is change, slowly but surely. Small victories where I choose myself over the need to produce, and I embrace the Harm Reduction model Heather Archer discusses in *The Grind Culture Detox*: “Harm reduction invites us to start where we are and to take baby steps toward incremental transformation.”⁴⁰ Through small acts over time, I can create great change, and I can help others see what a life in resistance to grind culture could look like. That is how we create progress in the fight against grind culture.

⁴⁰Archer, *The Grind Culture Detox*, 49.

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