Special issue: Legacies of medieval dance

Dance, Institution, Abolition

Seeta Chaganti
Department of English, University of California Davis, Davis, CA, USA.

Abstract Antiracist commitments—in medieval studies and elsewhere—are incomplete without a commitment to abolitionist principles. These principles involve the dismantling of police, prisons, and many other institutions fostering the interests of carcerality, property protection, and racial capitalism. This essay encourages scholars of medieval dance to explore abolitionist horizons because, it argues, the study of medieval dance requires the development of three capacities also integral to the abolitionist project: 1) an ability to envision what we cannot know; 2) an understanding of how to act collectively even through our estrangement from each other (as medieval dancers did); 3) a willingness to take risks. These characteristics could help scholars of dance confront medieval studies and mobilize it to make not just the field but also the world a place of freedom, thriving, and mutual care.

Résumé: *Les engagements antiracistes – dans les études du Moyen Âge ou ailleurs – ne peuvent point se compléter sans engager également des principes abolitionnistes. Ces principes comprennent la démolition des polices, des prisons, et des autres institutions qui soutiennent les systèmes carcéraux, la défense de la propriété, et le capitalisme racial. L'étude de la danse médiévale demande trois compétences qui sont également intégrales au projet abolitionniste: 1) la capacité d'imaginer ce qu'on ne peut pas savoir; 2) la capacité d'agir collectivement à travers nos différences (comme l'ont fait les danseurs médiévaux); 3) la capacité de prendre les risques. Ces traits pourraient aider ceux qui étudient la danse à confronter la discipline des études médiévales et à la mobiliser pour créer – de la discipline et du monde – un espace de libération, de floraison, et de soin pour tous.*

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If medievalists hope for a future liberated from racist repression, we should look to the terms and praxes of abolition and dismantle repressive institutions, both inside and outside medieval studies, rather than simply reforming them. *Abolition*, in its current usage, often refers to *prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition*, which exists as a materially interventionist and largely Black feminist movement that has long worked to end carceral structures in the US and worldwide while at the same time substantially informing the broadest struggles against racism and racial capitalism. Cedric J. Robinson describes the latter thus: as '[t]he development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology' (Robinson 1983, 2). In her influential condemnation of the PIC, Ruth Wilson Gilmore elucidates the inextricability of carceral institutions, racism, and capitalist exploitation: 'Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore 2007, 28). Our first question, as medievalists, might then be whether or not Gilmore's definition of racism resonates with definitions of race originating in our field. The most influential of these is Geraldine Heng's: race is a demarcation of human differences 'selectively essentialized…in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups' (Heng 2018, 27). In different ways, both Gilmore and Heng train our focus on the systemic character of racism, asking us to look to the institutions—governmental, legal, religious—that have long codified it. For even if the modern prison most luridly casts racism into relief, it does so in neither spatial nor temporal isolation as an institution. Indeed, most PIC abolitionist thinkers, including Gilmore, Angela Y. Davis, Mariame Kaba, and Naomi Murakawa, acknowledge that to transform our approaches to harm means transforming everything about our world (Murakawa 2021, xviii–xix), not just excising police and prisons from it.

Given that abolition implies the necessity of targeting all institutions that repress along racial and class lines, those institutions perforce include academic ones, themselves often rooted in deep history. In an academic setting, such forms that embed and perpetuate the inherent violence of racism—its production and exploitation of premature death—include everything from a scholarly society's multigenerational protection of wealth built on the backs of immiserated labourers; to an organization's complicit dependence upon the murderous racism of carceral and criminal justice systems; to a university's espousal of the values of corporate real estate in justifying racist displacement and increased policing.[1] If medievalists want to see a future—for education and for the world beyond it—that is just and liberated, that goal will require doing away

1 The MAA suggests 'remembering the academy with a bequest,' replicating the inequities of intergenerational wealth transfer patterns (Medieval Academy of America 2021a). MLA and MAA harassment policies rely on violent state-based enforcement systems (Modern Language Association 2022; Medieval Academy of America 2021b). And universities are gentrifiers (Baldwin 2021, ch. 1).

with these institutions; placing oneself against (*ab-*) their increase (*olere*): abolishing them.

A second aspect of defining abolition is also important to articulate at the outset: the *abolition* of an institution does not exist on a continuum with the *reform* of that institution. Rather, abolition and reform qualitatively differ from each other. Looking to reform as an institutional solution threatens ultimately to preserve an institution's most repressive foundations. Michel Foucault has warned that reform, internal as it is to the institution, is doomed repeatedly not to disturb in any significant way the institution's 'very functioning' (Foucault 1995, 234). Reform, as Davis notes, reifies elements of the status quo (Davis 2011, 29–31).[2] As medieval studies organizations adopt the languages of justice, antiracism, and equity to remain viable in their existing structures—and I have abetted this phenomenon myself—they simply entrench their hierarchies, their wealth protection, their racism, their classism, their prestige markers, and their capitalist and individualist values.

2 Here Davis shows how even diametrically opposite ways of addressing the gender of prisoners in reform movements equally shore up patriarchal assumptions and structures.

These comments emerge from several years of thought within and around the context of a medievalist turn toward a more politically interventionist and critically aware examination of race than was often evident in many arenas of medievalist scholarship before this point, a turn that has occurred due largely to the work of scholars of colour. In 2020, Medievalists of Color named policing as an engine of racial capitalism and advocated for its abolition (Medievalists of Color 2020). In 2019, Sierra Lomuto used a meditation on the public library in her hometown of San Francisco to energize further her commitment to refuting Eurocentric canonicity in her classroom (Lomuto 2019). 2018 saw Nahir I. Otaño Gracia's account of the presence of and potential for harm in spaces like the annual International Congress of Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo) (Otaño Gracia 2018). In 2017, Dorothy Kim asked what we were doing in our classrooms to counteract white supremacy (Kim 2017). That same year, Adam Miyashiro illuminated the political ignorance of the organization then known as ISAS (International Society of Anglo-Saxonists), which aimed to consider 'global perspectives' at its annual meeting with little thought to that meeting's Hawaiian venue as a militarized site of colonization that continues to dispossess people and desecrate sacred spaces (Miyashiro 2017). Mary Rambaran-Olm would later resign publicly from this same scholarly organization for its racism and its condonement of harassment (Medievalists of Color 2019).

In response to these and other positions publicly taken, the field has eagerly articulated goals like antiracism, inclusivity, and equity. But whereas the examples above involved substantial critique of medieval studies' underlying institutions and structures (often at considerable risk to those articulating the critique), the field's absorption of this repositioning

has involved (as is often the case) liberal reformist adjustments of the structure: non-coalitional interpretations of identity politics; seat-at-the-table politics. But to oppose racism requires demolishing those very institutions of white wealth and status conferral that have constituted and continue to sustain and organize medieval studies: the engines of racial capitalism. And ultimately, our unwillingness to dismantle institutions within the field leaves us unprepared to dismantle them beyond it. We criticize racism within the context of an academic field without identifying, in order to abolish, racism's most powerful and dangerous instruments both inside and outside the field. There is no antiracism without abolition.

Medievalist impulses to dismantle institutions from within medieval studies are hardly new, of course, though to express oneself in this way now might resonate differently from how it has in the past. Eileen Joy spoke as a 'recovering medievalist' about the need to critique our most familiar and established publishing venues for their reciprocal relations with repressive institutions as well as for their own constraints (Joy 2013, 18). And in the 1980s and 1990s, Sheila Delany's Marxist and feminist work within medieval studies critiqued both new historicism and capitalism by observing that the former 'often confines itself to the empirical or superstructural register without penetrating to longer-range developments. The price of wool does little…to explain the Wife of Bath; the nature of early capitalism does a great deal more' (Delany 1990, 120). But this particular and present moment, characterized as it is by antiracist positioning, lacks meaning without the awareness that racism will not end unless all forms of carceral institution do.

To this end, I address here a subset of medievalists as a means of advocacy or perhaps radicalization. Specifically, I will argue in this essay that to study medieval dance is to develop an orientation that can counteract liberal reformist political strategies and keep the abolitionist horizon in sight. I make this claim for three reasons. First, medieval dance forces its scholars to accept its *unknowability* and the sense of imagination it requires in a manner that distinguishes it from other historical phenomena, even other performance-based ones. Second, as a movement practice that does not rely on empathy politics to motivate people to act together, medieval dance posits a specific type of *collective action*. This specification is important in that, as Solmaz Sharif has argued, calls for empathy risk leading to a recognition of sameness that produces an 'endpoint' rather than—drawing upon Audre Lorde's formulation—an 'actionable rallying point' (Sharif and Laurentiis 2017). Third, dance extends confrontations with *risk* well beyond the parameters that liberalism sets. In proposing that the study of medieval dance prepares us to choose and enact abolition rather than reform, this essay differs

substantially from institutional manifestos that call on us to improve premodern fields by making them more inclusive. I speak to dance scholars for the possibility that they aspire not to make the field better but to set their sights on the world beyond it. Though it might sound counterintuitive, I will maintain that studying medieval dance could outfit one to resist hiding behind discursive nuance—whether of critical analysis or reformism—and instead to confront in the most direct way possible the material realities of racism and other oppressions. I hope in what follows to identify the specific fitness of medieval dance scholars actively to support abolitionist movements in all their comprehensiveness and thus to reject reformist approaches. If my decision not to address medieval studies more broadly in this call to action runs counter to liberal attachments to inclusivity, I have made that choice deliberately. That is to say, I turn to this smaller audience for its likelihood of intensely aligned comradeship against the threats of dilution and demobilization that reform strategy always presents.

Dance and unknowing

PIC abolition frequently cautions us against the inclination merely to replace repressive institutions with something analogous, something police-shaped to take the place of police. As Davis and Dylan Rodríguez suggest, the way forward lies in refusing to reproduce the 'repressive logic' of structures that hierarchize and punish in the first place—asking questions not about how to substitute what we have with institutions that would function in similar ways but about how to obviate the need for those functions in the first place through a different social vision (Davis and Rodríguez 2000, 215–18). This task requires imagination, the capacity to entertain what we have not known before and cannot know now even if we can conceptualize that such a possibility exists. Recently, I suggested that scholars of the Western Middle Ages might accommodate such a frame of mind because of our familiarity with the Boethian notion of Providence, the idea that we can acknowledge that our ways of understanding time, cause, and the world are incorrect and imagine the possibility of a more expansive and accurate framework for understanding the world even if we have no cognitive access to it currently (Chaganti 2022a, 152). Here, I will refine that suggestion to focus on the medieval dance scholar, who in their work imagines not only movement that is impossible to capture but also the structuring disharmonies beneath dance's often harmonious appearance. In this section, I will argue that the medieval dance scholar's imperative to imagine beyond visible and recordable harmonies can prepare them to challenge the social status

quo: to achieve the latter requires looking past liberalism's attachment to its own versions of harmony and harmonic justice, toward something unknowable.

It would seem, of course, that much medieval performance—not dance exclusively—could offer such a means to abolitionist thought and action because all of it asks those who study it to conceive of the unrecorded and unrecordable. Carol Symes, for instance, has demonstrated the necessity to attend to 'the troubled relationship between what little is visible on the manuscript page and how much more might once have been visible or audible in performance' (Symes 2007, 16). The imaginative capacity of those advocating the abolition of our present institutions to build something new and not seen before might thus align with the work of scholars who need to see beyond textual witness to understand the fullness of performance culture as a dimensional, multi-sourced set of practices and spectacles. Symes reinforces this alignment, arguing elsewhere for the centrality of the question: '*What is the relationship between what was written down and what was really going on?*' (Symes 2011, 33). Written record and its absence correlate in more complex ways to performance reception, suppression, and duration than we can currently imagine.

And yet, the practice of situating drama on the axes of textuality and non-textuality keeps it in a fundamentally liberal realm of individualized capacity. The focus on textuality and its absence, that is, shapes our sense of performance as driven by the formation of individuated characters; or, in the case of medieval theatre, the unique manuscript copy (Symes 2011, 41–43, 46). Even if, in Benjamin Bennett's terms, 'all theater is revolutionary theater,' the dichotomy of performance and reading continues to shape itself around challenges to psychological realism and the examination of character presentation (Bennett 2005, 81). The conjuration of non-textual elements in premodern performance universally encourages the cognitive creation of the unseen, the unimagined, or the presently unimaginable. In the context of drama, however, such creation often persists in the liberal valuation of an inevitably foregrounded individual, the articulation of interiorized and singular agencies through language.

If the implicit liberalism of many approaches to dramatic performance makes itself visible in this way, liberalism becomes further evident through still other performance modes distinct from medieval dance. Modern dance provides an example. Rudolf Laban (1879–1958), the choreographer and inventor of the dance notation system Labanotation, located his theory of dance as 'totality'in liberal visions of law. Ana Isabel Keilson argues that for Laban, 'Dance revealed social order as flowing harmony through each individual's active exercise of freedom extending from law' (Keilson 2019, 20). As Keilson notes, while Laban's position represents 'embodied conservatism,' it simultaneously represents a positive approach to liberal

democracy. It discerns the possibility of harmonious reconciliation among individuals—the 'liberal social subject' – through a conservative vision of society (Keilson 2019, 27, 28, 31). This sense of harmony is rendered in legal contexts as 'harmonic justice,' generated from the interaction of different individual wills. Kathryn Temple situates this term in her readings of the eighteenth-century English legal scholar William Blackstone. Blackstone, as Temple argues, optimistically subscribes to an ideal form of interdependence and balance between individual interest and absolute, eternal, and institutional forms of justice, so that each necessarily follows from the other (Temple 2019, 150; Temple 2014, 132). Echoing accounts of Laban, who aimed 'to present "individual personalities," and celebrate the possibility of their "harmonious interaction"' (Preston-Dunlop 2013, 44), Blackstone's harmonic justice involves 'a weighing process in which differences are subsumed under similarities and conflict is reframed in service to a larger sense of harmony' (Temple 2019, 161–62). Even without the implements of language and dialogue to articulate and foreground individual subjectivity, dance in Laban's modern context reflects these aims to reconcile individual perspectives—as well as privileging individuality as a necessary component of such a resolution process—through formal attachments to harmony and symmetry.

Medieval dance, however, counteracts these liberal structures of thought by forcing us to imagine the possibilities of disharmony, asymmetry, and arrhythmias rendered invisible in the archival preservation of early dance. Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century English poem 'To Rosemounde,' in which the speaker watches his love object dance and which is composed in a *balade* form related to earlier medieval dance practice (Cohen 1915, 45), illustrates this dynamic:

Madame, ye ben of al beaute shryne
As fer as cercled is the mapamounde;
For as the cristal glorious ye shyne,
And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde.
Therwith ye ben so mery and so jocounde
That at a revel whan that I see you daunce,
It is an oynement unto my wounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

For thogh I wepe of teres ful a tyne,
Yet may that wo myn herte nat confounde;
Your semy voys that ye so smal out twyne
Maketh my thoght in joy and blis habounde.
So curtaysly I go with love bounde
That to myself I sey in my penaunce,
"Suffyseth me to love you, Rosemounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce."

Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne
As I in love am walwed and ywounde,
For which ful ofte I of myself devyne
That I am trewe Tristam the secounde.
My love may not refreyde nor affounde;
I brenne ay in an amorous plesaunce.
Do what you lyst, I wyl your thral be founde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

[Madame, you are the shrine of all beauty as far as the map of the world is circled, for you shine like the glorious crystal, and your round cheeks are like ruby. Whereupon you are so merry and so jocund that when I see you dance at a celebration, it is an ointment to my wound, though you will not dally with me. For though I weep a barrel full of tears, yet, that woe cannot defeat my heart. Your thin voice that you twist out so diminutively makes my thought abound in joy and bliss. I go so courteously, bound by love, that I say to myself, in my penance, 'It is enough for me to love you, Rosamound, though you will not dally with me.' There was never a pike so rolled in sauce as I am rolled and wound up in love. Because of which I often believe myself to be truly Tristran the second. My love cannot grow cold or numbed; I burn always in an amorous desire. Do what it pleases you, I will be found your slave, though you will not dally with me.] (Benson 1987, 649; trans. my own.)

On the one hand, the poem's images of Rosemounde's 'rounde' ruby cheeks, the 'mapamounde' (globe of the world), and the lexical opposition ultimately balancing itself in the speaker's love never freezing ('may not refreyde') while he continues to burn ('brenne'), promote a sense of periodicity in their concentricities and symmetrical swings. The repetition of the line 'Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce' (though you will not dally with me) reinforces the poem's harmonious effect by seeming to lead us toward a structurally inevitable resolution. All such perceptions find archival support in medieval writing about the symbolic value of dance's harmony and order (see Oresme 1968 [1377], 142–44).

On the other hand, critics have paused over the images in this poem that strike readers as 'oddly discordant' (Mann 2016, 130), namely its peculiar barrel of tears and sauced fish. I have argued that we might understand the strangeness of these images—each of which begins a stanza following the harmonious repetition of the poem's refrain—as not simply an oddity of content or image but instead a reflection of an otherwise invisible presence of disharmony. The images intimate an exertion of unpredictable and irregular trajectories of forces within the dance as the speaker experiences that dance through a mode of participatory spectatorship (Chaganti 2018,

21). Static visual representations of round dances from the Middle Ages cannot fully convey this aspect, particularly as they often offer an image of the dance from outside it. But reading representations of dance through these experiential perspectives conveys to us a different and more complicated medieval understanding of the mechanics of dance. This is a strange footing that we cannot empirically verify for ourselves in the present but whose presence is suggestive and freeing to acknowledge in its disharmony and irresolution.

If, as medieval dance scholars, we thus question harmonic ideals for their occlusion of dance's experiential and embodied realities in time and process, we might extend that suspicion of apparent harmony back into the liberal political realm, rejecting those ideals of balance and resolution even if we cannot fully know the specific elements that would constitute an alternative. That is to say, dance scholars might inhabit a standpoint that compels us to critique liberal aspirations to harmony, discerning how such aspirations conceal what is inequitable, uneven, and hierarchical in the status quo. For as Temple rightly notes, the insistence upon the possibility of what seems, to a liberal majority, harmonious resolution will undoubtedly minimize and silence the concerns of those already marginalized in a society (Temple 2014, 132–33).

To resist the apparent tendency toward inevitable harmony in medieval dance thus seems potentially generative as abolitionist training. The habit of mind developed through this perspective prepares us to entertain the possibility of a vision we cannot fully see (particularly not through our traditional mechanisms of evidentiary support). Our receptiveness to this possibility might lead us to slough off our dependence upon the institutional structures that to others might seem inevitable. For in their seeming inevitability, their insistence upon liberal modes of resolution, those institutional structures make carceral consequences appear likewise inevitable to most (Davis 2011, 1). The unknowing that necessarily attends medieval dance creates a space away from these dynamics, a space of irregularity and defamiliarization in which to imagine and create something different from the institutions whose practices will always, in the end, safeguard the white resources and power upon which they were established.

Strange collectives

The strangeness and disharmony of medieval dance furthermore elucidate promising possibilities for understanding collectivity, coalition, and solidarity. This section will elaborate upon the unknowable disharmonies of dance by dwelling upon the unseen but crucial forces that hover between dancing bodies in medieval perspectives on dance. Attuning ourselves to these forces, I will argue here, can allow medieval dance

scholars to understand and engage in collective struggle in ways that override both the liberal interpretation of identity politics and the need for institutional hierarchical structures that might appear to support, but ultimately threaten, such struggle.

To return to the limitations in medieval studies' current political engagements with which I began, it has sometimes seemed the case that liberalism's narrow, opportunistic interpretation of both identity politics and the critical legal studies term *intersectionality* has undermined the pursuit of freedom. To be sure, this problem is hardly unique to medieval studies institutions. As the scholar of Asian American studies Colleen Lye argues, the 'intersectional person,' in their current institutionalized sense,

> … becomes the ideal minority subject, to be sought for inclusion because the form of her multiplicity is not qualitatively distinct from that of the majority, just quantitatively…. [H]er intersectionality can be considered to exist on a continuum with the marks of uniqueness that distinguish the abstract liberal individual… In this application, intersectionality is compatible with individuality and indeed signifies the very opposite of identity as it was conceived by the [Combahee River Collective] and, in fact, Crenshaw. (Lye 2020, 704)

Medieval studies is by no means immune to this misprision, and I have attempted to address it elsewhere by speaking for solidarity models that expand coalitional networks to seek out justice and liberation not simply for certain groups within medieval studies, or even for medieval studies as a whole, but well beyond the field. This praxis necessarily involves medievalists 'collaborating to oppose what the group discerns as injustice while recognizing the fight's broadest implications,' particularly those implications that concern the white liberal interest in preserving a racial capitalist status quo (Chaganti 2022b, 123). Such collaborations would logically require action that occurs collectively and beyond the institutional structures that have established and reified medieval studies' inequities and violences in the first place. A model like this might be difficult to enact within the parameters of liberal senior mentorship protocols as well. Such protocols risk encouraging emerging voices to speak largely as liberal individual subjects, foregrounding and setting their own vulnerabilities as their boundaries for action. In that way we risk defusing, as Lye describes, the potential militant power of intersectional and identity politics.

So, I appeal again to medieval dance scholars; their imagination of the unseeable might also allow them to adopt models of collective action that generate interventionist force through disharmony. To make this case, I invoke the round dance often called *carole* (Mullally 2011, 60–61). Perhaps even more than Chaucer's imagined dance in 'To Rosemounde,'

those performances explicitly categorized as round dances appear to reflect and promote ideals of harmony. From Dante's saints in the *Paradiso*, moving in what John Stevens sees as a *carole*, to the turning ring in the late-twelfth-century Middle English *Hali Meiðhad*, round dancing affirms celestial order (Stevens 1968, 3; Fletcher 1993, 439). At the same time, I suggest that we recognize the complicated relations of mutuality within the danced setting, relations more determinative of the dance experience than what the seemingly symmetrical and static visual representation of dance can convey. In these relations, the operation of dance relies less upon uniformity, periodicity, and obedient following than it does upon a network of asymmetrical and temporally askew forces of interaction within the formation of the dance. Furthermore, the *carole* participants' trajectories of mutual gaze and of bodily orientation generate temporally and spatially irregular forces that hover between kinetic subjects, what I have called the virtuality that attends medieval dance in its spectators' and participants' perception of it.[3] If to think about medieval dance is to entertain the possibility of scenes unknowable, it is equally to conceive of the complex and challenging sets of relations and interactions, as well as the force generated, within those scenes.

3 See Chaganti (2018, 189–226), for detailed readings elaborating upon this argument.

In those relations lie models for political engagement in the contemporary sphere that produce powerful action and destabilize assumptions about institutional hierarchy. First, the collective experience of medieval dance that I suggest we consider is always supplemented, as above, by virtuality—forces that exist as anticipatory to, lagging behind, superimposed upon, and adjacent to the material bodies moving in performance. *Virtuality* itself derives from, and is associated with, lexical groupings indicating power and force: *vir*, *virtus*, *vis* (Chaganti 2018, 7–9, 45–53). If we want to conceive of the possible dynamics of collective struggle for an explicitly political purpose, this model of force and virtuality as always both existing within and troubling the time and space of our collective spaces can give some shape to these dynamics. The presence of such force would mean that to operate collectively would never limit itself to the realm of the discursive or symbolic. We generate force both originating within and estranged from us that perforce moves into the world, anticipating and drawing us along so that we have to become interventionist actors together, supporting each other in pursuit of a larger goal.

As a way of describing the nature of collective interaction, the force of virtuality also frees us from the limitations of empathy politics. In other words, to engage in struggle together does not require that we empathetically walk in each other's shoes. Instead, our various estrangements and distances from each other (and even from ourselves, perhaps) energize our collective ability to see into an as-yet-unseeable future toward which we strive for each other. This vision of collective and community work and

thought cannot operate by the mechanisms of inclusion that attempt to place more of us in institutions that empowered themselves by excluding many of us in the first place. Nor would it rely on a standard of empathetic connection between individuals (as I mention above, a form of interaction that does not necessarily lead to further action). Instead, our work as medievalist thinkers and political actors would take place in collective, community-based, and explicitly anti-carceral settings whose forces generate and increase precisely through difference and estrangement, in order to attack racial capitalist structures.

And if the model of collectivity that medieval dance offers—power through estrangement—can guide us toward new modes of thinking and living, it can additionally aid us in destabilizing the institutional hierarchies on which we currently depend. Scholars of medieval dance are familiar with the idea that a *carole* had a 'leader' (or leaders). In the example of *Hali Meiðhad* I briefly mentioned, a reference to this convention exists: 'ther Godd Seolf ant His deore moder… leat i thet eadi trume of schimminde meidnes' (there God Himself and His dear mother…lead in that fortunate company of shining maidens) (Millett 1982, 11; trans. my own). Our sense of the role of the *carole* leader seems tacitly to map onto a modern sense of leadership. Richard Leighton Greene, for instance, notes in describing the danced *carole* that 'The whole procedure was under the direction of a leader,' to whom he assigns specific duty (Greene 1977, xlv). Greene cites Jacques de Vitry's comparison of the *carole* leader (the woman who 'coream ducit' [leads the dance]) to a belled cow in a herd (Greene 1977, xlv–xlvi n. 5). Her own figurative 'belling' ('quasi campanam'), the sound of her singing voice, keeps her within the purview and control of her master, the devil. On the one hand, institutional convention dictates the woman's state of subjugation to one outside the herd. On the other, her interaction with her own group of singers—following the analogy of the herd—does not necessarily place her in a hierarchical, authoritative, or directorial relation with them. Given the complexity of the relations within a dynamic setting like a round dance, we can question the meaning of leadership here within the collective structure. As a so-called dance leader, is the *coryphée* in hierarchical relation to the others? Or is she better understood playing a collaborative organizational role? To shift briefly into an anecdotal sphere, imagining this dynamic somewhat puts me in mind of facilitating a meeting of organizers who are collaboratively negotiating multiple leftist microtrajectories, not to create a liberal fiction of balance and harmony but to aim toward the most challenging forms of solidarity possible. This possibility could provide dance scholars with an unusual—and perhaps effective for its surprisingness—model for helping to conduct non-hierarchical, community-based decision-making and consensus-building processes.

The work of studying medieval dance, its uncanny space and its off-kilter time, prepares us to see beneath the deceptive harmonies of liberalism and to confront directly, in our modes of attack, the jagged imbalances, the injustices temporally dragged forward, that structure the world. From there we can aim to create collective action that draws force from our awareness of disharmonies rather than erasing them. Furthermore, in its distinction from the liberal and hierarchical strategies we might conventionally bring to work we see as socially just, medieval dance's strange footing of collectivity could prepare medieval dance scholars for not only action but also its attendant risk.

Dance and risk

To study medieval dance involves risk. At every turn, it stubbornly emphasizes the attenuated relation between its historical practice and the archives on which we depend to research it. For that reason, even though every scholar of every historical field knows the limits of archival evidence as a source of comprehensive historical truth, dance appears an especially unstable historiographic enterprise. And this deficiency may sometimes be clear to hiring committees (especially outside dance departments) composed of scholars accustomed to abundant records that might more readily justify and support their inquiries. Thus, those who decide from the outset to specialize in premodern dance have already displayed significant courage and imagination (which I myself did not possess, turning to dance only later in my career). In this last section, I hope to honour and call upon that sense of courage that I see in medieval dance scholars by asking them to think about how to respond to the risk they might perceive as attendant upon serious attempts to approach an abolitionist horizon.

The possibility of dismantling certain institutions and leadership structures will no doubt appear to risk doing harm, or leave some, or many, unprotected. Undoing scholarly societies, organizations, and other academic spaces, however, could mean building different kinds of communities indexed less to the mutually beneficial support of common scholarly interests than to shared political commitments and levels or types of political will toward more expansive goals.[4] Furthermore, our apprehension about the implications of such shifts might lessen in light of the fact that other premodern disciplines are thinking along related lines, as when classicists Sasha-Mae Eccleston and Dan-El Padilla Peralta advocate for 'a fuller and more holistic investment in our communities, in and outside of the academy' (Eccleston and Peralta 2022, 208). Moving away from scholarly interaction organized around hierarchies, gatekeeping, and elitist prestige markers might feel safer if adjacent fields (especially those

4 An abundant history of experimentation with education outside the traditional, and predominantly white, institution exists. See, for instance, the Chicago Communiversity and Abolish the UC (Staff, Students, and Parents 1970, 25; "Abolish the UC," https://www.instagram.com/abolishtheuc/?hl=en).

seeming even more mired in those values) follow similar models, with the goal of defusing the meaning of those signifiers in favour of less competitive, less austere, more supportive means of scholarly interlocution.

Even so, medievalists might perceive risks beyond the professional realm in committing to a specific kind of political praxis beyond the academy. Some might wonder, for instance: if I find a home in a group that has come to consensus around an abolitionist position that rejects channels of law, order, and punitive consequence, what happens when someone in that group does harm? Other scholarly collectives have applied themselves to this question for years, and in doing so they have recognized its challenges, especially around sexual harassment and predation (Durazo et al. 2014, 285; Castañeda et al. 2014, esp. 104–106). We would be committing to something that makes significant demands upon us, in ways to which we are not all accustomed (CARA 2016, 64–69). To take another example, what about agreements that a scholarly community makes to defend itself according to abolitionist principles against racist and fascist actors in the field (not a hypothetical presence in medieval studies)? Adhering to such principles requires much more time to accomplish responsibly than does renting a cop or looking further up the hierarchy for shielding. Unfamiliar practices, lengthy and difficult resolutions, failures and dissolutions, administrative retaliation for political outspokenness, the painstaking establishment of trust to work in honest collaboration across the peaks and valleys of academic hierarchy, the commitments of time and energy taken from the time we spend doing what our jobs require of us if we want to keep them—this all seems risky.

And yet, as many abolitionists would maintain, the real risk lies in leaving things as they are. The concern I raised above about harm or harassment to another within a community, and how to address it, is illustrated through the specific problem of carceral feminism. Originating in discourses around sex trafficking, the term *carceral feminism* has broadened to refer to a response to sexual harm that deploys those very carceral systems that protect and perpetuate patriarchal violence in the first place (police and prisons), particularly against those women most marginalized and dispossessed. For this reason, feminist abolitionist thinkers and organizers have tended to reject it (Kim 2018, 225; Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie 2022). The critique of carceral feminism helps to illuminate a broader point: while some might feel that the presence of institutions protects and shelters them—whether, in this case, the police or a scholarly entity built on generational white wealth—those institutions have always made certain people unsafe because they were designed and conceived to do so. And if these systems are not safe for everyone, we should not consider them safe for anyone. For this reason, while it may

feel like a risk to let go of existing institutional inclusion strategies and turn instead toward breaking what we have down and making something new, to do so ultimately renders everyone not just more cared for but also freer than we currently are. We become more able to bring together our convictions inside and outside our academic work in ways not only transformative but also necessary if medieval studies is serious about the principles it has for some time espoused.

Dance scholars, again, could be especially empowered to take this leap not only because they are brave themselves but also because of the unique ways that the dance culture they study can clarify the real risks carcerality presents. To make this case, I turn to the late (sixteenth-century) English lyric 'I can be wanton and yf I wyll':

I can be wanton and yf I wyll,
But yf youe touche me, I wyll crye howe
I can be merye and thinke no evell,
But yet beware, one cometh I trowe.

Yf any come, in faith I crye,
That all the strete my voyce shall heare.
Take hede that no man doe youe espye,
And I then warant youe come verye nye

But yf youe come, syt farre from me,
For me semeth youe should be wylde,
And by such wanton men as youe be
Yonge maydes are sometymes begyled.

I wilbe ware of suchelyke wylde men,
For when they touche me, I doo crye howe.
Kysse me ye should, I beshrewe me then;
By Crist, not for my mother's blacke cowe!

Ye may me kyll as soone as kysse,
I pray youe awaie and let me be.
In faith, all the world wyll speake of this,
I say, ye play the foole with me.

By God, I strike youe with my fyste,
I shall make your cap fall on the flower.
But for all that, doe what youe lyst,
And I wil be styll and crye howe no more.

[I can be wanton if I want, but if you touch me I will raise the hue and cry. I can be merry and think nothing evil, but beware, I believe someone is coming. If anyone comes, in faith I will cry out so that all

> the street will hear my voice. Take care that no man see you, and then I will give you permission to come very near. But if you come, sit far from me, for it seems to me that you might be wild, and young maidens are sometimes beguiled by such wanton men as you are. I will beware of similar wild men, for when they touch me, I do raise the hue and cry. Should you kiss me, I would beshrew myself then; by Christ, not for my mother's black cow! You might kill as soon as kiss me, I pray you, go away and let me be. In faith, all the world will speak of this, I say, (if) you play the fool with me. By God, I will strike you with my fist, I shall make your cap fall on the ground. But for all that, do what it pleases you, and I will be still and raise the hue and cry no more.] (Harris 2018, 243; trans. my own with the kind contribution of Carissa M. Harris).

The objection might occur here that this poem is not itself a dance lyric, but while 'I can be wanton' is not classified as such, its textual and generic situation places it in this context, adjacent to or reflecting the mechanics of the dance-vestigial. First, this lyric sits close in its manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 176, f. 98v) to another that has been designated a carol: 'A most fayre and true' (f. 100r; Wagner 1935, 454–55). This latter poem is considered a carol because it appears to contain a burden (a verse that begins every medieval carol as well as repeating throughout it like a refrain), inscribed as the first two lines of the text.[5] Second, 'I can be wanton' recalls the earlier and better-known English carol 'Ladd Y the daunce' (Cambridge, MS Gonville and Caius College 383/603; Greene 1977, 276–77), in which a maiden—the dance leader—asserts her right to enjoy her own merry behaviour in a dance but is then lured away by a clerk for a sexual encounter where consent is ambiguous at best. Thus, even if 'I can be wanton' has not been copied into the manuscript to indicate its status as a carol, its life as a poetic utterance seems to overlap both codicologically and conceptually with histories and traditions of dance that precede it.

'I can be wanton' demonstrates the limits of carceral solution by invoking a very early medieval enforcement practice known as the *hue and cry* (copied thus in the manuscript):

> I can be wanton and yf I wyll, but yf youe touche me I wyll crye howe
> I can be merye and thinke no evell, but yet beware one cometh I trowe. (Wagner 1935, 452-53)

This lyric receives much-needed attention in the important work of Carissa M. Harris, who models the incorporation of Black feminist theory into medievalist analysis (Harris 2018, 4-5). 'I can be wanton' is among a group of lyrics that Harris analyses as commenting upon on women's

5 DIMEV 126: https://www.dimev.net/record.php?recID=126#wit-126-1. Accessed April 8, 2023. Additionally, some of Harris's examples derive from the Ritson manuscript (London, BL Additional MS 5665), thus appearing with the important collection of 36 Middle English carols that this codex contains (Harris 2018, 191–92).

perspectives, societal positioning, their subjection to abuse, and their resistance to it. While in some cases these acts of resistance involve women independently standing up for themselves and making themselves heard, in others they are, as Harris also recognizes, more complicated. Into this latter category falls the raising of the hue and cry (or its threat) in 'I can be wanton' (Harris 2017, 45). The speaker's reference to this enforcement tool (which Elizabeth Robertson likens to 'calling the police today'; see Robertson 2022, 206) 'emphasizes,' as Harris says, 'the social and legal power of women's voices' even as the lyric admits that the threat of calling upon this form of justice ultimately fails: 'the law often does not work in women's lived realities' (Harris 2018, 206–207). In Harris's reading, the speaker's final utterance ('doe what youe lyst, / And I wil be styll and crye howe no more') suggests that she has succumbed to the assault and can now try only to survive it as a final form of resistance. Illustrating an aspect of the carceral feminist problem, the lyric shows us how a policing technique might create the appearance of safety against harm to women only to reveal its deliberate inefficacy at best and violence at worst toward those who are most vulnerable. After all, the technique always intended to serve instead patriarchal domination and ownership.

If we consider this poem through its faint or even suppressed relation to dance, its commentary upon carcerality intensifies. Treating this text speculatively as a carol, we note that the evocation of the hue and cry would be embedded in its burden, given that 'crye howe' appears in the first lines (commonly where the burden is transcribed). In this speculation, the phrase 'crye howe' might appear after every stanza in addition to lines 14 and 24 above. Repeating the reference to hue and cry fulfills a few functions. It communicates the tactic's inefficacy by diminishing further its potential to achieve any effect with every repetition. Hearing the phrase over and over also prompts listeners to recall the hue and cry's real meaning and origin, which, in its uses three hundred years before this poem, addressed theft of property as much as violence toward persons (Summerson 1996, 122). The hue and cry's even earlier, pre-Conquest, history accommodated, as Paul Hyams discusses, impulses toward private vengeance and the legitimation of violence (Hyams 2001, 29–30): the chase could and did end in death(s). To repeat its invocation would thus progressively entrench its allusion to a larger structure of carceral violence. In modern responses to sexual assault, manifestations of such carceral tradition make clear that in numerous ways they promote, rather than prevent, male violence (Kaba 2021, 3), precisely in their protection of property.

At the same time, if we feel that the poem's tenuousness of relation to the carol simply looms too large, disconnecting it from the liberatory strange footing of the carol, that situation in itself can reveal to dance

scholars what 'I can be wanton' fails to do as a non-carol. As suggested earlier, the carol can influence us politically through its encouragement to see the collectivity that accommodates and builds from estrangement. 'I can be wanton,' however, does not take up its own suggestions toward this possible collectivity. Harris points out that the speaker of 'I can be wanton' refers to other people throughout (Harris 2018, 208), whether someone (l. 4), all the street (l. 6), someone else (l. 7), my mother (l. 12), or all the world (l. 15). All let her down here. But in the network of virtual relations, of forces intending upon each other, the presence of such community members holds interventionist potential to stop the harm before it occurs. Indeed, the goal to prevent harm before it happens rather than having no alternative but carceral reactions after it does is undoubtedly shared by many others besides those explicitly organizing to abolish prisons and police. Perhaps the manuscript's unwillingness to render this lyric text unambiguously a carol betrays what this premodern moment similarly cannot or will not do. That is, neither poem nor moment will realize the potential of their own models of collectivity and strange vision to create a community that would stand against suffering and protect vulnerable people from it.

That the poem does not do so should not surprise us. The lens through which I have read dance and carols throughout is not that of the white clerical—or even white female—speaking, writing, or copying subject articulating these poems. That lens is, as I mentioned in my opening, a specifically abolitionist tradition advanced by Black and other women of colour feminists. And they in turn build upon the earlier abolitionist work that originated with a long history of Black radical revolt against enslavement (Rodríguez 2019, 1576). Taking these points together, we might recognize our unique opportunity as modern scholars of medieval dance to galvanize ourselves toward a different, free, and thriving vision of both study and the world beyond. Our historical and critical position allows us to discern medieval dance's strange models for acting in forceful collectivity. Simultaneously, our historical and critical position allows us to recognize those models' political potential by way of an abolitionist tradition that speaks from a very different time and place.

Conclusion: reform and abolition

Throughout this essay, I have tried to suggest that if we want a better field, we need a better world, and in order to achieve either, we need to ask some difficult questions about what kind of communities our traditional institutions have created. We could then think about turning away from those institutions in favour of other kinds of organizing that would involve

groups who found affinity through political aims, tactical preferences, and other considerations geared toward action and intervention as broadly related to medievalist interests. Implicit in this suggestion, as I intimated early in the essay, is the rejection of reform as a strategy. We have not needed Foucauldian or other institutional theory to make this case for some time. Where police are concerned, we might simply recall that Tyre Nichols' murderers (only the most recent killer cops to rear up as I write this piece) all wore the body cameras that result from reformist policies. Unreformable itself, policing is useful for elucidating why so many other institutions built upon the exclusionary violence that protects white property and wealth are unreformable as well.

In turning once more to why the medieval dance scholar in particular should be ready to reject reform, I would reiterate the medieval dance scholar's ability to imagine the presently unimaginable, attunement to models of collectivity that create and fuel force through disharmony, and capacity to confront risk. To abolish and radically remake, rather than to reform, has required and will require all three of these attributes. In this sense, scholars of medieval dance have the capacity to engage in the reconfigurations necessary for medieval studies to oppose the increase of racism and racial capitalism's violence in and beyond the field.

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About the Author

Seeta Chaganti is a Professor of English at the University of California, Davis. Her scholarship on medieval dance includes the book *Strange Footing* (2018) and essays in *Dance Research Journal, Philological Quarterly, Australian Literary Studies, Exemplaria, postmedieval*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Dance Reenactment* (2017). She encourages

medievalists interested in police and prison abolition to contact her and to follow UC Davis Cops Off Campus (@ucd_coc) for information and resources. e-mail: schaganti@ucdavis.edu.

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