

# Dancing to Distraction: Mediating 'Docile Bodies' in 'Philippine Thriller Video'

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## Abstract

This essay examines the conditions behind the 'Philippine Prison Thriller' video, a YouTube spectacle featuring the 1,500 inmates of Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Centre (CPDRC) dancing to Michael Jackson's hit song 'Thriller'. The video achieved viral status after it was uploaded onto the video-sharing platform in 2007, and sparked online debates as to whether this video, containing recorded moving images of allegedly forced dancing, was a form of cruel and inhumane punishment or a novel approach to rehabilitation. The immense popularity of the video inspired creative responses from viewers, and this international popularity caused the CPDRC to host a monthly live dance show held in the prison yard, now in its seventh year.

The essay explores how seemingly innocuous products of user-generated-content are imbued with ideologies that obscure or reduce relations of race, agency, power and control. By contextualising the video's origins, I highlight current Philippine prison conditions and introduce how video-maker/programme inventor/prison warden Byron Garcia sought to distance his facility from the Philippine prison majority. I then

investigate the 'mediation' of 'Thriller' through three main issues. One, I examine the commodification and transformation from viral video to a thana-tourist destination; two, the global appeal of 'Thriller' is founded on public penal intrigue and essentialist Filipino tropes, mixed with a certain novelty factor widely suffused in YouTube formats; three, how dance performance and its mediation here are conducive to creating Foucault's docile bodies, which operate as a tool of distraction for the masses and ultimately serve the interests of the state far more than it rehabilitates (unconvicted and therefore innocent) inmates.

*'I wanted something to thrill the world. I just found it so hilarious, so melodious. What an irony. They're right here in this jail, considered the rejects of society, and yet these rejects are now making our province and our country proud.'*

Byron Garcia, ABC News Interview, 2007<sup>1</sup>

*Key words:* Internet media, Philippines, dance/movement therapy, music

## Introduction

On July 17, 2007, Byron F. Garcia uploaded a YouTube video of 1,500 orange jumpsuit-clad dancing inmates from the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Centre (hereafter CPDRC) dancing the choreographic sequences from Michael Jackson's 1982 music video Thriller. The four minute-long video, known among YouTube

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audiences as the ‘Thriller viral video’ or ‘Philippine Prison Thriller’ (hereafter ‘Thriller’), amassed millions of views nationally and internationally. The video elicited a range of responses both positive and negative. As news reporters and documentary-makers visited the central Philippine island to learn more about the self-proclaimed ‘Dancing Inmates’,<sup>a</sup> most media outlets gave light-hearted reports while others indicated that forced dance rehearsals lasted for up to four hours daily.<sup>b</sup> Fans of the video continue to write supportive comments on YouTube celebrating the programme as a novel use of music and dance therapy, a model of holistic and therapeutic prison practice.<sup>c</sup> At the same time, national and international criticism of the dance programme surfaced. Allegations of inhumane treatment have been made against CPDRC by Philippine human rights group Karapatan, with primary blame resting on the inventor of the programme, Byron Garcia. In a BBC interview, Amnesty International Philippines stated that the dance videos appear to deny the individual inmates the basic right to respect.<sup>2</sup> Reports from 2007–10<sup>1–3</sup> indicate the implicit and explicit coercion that takes place in order for 1,500 inmates to partici-

pate in daily dance rehearsals; certain privileges are withdrawn for those who will not dance, with some inmates claiming they were denied food and conjugal visits for non-participation. Additional reports claim inmates who refused to dance were beaten<sup>3</sup> and one prisoner, a lead dancer, claims that his scheduled transfer from the facility was put on hold because of his ‘integral part in the public performances’.<sup>4</sup>

The video and its subsequent reception raise several complex issues, from prisoner agency and welfare to the reality of implementing a penal rehabilitation programme in a developing nation. Recent scholarship has noted the return to the ‘spectacle’ of punishment, and some have addressed the benefits of dance therapy as a mode of rehabilitation in prison environments and view CPDRC, overall, as a transformation from the punitive to the pleasurable.<sup>5,6</sup> Dance scholar J. Lorenzo Perillo discusses how the programme influences the social construction of Otherness, ‘discourages critical cultural engagement’ and ‘extends racial and colonial inequalities’.<sup>7</sup> The following article focuses on the commodification of the rehabilitation programme, and argues that YouTube broadcasting of the

<sup>a</sup> The title ‘Dancing Inmates’ was bestowed to them from Byron Garcia, and is reported in his video ‘CPDRC Song’ [Online] uploaded 9 October, 2008. Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-hinTjCD64> [2 October, 2013].

<sup>b</sup> Journalist Nick Lazaredes states that inmates dance twice daily, at 6am and 4pm in Jailhouse Rock: Cebu’s Youtube celebrities, SBS Dateline [Online]; 10 October, 2007. Available from: <http://www.sbs.com.au/dateline/story/transcript/id/131759/n/Jailhouse-Rock-Cebu-s-Youtube-celebrities> [2 October, 2013].

<sup>c</sup> See user cesaryapril1’s comment: ‘If Id [sic] ever be put in jail this is where i want them to send me lovin it:):)’; Pinkelephantist’s comment: ‘DANCE IS POWERFUL and so is MUSIC...I’d rather see them do this then [sic] think about their next crime after they get out. Don’t hate.....ParticipatE!’; and dragonsorcerer’s comment: ‘I like the message you were trying to convey. Prisons are overall a mess, no matter what society you look at. They should be used to rehabilitate those that can be, and not as a way to cage those that can be saved with the fallen, thus promoting the breeding of evil.’ Available from: [http://www.youtube.com/all\\_comments?v=hMnk7lh9M3o&page=2](http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=hMnk7lh9M3o&page=2) [2 October, 2013]. Hugh Riminton reports that ‘Every able-bodied prisoner – about 1,500 of them – must dance... Sometimes, the dancing occupies up to five hours a day’. Riminton H. ‘Thriller’ Prisoners Prepare to Make ‘Electric Dreams’ Come True. CNN.com [Online]; 5 September, 2007. Available from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/09/04/dancing.prisoners/#cnnSTCText>. [2 October, 2013].

performances fall in contrast to rehabilitative Dance/Movement therapy conventions. I question whether the mediation of recorded videos of the dance programme and whether such digital circulation constitutes a violation of prisoners' humanity and inherent dignity as outlined in international standards governing the treatment of prisoners.<sup>8,9</sup> The tension between the positive benefits of this music and dance therapy programme against allegations of mistreatment through enforced participation is examined, taking into account the sociocultural and economic landscape of the Philippines, as well as the power of dance as a medium for constructing what French philosopher Michel Foucault called 'docile bodies'.

While Jonathan Sterne<sup>10</sup> argues that [audio-recording] formats help define meaning, critical assessment of sound, vision and format in light of current, post-digitisation, consumption practices, critical discourse remains limited. Thus, the mediation of prison 'Thriller' through the context of digital, audio-visual site YouTube is a matter of great significance. Using 'mediation' here in the context of new media studies, I argue that the Internet mediation of these pop-dance recordings through the video-sharing platform YouTube without proper, prior consent denies unconvicted individuals the right to privacy, as such videos and associated images enjoy an afterlife that far exceeds most jail sentences. Through an examination of essentialist racial tropes, I argue that the popularity of 'Thriller' serves hegemonic political institutions by distracting global audiences from the harsh realities of everyday Philippine prison life. By investigating the cultural context alongside media depiction and reception of the inmates, I argue that careful consideration must be given before rehabilitation programmes are disseminated online and become government

public policy. Before analysing the mediation of the events however, further details about the CPDRC's unusual approach to rehabilitation are required.

### **Contextualising Philippine Prisons: Byron F. Garcia and CPDRC**

CPDRC is a modern, purpose-built detention centre, in the hills high outside the city of Cebu and is the largest prison on Cebu island. Because the judicial system is notoriously slow and rife with corruption, all inmates at CPDRC are awaiting trial on an array of charges – many waiting for up to six years.<sup>11</sup> CPDRC was built to comfortably accommodate 1,400 inmates, with a population of 1,288 in January 2013. In contrast, neighbouring Cebu City Jail and Mandaue City Jail have increasingly housed over twice their capacity in recent years. CPDRC's desire to serve as a model of 'leadership and good governance'<sup>12</sup> and subsequent refusal to overcrowd their facility is in contrast to fellow Philippine prisons as they struggle with severe overcrowding in old, sub-standard facilities. Indeed, conditions in prisons across the Philippines are notoriously harsh; former Philippine president Gloria Arroyo Macapagal once said a life sentence in a Philippine prison was worse than death.<sup>13</sup> Recent human rights advocates report similar findings, observing widespread, consistent and credible reports of the use of torture against persons in detention, and harsh prison conditions characterised by overcrowding, lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate nutrition and medical attention.<sup>14</sup> Philippine prison populations today show over-congestion by 300% plus, as well as a significant rise in recidivism.<sup>15,16</sup>

After a series of violent incidents unsettled the wardens at the previously overcrowded CPDRC, Cebu Governor

Gwen Garcia appointed her brother Byron as Security Consultant to the facility in 2006. The newcomer to prison employment was given free reign to restore discipline and control to the prison. Byron Garcia initiated a mandatory calisthenics regime that was only met with success when music was added – initially a compilation of his favourite 1980s and ‘90s pop songs. Played over six loudspeakers across the prison yard, the sounds of Queen and the Village People enticed inmates to clap and move together in time to the beat. Delighted with the results, Garcia recorded the rehearsing waves of orange dancers with a view to share his experiments with other prison officials. Using his personal channel and username ‘byronfgarcia’, he uploaded a record-setting performance of 967 inmates dancing ‘The Algorithm March’ to YouTube in October 2006. Official choreographers from outside the prison were hired thereafter, and several homemade videos followed including routines to songs from the musical-film *Sister Act*, and Pink Floyd, so that by the time ‘Thriller’ was uploaded, Garcia had a firm understanding of the communicative potential that this new media platform, YouTube, held. More than the physical movement of dance, Garcia attributes power to music as the platform to reach the inmates ‘inner-psyche’. Using his YouTube channel as a platform to explain his philosophy, he describes his belief that ‘therapeutic music and dance is meant to help prisoners cope with their depression and anxiety, improve their wellbeing as they go through a transition phase and reintegrate to society’. His manifesto continues:

*Music is a protocol to heal them of emotional and psychological disorders and trauma as a result of the offense or incarceration. Because penology practices make living hell in jails, the tendency is we breed next generation demons when they are discharged. If prisoners are healed while in prison, then we make them better persons when they are released and stay away from crime.*

Here Garcia affirms his belief that his programme ‘heals’ inmates through the therapeutic power of pop music, a statement he reaffirms in countless media interviews. Yet to date no official reports confirm exactly how the programme has healed inmates, how and if it actually reduces recidivism rates.

### **The Dancing Inmates: Viral Video and Tourist Destination**

YouTube’s amateur-video origins have been countered by the sites’ increasing commercialisation. Yet despite this, YouTube remains primarily associated with user-generated and amateur content. A short history of CPDRC’s dance-as-rehabilitation programme echoes YouTube’s evolution from personal to public to commercial.<sup>d</sup> ‘Thriller’, posted on YouTube on July 17, 2007, was one of the earlier amateur videos in YouTube history to go truly ‘viral’ since the website went live mid-2005. Within the first week of being uploaded the video had been viewed some two million times, accruing in excess of 52 million hits at the time of writing. International press and YouTube viewer comments generally express surprise, followed by amusement, ridicule and racial aspersion watching the Dancing Inmates videos – a cursory glance at any of the 90,000+

<sup>d</sup> The phrasing here echoes Kim J. The Institutionalization of YouTube: From User-Generated Content to Professionally Generated Content. *Media Culture Society* 2012; 34(53):65.

comments garnered to date will reveal such crude categories.

Capitalising on the popularity of their YouTube presence, Garcia initiated a live, monthly public musical showcase by August 2007. Held in the prison yard, locals and foreign tourists alike are openly invited to view two-hour pop music performances by the inmates from the panoptic towers above. Although tickets to these shows are free, donations are accepted and this unique convergence of 'leisure and imprisonment'<sup>17</sup> has generated extra revenue for the facility from the sale of official CPDRC merchandise and refreshments. These performances are advertised locally and sometimes, online, with posters announcing their updated repertoire. CPDRC's growing reputation as a tourist attraction for the island of Cebu (and the Philippines) follows several other detention facilities that have opened their doors to the public including sites that continue to operate as fully functioning prisons (most notably, Angola Prison Rodeo show at Louisiana State Penitentiary, USA). After the shows and in contrast to any maximum-security prison protocol, audience members are invited down into the prison yard to have their photographs taken with the inmates. Requests for dances are also taken, from Governor Garcia's birthday requests (songs by Vanilla Ice and the Human League) to YouTube fans demands for 'Gangnam Style' and 'The Harlem Shake'. The combination of regular YouTube postings, live performances and additional tourist spectacles appear to commodify the inmates for the purpose of financial revenue and mass entertainment.

Extraordinary levels of control are involved in creating a YouTube video like this – and prisons are first and foremost spaces of control. Many early videos uploaded onto YouTube feature extended introductions

preceding the dance routines. Garcia seizes the opportunity to introduce live and imagined audiences to the most prominent inmates. Using a microphone amplified by the prison speakers, inmates must state their name, and the offence with which they have been charged. Prisoners are presented as human, but permanently inscribed with their (alleged) crime. A 2008 documentary by Journeyman Pictures reveals the extent of the surveillance and control enacted in CPDRC. Interviews with the inmates highlight their lack of consent in Garcia's YouTube broadcasts, most pointedly displayed in an interview with prominent dancer Wienjiel Resane who states that they didn't know Garcia had broadcast videos of their dances on the Internet until reporters arrived at the facility requesting interviews with the lead dancers. Permission was not sought nor required for Garcia to disseminate videos of the CPDRC inmates' rehabilitation programme over YouTube.

### **Problematizing Musical Stereotypes**

The choice of primarily Western pop music soundtracks for the dance programme is not surprising given the centuries of Western influence upon the Philippines since the 1500s. Colloquially, and academically, the Philippines is regularly cited as a nation filled with 'inherently' musical people. As Filipino historian and playwright Horacio de la Costa<sup>18</sup> romantically eulogised, music is regarded as one of the 'jewels' of the Filipino, providing a bond that binds across a nation of over one hundred languages and dialects. Tracing the history of this so-called musicality highlights the explicit role of colonisation in music training, from Spanish friars teaching Filipino natives Catholic hymns in four-part harmony, to American enculturation during the World War II through the medium of radio and popular song.

CPDRC, nestled in the Visayas region of the Philippines, provides a particularly rich history of music traditions that extends pre-Spanish acquisition. Visayans are frequently stereotyped among Filipinos as the most musical people in the country, due to their bustling calendar of fiestas. The Visayans, legend tells us, 'were said to be always singing except when they were sick or asleep'.<sup>19</sup> With the exception of funerals, historian William H. Scott explains that

*[A]ll Visayan feasts... were accompanied by dancing and gong playing – weddings, birth of children, planting and harvesting of crops, preparations for war, and victory celebrations afterwards.*<sup>19</sup>

In Cebu, as indeed in many other cultures, music rituals also include movement and dance. The Sinulog fiesta, an annual festival commemorating the Filipino conversion to Roman Catholicism, is celebrated throughout Cebu (and many other parts of the Philippines), and its main feature is the collective performance of the Sinulog dance. To dance the Sinulog dance is to worship the Santo Niño, providing liminal spaces of celebration and bonding.<sup>20</sup> From early childhood, Cebuanos perform the Sinulog steps to the clear beat of the gongs and trumpets. Dance, particularly collective and collaborative dance in unison, occurs regularly in the lives of many Cebuanos and symbolises how music and dance are embedded in collective memory, national identity and power relationships. Scholars have noted that centuries of contact with traders and missionaries followed by combined periods of Spanish colonialism (1521-1898), American imperialism (1898-1946) and the Marcos dictatorship (1966-1986) 'immersed Filipinos in complex sociocultural situations that left deep

imprints of the West as superior and advantageous'.<sup>21</sup>

Today, music certainly continues to play an important role in everyday life for millions of Filipinos. Clearly, Garcia built his rehabilitation programme on an existing musical-Philippine stereotype, or what Perillo<sup>7</sup> designates the 'Filipino-mimicry stereotype'. Perillo fluently argues that the musical-mimicry stereotype normalises the dancing inmates as essentially Filipino, while simultaneously creating an 'elated sense of collective identity for a multicultural archipelago that has survived centuries of psychologically fragmenting and violent colonialism'.<sup>7</sup> This stereotype, in combination with its presentation on YouTube, discourages critical engagement with 'Thriller' and, as I go on to argue, are in contrast to traditional conventions of Dance/Movement therapy, instead revealing underlying ideologies of punitive punishment, discipline, and control.

### Dance and Docile Bodies

*'The inmates relate to me. I relate to them. You know? We have a good relationship now. Whatever I tell them to do, they do.'*

Byron Garcia, ABC News Interview, 2007

Such observations on using music and dance as a form of benign discipline follow Michel Foucault's analysis of modern penology, as explained in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.<sup>22</sup> Foucault's account of the shift from public punishment and executions to a 'gentler', more 'civilized' method of punishment through imprisonment reveals that the changes in penal history served not to punish less, but to punish better. Punishment became 'gentle', though not for humanitarian reasons. Foucault argues that reformists were unhappy with the unpredictable, unevenly

distributed nature of the violence that the sovereign would focus on the body of the convict. The sovereign's right to punish was so disproportionate that it was ineffective and uncontrolled. Out of this movement towards widespread, more evenly distributed punishment, a thousand mini-theatres of punishment were created wherein the convicts' bodies were put on display in a more ubiquitous, controlled, and effective spectacle. It is perhaps no surprise that Garcia's ideology reflects aspects of Foucault's theories on modern penology, such as the desire to impart on the viewer a visual lesson in morality. Garcia asserts that he saw in the lyrics and video of Michael Jackson's original *Thriller*, a much celebrated extended music video featuring the undead (zombies, werewolves) climbing out from their graves, dancing under the moonlight, much of what prison culture is like. Discussing his reasons for choosing the 1980s song 'Thriller' for the inmates to perform, he explains:

*The Dancing Inmates come as... people perceived to be evil... What I wanted inmates to do in dancing to the Thriller was for them to be convicted to sin. When I uploaded this on the YouTube, what I wanted viewers to see is how evil dances in our lives without knowing its deathly consequences.*<sup>23</sup>

Despite the fact that CPDRC inmates are awaiting trial, and thus innocent until proven guilty, Garcia publicly convicts them 'in sin'. His determination to make an international example of their (allegedly) criminal bodies is striking, juxtaposing medieval public spectacles of punishment with modern prison philosophy and macro level mediation potential. The CPDRC replaces corporal violence with dance rehearsals, Perillo observes, and in doing so 'redistributes public responsibility online to... bring

criminals to justice'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, while Garcia claims dance performance is pitched in opposition to punishing the inmates' physical body, he simultaneously reveals an underlying moral impetus behind the Internet broadcasting of 'Thriller', but becomes additionally affective when we remind ourselves that most of the mediated and remediated inmates remain unconvicted of any crime.

The dance routines, but more significantly their mediation, represent a shift from disciplinary societies, as Deleuze contends. The result is a 'move towards control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication'.<sup>24</sup> This is crucial in relation to CPDRC, as the benefits of exposing prisoners to pop music and dance, as well as widespread fame and (mis)fortune through their commercial spectacle, must be considered as part of a wider inclination towards new, open forms of punishment that are being introduced 'without a critical understanding (of) what is happening'.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the inmates become useful to the states' requirements, thus enacting the quintessential modernist approach to discipline, producing what Foucault designates as 'docile bodies': bodies that not only do what we want, but do it precisely in the way that we want. Accordingly, through their embodied performance, the inmates have become Foucault's subjected and practiced bodies that embody the very essence of docility.<sup>22</sup>

Measured in millions of YouTube hits, thousands of tourists' photographs and hundreds of news reports, Garcia's programme is deemed by many to be successful. Yet concerns for the inmates resurfaced in February 2010, weeks after U.S.-based Sony Pictures conducted a highly publicised visit to CPDRC. Travis Payne, Michael Jackson's

long-time dancer and choreographer, along with two professional dancers, taught CPDRC inmates an adapted choreographed routine for 'They Don't Really Care About Us.' The final performance, the first CPDRC video to be recorded in HD (higher definition) by Sony, was subsequently used to promote Jackson's posthumous 'This is it' release. Questions were raised about missing donation money after the event, and Governor Garcia suspended the dance programme (and by default, the recording and dissemination of new dancing inmates videos), expressing a desire to focus on other rehabilitative measures instead. At the same time she declined the opportunity to renew her brothers' contract as CPDRC Security Official, effectively causing his dismissal from the facility amid rumours of embezzlement. However, the demand from YouTube fans for the dance programme to be reinstated was so great that by August 2010 the governor abandoned attempts at implementing alternative rehabilitation methods. Rehearsals recommenced and the monthly live shows resumed as before. However, it appears two significant shifts occurred in the programmes' operations between February and August 2010. Firstly, since late 2010 recorded performances are no longer made or disseminated by Byron Garcia; they are instead uploaded from different YouTube accounts by various CPDRC staff. Secondly, and most notably, for the first time since its inception and with Garcia's explicit dismissal, it appears that participation in the programme is no longer mandatory. Inmates may choose to dance, and there is no

punishment or withdrawal of privileges for non-participation.<sup>e</sup>

Due to the international popularity of the videos, by the end of 2007, eight Filipino prisons had begun adapting Garcia's dance as rehabilitation. By March 2010, the Philippine government passed legislation to implement the dance programme in all prisons across the Philippines. This new public policy, signed by the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), placed Byron Garcia at the helm of the new 'Ambassadors of Goodwill' programme, which featured twelve former dancing inmates, now released from CPDRC and touring the Philippine islands, with Garcia sometimes appearing alongside in the dual role of programme creator/troupe 'manager', promoting his CPDRC rehabilitation programme in other Philippine prisons and on Philippine public broadcast television shows. Garcia's actions have also been acknowledged by international sources concurrently, in the form of the 2011 Disruptive Innovator Award at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. Since 2010, apart from sporadic YouTube posts depicting waves of dancing inmates in Metro Manila and Bilibid prisons, the impact and effectiveness of the BJMP's nationwide policy in practice remains as elusive as CPDRC's original programme.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The dance-as-rehabilitation programme, the recorded and disseminated performances and associated monthly performances are conflicting on several grounds. The true

<sup>e</sup> Interviews with CPDRC staff and reinstated choreographer Vince Rosales, in addition to observations in January 2013 confirm that at present, some inmates do not participate in the programme, it appears, for a number of reasons including old age, ill health, and personal choice. Yet for the most part, the majority of inmates 'choose' (inasmuch as one can choose in coercive environs) to participate. My research suggests their desire to participate is primarily due to a lack of other, viable options.

origins of the programme are difficult to construe, as Garcia interchanged the reason for initiating the programme with each media interview given. Initially, he asserts an exercise programme was created to provide discipline and control over unruly inmates, later using music to 'penetrate their psyche'.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after that it is described as a tool of distraction, to take their minds off their impending trials, as Garcia confirms: 'Inmates say to me: "You have put my mind off revenge, foolishness, or thinking how to escape."<sup>27</sup> Later still, it is pitched as a therapeutic, holistic process, a form of music therapy to help the inmates reintegrate into society after the trauma of their detention, as I mentioned earlier. These features are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as the act of dance is widely understood as a pleasurable pastime that can be rewarding, increasing fitness levels and general wellbeing.

As this essay underlines, the choreographed, (initially) mandatory programme may be understood as extensions of existing Filipino and Cebuano music and dance traditions. Yet to call it therapeutic, or a 'clinical breakthrough'<sup>28</sup> in the strictest sense is disingenuous, not least because of a lack of empirical evidence to support Garcia's claims of rehabilitative success and reduced recidivism rates. The original programme bears little resemblance to conventions of Western somatic, expressive, and rehabilitative Dance/Movement therapy, undertaken under the rigorous guidelines of a trained therapist. Dance/Movement therapy programmes in prisons may appear, by definition, contradictory – forcing another form of control over inmates within the confines of a detention centre. Indeed agency remains a vital component to any therapeutic activity. It remains unclear exactly how long participation in the programme has been optional rather than forced, and the extent to which

this programme is without any form of inherent coercion. Sharing videos of the Dancing Inmates with a global audience without permission denies the inmates' right to privacy, and is in direct opposition to core therapeutic regulations. The Web 2.0 technology that enables communicative, social networking features such as YouTube comments enables the inmates' objectification by anonymous viewers – we must be mindful of encroaching into exploitative territory. Through YouTube and various other new media platforms (such as blogs, social-networking sites, and photo-sharing galleries), the inmates' identities as incarcerated men and women have been globally disseminated without the performers' permission. User-generated videos and holiday photographs of the inmates' live performances continue to be distributed electronically and their images enjoy an afterlife that extends far beyond their time served in detention. Additionally, their participation in state-sanctioned commercial events, such as their performance in Sony's This Is It DVD promotion and 2013 Filipino film *Dance of the Steel Bars*, raises further questions of prisoner agency and increasing commercialization. Transparency regarding such commercial endeavors would better serve the CPDRC's officials. Equating free labour and promises of fame with a form of rehabilitation is a deeply problematic concept; 'Thriller's' entertaining exterior, packaged and delivered through the medium of YouTube, is clicked and enjoyed by most YouTube commenters as a moment of banal entertainment, with seemingly little concern depicted for the inmates' plight.

A boundary between the glorification and humiliation of (suspected) criminals is in danger of being crossed through the CPDRC programme, as families who reside in the area express distaste at the tourist attraction

on behalf of the victims of crime. 'Busing in tourists to see [the Dancing Inmates]', local Mariana Reyes declares, 'rewards them for the actions that led to their incarceration'.<sup>29</sup> This form of thanatourism (dark tourism) serves to add to contemporary mediations of prison culture, exemplifying the growing trend in popular cultures' obsession with prisons, with movies, television shows, websites, toys, fashion and tourist destinations celebrating 'themes of punishment and retribution with increasing frequency'.<sup>30</sup> Internet mediations of the Dancing Inmates, as well as the live monthly performances in Cebu, run the risk of alienating Cebuano residents who see perpetrators of crime being celebrated internationally. In addition, some critics argue that the novelty of the programme simply misses the point. Criminal justice professor Edward Latessa believes that more appropriate programmes including 'substance abuse or family reunification programmes should be implemented with such coordination and vigor'.<sup>31</sup> Providing leisure opportunities in the guise of rehabilitation may do more harm than good. Dance, though it helps pass the time, and ensuing Internet fame, does not train the majority of inmates in the transferable skills needed to help them restart their lives after release.

Most crucially, the distinct viral power and subsequent prison economy generated by 'Thriller' clearly serves the interests of the Philippine state. The inmates' dance is endlessly repeated on YouTube, distracting viewers from the overall reality of Philippine prison life where many prisoners live in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions with acute overcrowding and insufficient food. Furthermore, it reduces the CPDRC inmates to a single, entertaining image that obscures the wider, more complex and ultimately unjust picture – that CPDRC inmates have been detained for up to six years awaiting

trial, amid political and socioeconomic power struggles, in a penal system that is abysmally slow. The inmates' captivating video performances as seemingly happy, cheerful and content Filipino prisoners is their double-edged sword. As we become increasingly conditioned to live in a 'Broadcast Yourself' society, where fame itself is enough reward, the resulting benign projection and banal mediation of the inmates through YouTube clearly undermines the integrity of this 'rehabilitation' programme.

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