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Reflections on Here: A Choreographic Thesis

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REFLECTIONS ON *HERE*: A CHOREOGRAPHIC THESIS

BY MAILE BLUME

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS
IN DANCE

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Deep love,
Maile

Abstract

This choreographic thesis describes the conceptual foundations underlying the development of the dance, *Here*. *Here* uses text and movement to explore the challenge of locating oneself in this particular institution. It asks the questions: what happens when our personal needs conflict with the structure of this institution? How do we use our limited capacities to exist / resist / care for each other in this place? *Reflections on Here* describes the choreographic inquiries and discoveries that contributed to the development of *Here*. It includes research on desire and mourning, as well as reflections on the power of autobiographical dance.

Reflections on Here analyzes the work of Bill T. Jones and Cynthia Oliver as a way of understanding how autobiographical dance and text may be used to support one another in performance. It examines how work in the studio as well as in performance can build a feeling of “compassionate power” onstage. This idea of “compassionate power” is used in this project to describe the somatic principles that may embody the loving action that takes place during collective organizing. These somatic principles include sensing and working with the weight of the body on the floor and working with momentum rather than forcing movements to take place. *Reflections on Here* analyzes how the idea of compassionate power infused the development of *Here*, and connects the work of choreographers who are concerned with showing personhood and their sociopolitical landscape onstage. Finally, *Reflections on Here* acknowledges the necessity for this choreographic project to be contextualized within – and connected to – the ongoing brave and compassionate organizing happening at Scripps College.

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CHAPTER 1: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DANCE AS A VISIBLE VESSEL BETWEEN SOCIETY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

If people were to ask me why I dance, I would cite the same reason that I write poetry: to create a vessel between my internal and external worlds so that I can watch how the two are interacting. Furthermore, as argued by Ann Cooper Albright in “Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell”, autobiographical dance is often rooted in the assumption that “a story about my life helps you to think about your life” (Albright 110). Essentially, it hinges on the belief that sharing my sociopolitical reality may prompt you to think more deeply about your sociopolitical reality, and together, we may generate new knowledge about how our realities are connected.

I am interested in the medium of autobiographical dance – dances that use movement and text based on personal experience – because this form embraces the idea that important political information can be found in art that also emphasizes its subjectivity. Certainly all art is both personal and political because it reflects the particular positionality of an artist in their own culture and society. However, when thinking about autobiographical dance, the words “personal” and “political” seem to blend together because they exist concurrently in the same body, at the same time. Society and an individual’s experiences meet precisely where the body stands: “Autobiography, like dance, is situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation” (Albright 110). Autobiographical dance expresses the ways that society interfaces with certain bodies. Therefore, it has the power to encourage audience members to examine the systems of power that contextualize the bodies onstage, as well as their own. For an artist who uses dance to examine society by bringing awareness to

the ways it manifests in the body, autobiographical dance is a fitting form of expression and exploration.

The renowned American Modern dance choreographer, Bill T. Jones, is particularly skilled at using autobiographical dance to communicate the ways his body acts as an interface between his embodied experiences and the society in which he lives. According to Albright's descriptions of Jones' early work from the 1980s,

With a mixture of charm and defiance that has since become a trademark of his autobiographical style, Jones worked the audience, alternatively emphasizing the similarity of human experience by pulling us into the details of his life, and then emphasizing the difference by confronting the very real racial gulf between the predominantly white audience and Jones's position as a black dancer (Albright 111).

Jones's use of text emphasizes the subjectivity of his body, which was vital in a time in American history when the effects of AIDS on gay community members was being silenced. Jones participated in a collective movement among choreographers to publicly reclaim their humanity onstage – to push for the visibility of their communities:

Jones's early work with autobiography (including duets with his lover/dance partner Arnie Zane, who died in 1988) is typical of the way in which many women and gay men stake out a textual 'I' in order to 'talk back' to their audience. Claiming a voice within an art form that traditionally glorifies the mute body, these choreographers used autobiography in performance to change the dynamic of an objectifying gaze. Almost overnight, dance audiences and critics had to contend not only with verbal text in dance, but also with personal narratives that insisted, sometimes in very confrontational ways, on the political relevancy of the body's experience (Albright 111).

Autobiographical dance in which the performers are speaking challenge object-subject relationship set up by the proscenium stage. Suddenly, the dancers are not so much inhabiting a position as a spectacle as they are engaging in an active and ongoing exchange with the audience. Often, the dancers look directly at the audience, speak in a conversational tone, and confront the audience members with questions and statements

that elicit deeper audience thought about their relationship to the performers. Word choice, tone of voice, movements, and facial expressions become important tools in the act of reclaiming visibility and personhood onstage.

CHAPTER 2: THE POWER OF MOURNING ONSTAGE

Certainly, it is no coincidence that speaking onstage became an important choreographic device for gay choreographers who were trying to gain visibility during the AIDS crisis. Speaking onstage allowed these choreographers to challenge the shame and stigma often placed on gay AIDS victims, and to generate public knowledge about how their communities were being denied certain human rights.

As a choreographer, it is especially meaningful to me that many of these choreographers demonstrated mourning onstage to call attention to the ways that they and their loved ones had been affected by AIDS and the systemic silencing of gay grief. Showing mourning onstage was a radical way to force audience members to confront and experience the collective pain circulating through gay communities. These performances asked audience members hold both, gay mourning and, inextricably, gay desire, since these two cannot exist separately. They implicate each other. According to “Melancholia and Fetishes” by dance scholar David Gere,

The two live as twins, with mourning resulting from the rupture of the expectation created by desire, and desire founded on the unpredictability of its finding its object. One might even go so far as to say that desire and mourning are two sides of the same coin, part of the same transaction, or a single tune rendered in transposed keys (Gere 100).

Showing mourning onstage does not only show what has been lost, but what is at stake for the performer; that is, what they actively desire and how that desire is actively being cut off from being attained. Gere continues that, “for a culture predicted on desire, then, mourning takes on a particularly powerful valance, magnified into melancholia” (Gere

100). Melancholia results from mourning not just an individual, but an ongoing collective reality of systemic violence and marginalization. Gere explains:

For gay men and lesbians, the ‘return to normalcy’ — a state of societal embrace — is not possible, for there is nothing akin to normal for a societal abject; all that remains for the queer mourner is, in fact, the return to abjection (Gere 102).

For queer choreographers during the AIDS crisis, mourning onstage becomes not only an expression of individual loss and desire, but an expression of collective desire for a radically different future. It calls on audience members to confront the fact that society is not built to accommodate queer lives, and that people’s literal existence depends on a collective restructuring of society. In short, it demands that audience members hold and be personally accountable for addressing this painfully deep lack of support for queer people, made especially salient during the AIDS crisis.

Speaking autobiographical text onstage makes the act of mourning onstage all the more explicit and confrontational. It humanizes the performer and invites the audience members to share in this public mourning. In doing so, it also invites audience members to consider the differential sociopolitical landscapes that surround both, the performers and the audience members. While mourning onstage, performers open up an opportunity for audience members to witness and recognize the extremely painful realities of American society. They may begin to implicate themselves in these realities, and examine where they might have the power to disrupt them. I believe it is here where the transformative power of autobiographical dance lies. The choreographic project, then, becomes how to create dances that allow performers and audience members to tap into this collective grieving and its implicit collective power.

CHAPTER 3: BILL T. JONES AS A GUIDE FOR CREATING EFFECTIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DANCE

It has been helpful for me to return to Bill T. Jones' work as a model for how autobiographical dance can be used to confront audience members with questions about their own complicity in systemic violence. He begins by establishing a relationship with his audience. In an excerpt of "Breathing Show" (2000), Jones begins his dance by acknowledging his audience the way I would imagine someone acknowledging their colleagues, or a group of students. After taking a moment to stand still with his eyes closed, Jones turns to his audience, looks out at them, and addresses them: "Okay." He takes a moment to explain how the dance works, and to talk about his experiences creating and performing this dance in the 1980s.

After completing two phases of his dance – in which he does the movement phrase once, and then again describing the movements as if he were teaching them to a class – Jones addresses his audience in a more intimate way. In his third phase, Jones accompanies his movement phrase by speaking his uncensored thoughts and feelings as they arise. Many times, Jones' verbalized thoughts take on the form of instructions. He soothes, "Hush little baby. Stop. Stop that -- don't worry. Don't worry about tomorrow, look over there", "Big wave comes in. Hide, hide what you don't have, hide what you don't know, hide everything. Pavlova, Nijinsky", and "Don't be afraid to die. Don't be afraid to die...now."

These text phrases are particularly powerful to me because they illustrate the connections between different aspects of Jones' reality. And, because Jones' experiences are couched in his public identity as a Black gay choreographer who lost his partner to

AIDS, Jones evocation of these parts of his consciousness may evoke certain meaning making. For example, his placations, “Hush little baby. Stop. Stop that -- don’t worry. Don’t worry about tomorrow, look over there” and “Don’t be afraid to die. Don’t be afraid to die...now” remind me of how the US government responded to people dealing with AIDS in their queer communities: by silencing and minimizing the effects of the massive losses being experienced. Similarly, Jones’ line, “Hide, hide what you don’t have, hide what you don’t know, hide everything. Pavlova, Nijinsky.” makes me think about the historical and ongoing social pressure for artists to hide their queerness. It is precisely because it takes on the form of a stream of consciousness that Jones’ text is both personal and political; his verbalized associations reflect a web of connections that exists in American society. By speaking, Jones is highlighting important threads that may otherwise go unseen.

Jones’ movements support Jones’ text in highlighting these particular threads. For example, as Jones states, “Hide, hide what you don’t have,” he brings his right pointed index finger behind his back, and as he continues to say, “hide what you don’t know, hide everything,” he raises his left arm up and over his head, and lets it land there: “Pavlova. Nijinsky.” The pose references one of Nijinsky’s poses from his performance in *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, and is especially poignant because Nijinsky was known to have a longstanding romantic relationship with his colleague and choreographer, Sergei Diaghilev. The embodied instruction to hide flows directly into an evocation of Nijinsky, suggesting that this instruction to hide has historically informed the lives of gay

choreographers. The visible strong weight¹ of Jones's hand resting on his head makes me think about the heaviness of being told to hide one's identity; this heaviness does not dissipate during the creation of art, but rather informs the art-making process.

The movements that corresponds to Jones' text, "Don't be afraid to die. Don't be afraid to die...now" are also moving. The movements are both heavy and controlled, embodying the urgent and controlled tone of Jones' voice. As Jones proclaims, "Don't be afraid to die," he stands up. As he continues, "Don't be afraid to die...now", Jones unfurls his hands so that his palms are facing the audience. He leans forward, balancing on his left foot with his right leg extended, and with his arms held by his sides, his palms offered to his audience.

As he speaks of death, his physical body lowers, as if on a hinge following a predetermined path. Although this section of Jones' phrase happens much quicker than the beginning of the phrase, the movements continue to happen in sustained time, matching the cadence and flow of Jones' increasingly urgent yet steady words.² After a beat, Jones stands back up, and exhales visibly through his open mouth. This pause seems different to me than the pauses Jones takes after completing the first two phases of his dance; I experience this pause as a moment of Jones' necessary emotional recovery: perhaps he is taking a moment to process all that he has said and moved through. As Jones takes this moment to breathe, he looks out his audience. For a moment, he and his

¹ This term, "strong weight", comes from the system of analyzing movement put forward by Rudolf Laban.

² "Sustained time" is another term from the system of analyzing movement put forward by Rudolf Laban.

audience members witness each other. The power dynamic between the performer and spectator has transformed into an exchange of gaze, an exchange of breath.

In the last phase of his dance, Jones repeats his original movement phrase, allowing his uncensored words to inform his movements. When he finally comes to the ending of the movement phrase, he says, “End. Glorious end. Glorious, beautiful end. Generous end. Loving end. End...end...end. Fini...fini,” while steadily leaning forward. This ending sharply contrasts with a moment in the middle of this phase when Jones throws his arm back and yells, “Get out. Out! Out of this neighborhood, out of this country, out of this fucking world! Out—get out!” The ending is described as a return to something steady and generous after this moment of abrasive hostility.

After Jones finishes this section of his dance, he again takes a moment to catch his breath and look out at his audience. When I first watched this part of the dance, I was struck by the power I saw in Jones’ outward gaze. I saw noticeable defiance, anger, sadness, and mourning in Jones’ face. Yet, although Jones’s chest rises and falls rapidly during this moment of pause, his face appears controlled, holding rather than releasing the many emotions that pass beneath the surface of his body. In this moment, Jones illustrates that there is something immensely powerful in demonstrating vulnerability onstage, in showing both an ability to confront one’s emotions and work with them to create something new. I see this moment of vulnerability as a sort of opening up of a channel between the body and the dancer’s emotional world, between the dancer and their audience. It is an establishment of interconnectedness that is especially radical in a world that often cuts off this kind of emotional communication between multiple bodies. By showing vulnerability and engaging in an exchange with his audience members, Jones

invites a collective experience to take place: one of multiple bodies holding and processing this grief in a way that gives rise to a feeling of power.

CHAPTER 4: CYNTHIA OLIVER AND THE EMBODIMENT OF TEXT

I began wondering if similar power could arise from using text as source material. Creating dance from autobiographical text is a process I am personally very passionate about and inclined towards because I usually process my own experiences of the world into poetry. Kevin suggested that I look at Cynthia Oliver, and upon hearing her in an interview, I immediately identified with her description of her creative process: “I usually begin work with text. I’m driven with text. I’m in love with language. It usually dictates what my interests are, and then I take it from there.”

This is especially evident to me in Oliver’s piece, Boom!. In this dance piece, Oliver and her dance partner Leslie Cuyjet speak to the audience in a way that exudes sincerity and expressivity. As they speak, they appear to be talking to the audience members rather than performing. With widening eyes, tilting heads, and swift changes in tone, they look at their audience members and speak to them with conviction. This performance made me realize that *how dancers speak* is equally if not more important in terms of communicating with the audience than what they are saying. There is a noticeable difference between dancers who *perform* text, and those who *embody* it. Dancers can embody text on a physical level by really speaking from their diaphragms, and on an emotional level by emotionally processing what they are saying as they are saying it.

In this moment of embodiment, dancers re-experience their somatic responses to a text. Their tone of voice, pace of speech, and the tension in their muscles all respond to the semantics of the text. By opening themselves up to these bodily reactions to the text, dancers become more accessible vessels of meaning making for their audience members.

As dancers' neural connections fire, causing them to experience somatic reactions to the text, audience members' mirror neurons mimic the neural connections that they perceive in the dancers' bodies. This leads them to experience similar physical and emotional reactions to the text being spoken as the dancers onstage.

Certainly, the words that Oliver and Cuyjet speak feel very much their own. By generating the text from personal experience (in the case of Oliver) or deeply learning the text on a body level (in the case of Cuyjet), the dancers are able to embody the text; to open the portal between their minds and their bodies, their bodies and the bodies of the people watching.

In Boom!, the dancers' voices sometimes overlap, speaking different expressions of the same assertion. Together, the dancers build a web of utterances that contribute to an overall emotional communication with the audience. Their work becomes as much about overlapping embodiment as it is about the powerful words being spoken. In fact, it is the dancers' embodiment of the words that gives the words their power.

In my own choreographic project, I am interested in using autobiographical text to spur the embodiment and transmission of certain emotional experience. While I witness this in the dancing of Oliver and Cuyjet, I wonder how I can get my own dancers and myself to a similar place of clear embodiment. I am excited to continue developing strategies for this in my own choreographic work.

CHAPTER 5: GOALS FOR THIS CHOREOGRAPHIC PROJECT

This choreographic project began with my first solo choreographic project, *a beginner's guide to floating* (2015). The reason I believe this choreographic project started here is because in *a beginner's guide to floating*, I explicitly dealt with themes of trauma and grieving in both the choreographic process and onstage. Looking back, I am realizing that while I was in the process of creating *a beginner's guide to floating*, I felt very lost in my work. What I mean by this is that I don't think I truly appreciated what I was making while I was making it, or even when I performed it. In truth, I don't think it was until now — as I'm watching videos of my rehearsals of *a beginner's guide to floating* — that I was able to see the beauty of the work I had been creating. I feel similarly about *Here*. While I am more critical and less judgmental of my work now, I am still experiencing the feeling of getting sucked in so deeply into a project that it is difficult to step back and view it as a bigger picture. I am grateful for this experience — to fall down wormholes as beautiful as this one, as important and deeply rooted in my body as this one.

This dance, *Here* is my personal exploration of autobiography through movement and text. The inquiries I listed in my formal project proposal were, “How can text and movement be in conversation in a way that isn't redundant, but supportive in creating a shared vision?” “How do embodied traumas affect how we physically move through the world?” and “What does individual and community healing look like in the body?”

It's funny — although I decided to hone in on the first question, I am realizing now that I brought the other two along with me. While I began by looking at

choreographers who work with text, the themes of my own text-based compositions revolved around trauma and healing. I was interested in demonstrating what I now call “compassionate power” onstage. To me, “compassionate power” is “movement that queers gendered ideas of power, and includes the use of strong weight, releasing into the floor, using momentum, and intentional presses into the floor for support”.

Compassionate power is based on the radical principle of allowing rather than forcing.³ I see it being complimentary to the “ethics of care” model proposed by feminist scholars that calls for an understanding of justice that is based on equity and collective care rather than on adherence to strict social rules and social monitoring. Compassionate power is my attempt to embody what an ethics of care might look like — moving with the self, others, and world in a way that is based in care and a fluid exchange of support, and using the momentum gained from that collective support to generate collective power.

As I began working on *Here* with this underlying principle of compassionate power, I noticed myself gravitating towards themes of what it means to exist and attempt to practice an ethics of care within Scripps College. And while explorations of trauma are certainly a part of this project, the thematic focus of the dance became much more specific. Eventually, my inquiries became, “What happens when our personal needs conflict with the structure of this institution? How do we use our limited capacities to exist / resist / and care for each other in this place?” And, simultaneously, how can

³ At the end of one of my somatic classes, in the Fall of 2015, Gail Abrams gave me a handout listing some of the movement principles that underlie her work. One of them was “Allow, Don’t Force.” This concept resonated with me, and reminded me of the concept of surrender that I had learned about in my first yoga class in high school. I am very interested in this idea of finding power in releasing weight — in using bone mass instead of muscle activation to move myself. I see this idea — that there is power in choosing to release and use one’s own weight to move with the world — as incredibly radical, and I want it to be a part of my choreographic work in the future.

autobiographical dance and text support one another in demonstrating an exploration of these questions onstage?

CHAPTER 6: CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

When I began working with my dancers, I had been working on a foam roller dance for my composition class, and was interested in doing a group dance with foam rollers. During our first rehearsal, I had dancers push foam rollers onstage with an audible frustrated grunt or exhale. After the foam rollers collided, the dancers marched on from opposite sides of the stage, using strong-weight, a wide-legged stance, and their fists clenched at their sides. After four steps, the dancers made eye contact and paused, and then slowly walked towards the foam rollers and worked together to lovingly embrace the rollers and stand them up vertically throughout the stage. The dancers exited the stage and took turns running on and balancing on foam rollers of their choice. My hope was that my solo, which would come before this section, would establish the foam roller as a symbol of the institution of Scripps College, and the group phrase would explore how to take the materials of this place (the horizontal foam rollers) and make them into something new, imbued with a new energy and capabilities. While this rehearsal was helpful in clarifying the narrative I wanted to explore, I was left feeling concerned that the foam rollers would impede the clarity of that narrative.

I became interested in how desks and chairs could serve a similar purpose. During a flight to Colorado to take my sister to visit colleges, I had a vision of two people doing contact improvisation in an empty classroom. I was so moved by this vision that I immediately texted a friend and asked if she would be interested in doing an improvised duet with me as part of my final dance. While she was unable to join the dance, the image of dancing in an empty classroom stuck with me. When I returned to the studio with my dancers, I had them do dances in between chairs, and was struck by the eeriness of this

image; the dancers were seated, but not in the chairs, suggesting that while the chairs were present, their intended purpose was not being fulfilled. Rather, they created walls between the dancers, blocking them into spaces of imposed individualism and isolation.

Once I had the chairs to delineate the spaces onstage, the dance became much easier for me to craft. I began seeing much more clearly onstage what I had been feeling in my body — the way that this place often results in students being cut off from each other, and how the structure of this place makes collective organizing difficult.

During my first rehearsal, I had shown my dancers the gestures from my foam roller solo. I had explained that each gesture represented a different head space that I feel within this institution. I had them learn these gestures, and shared with them a poem I wrote, “Away”, that was the text score of my foam roller solo. I think starting this project by sharing this poem and gestures helped create a shared vision among the cast. I was surprised by how easy it was to work with my dancers. I felt an intense receptivity and focus coming from them. I asked them to come up with their own phrase locating themselves in this institution. The first time I watched them do these phrases between the chairs, I was very moved.

Appendix A. *Dancers Samantha Simon and Morgan Weidner doing their solos in rehearsal*



There was something powerful in watching these two dancers move slowly and thoughtfully between the chairs. It countered my expectation for how students would move in this setting, and rather embodied how I wished students would be able to move through this space at all times: at their own pace, taking time to feel where they are, and letting this knowledge guide their movements. I felt like I was watching both a utopia and a reality: this process is one I believe is happening for students on an unconscious level, but one students are rarely given the time to fully experience on a body level. Through my conversations with friends and peers, I have gathered an overwhelming consensus that being here requires that students turn off their awareness of their bodies to some degree in order to succeed academically. This frightens me greatly, because I believe our emotional and somatic feedback is where so much of our learning happens. There seems

to be an uncomfortable dynamic at play in which students are often pressured to produce academic work for external rewards (grades, positive relationships with professors, etc.) at the expense of their emotional and somatic learning. And, often, their pursuit of these external rewards causes the deterioration of their physical and emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, impedes their ability to learn.

It felt really good to set up an empty classroom of our own with my dancers, and to have them take as much time as they needed to create their solos. I appreciated the moments of counterpoint that happened when they did their solos simultaneously. I found it particularly moving when they would hit the ground and reach towards each other at nearly the same time. I pointed these moments out to the dancers, and they continued to do them.

As I watched my dancers perform this section of the dance, I began feeling like my own restless energy towards this place was missing. I decided to do a solo that would express my own restlessness. When I first began working on my solo, I gravitated towards the image of being pushed around by a big wave. Growing up in Hawai'i has led me to understand uncontrollable experiences to be much like the ocean: humans must work with their limited capacities to find a sense of stability and buoyancy in this forceful environment. Around the same time that I was beginning to craft my solo with the ocean in mind, I was given an assignment in my dance composition class to make a dance completely of movements that my body wanted to do. I found myself building this sequence quickly and easily. I felt powerful as I danced this dance fulfilling my somatic desires. And I was surprised to discover the feeling of “compassionate power” underlying many of my movements. I ended up combining this powerful “I want” dance

with the idea of being pushed by a wave through an empty classroom to form my final solo. Moments of compassionate power became interrupted by moments of being pushed to the ground and thrown across the space by an invisible force. And, conversely, moments of being pushed around became countered by moments of finding stability and expressing compassionate power.

However, I knew from the beginning that I wanted this dance to also include a group unison phrase that embodied collective, compassionate power. Even when I envisioned the dance taking place on foam rollers, I imagined dancers pressing into the floor, gaining momentum, and really traveling through space. I wanted to imagine a world that included this kind of collective mobilization. To create a group phrase, I asked my dancers to write down things they felt like they needed in this college environment, at this particular time. I then asked them to lie down with their heads touching and to say those things aloud. Then, I asked them to create gestures for each of the words they had said. We put all of the gestures together in a cohesive movement sequence, and I videotaped it. I had asked my dancers to say aloud the words that corresponded to each movement as they did the sequence. Before we recorded the video for safekeeping, my dancers decided to say the words in the present tense, and to turn them into phrases that begin with “We”. Looking back at the video now, I can hear my dancers say,

“We connect.

We escape.

We care.

We...companion? [laughter]

We feel safe.

We love.

We process.

And we lift.”

I’m now realizing that although we took this spoken text away, the movements of this phrase remained mostly unchanged up through the performances. In this way, the integrity of these movements were kept intact, and only altered to emphasize the intentions that had already been implicated in them. In fact, I believe they were altered only to better communicate the idea of compassionate power that I had wanted to come across from the phrase as a whole.

After I showed the dance to the Scripps dance faculty at our first showing, one of my professors, Kevin Williamson, asked me to consider, “What is the movie?” I began thinking of the sections of the dance like separate scenes, each with their own distinct feelings. Kevin also asked me to think about what causes the dancers to inhabit the floor at the beginning of the dance. After we briefly talked about the possibility of having the dancers start in chairs, Kevin posed the question, “What do I need to know? Are they constricted? Are they about to fall?”

I sat with these questions for a long time. I felt pretty strongly that I didn’t want the dancers to begin in chairs because I wanted the chairs to be markers of separation, and for them to be shown as obsolete in providing support for the human bodies onstage. I wanted to unmake the chairs; to imbue them with new meaning as boundaries and hindrances rather than reinforce the idea that they are supportive structures. However, I appreciated Kevin’s suggestion that there be an impetus for the dancers to begin their separated solos at the beginning of the piece. In our rehearsals following the showing, I

asked my dancers to run their hands down the length of the chairs and to fall forward once they were no longer able to touch the chairs. I appreciate this gesture because it makes falling a continuation of touching the chairs, of noticing and acknowledging the boundaries that have been set up. Kevin had encouraged me to make the first movement section of the dance shorter, more potent, and more clearly readable. I tried to think about what basic actions I could use to portray the difficult task of trying to locate oneself in this institution. I came up with the very literal representation of pressing hands into different spots on the floor. I combined this basic action with another basic action: using one hand to forcibly place the other in various locations on the floor. These basic actions were already a part of the movement vocabulary used in my dancers' solos. I believe this made them especially clear and readable to the audience, and gave the audience a context for understanding these gestures as they reappeared throughout the piece.

Appendix B. *Dancers Samantha Simon and Morgan Weidner moving their hands to specific locations on the floor during the opening sequence of Here.*

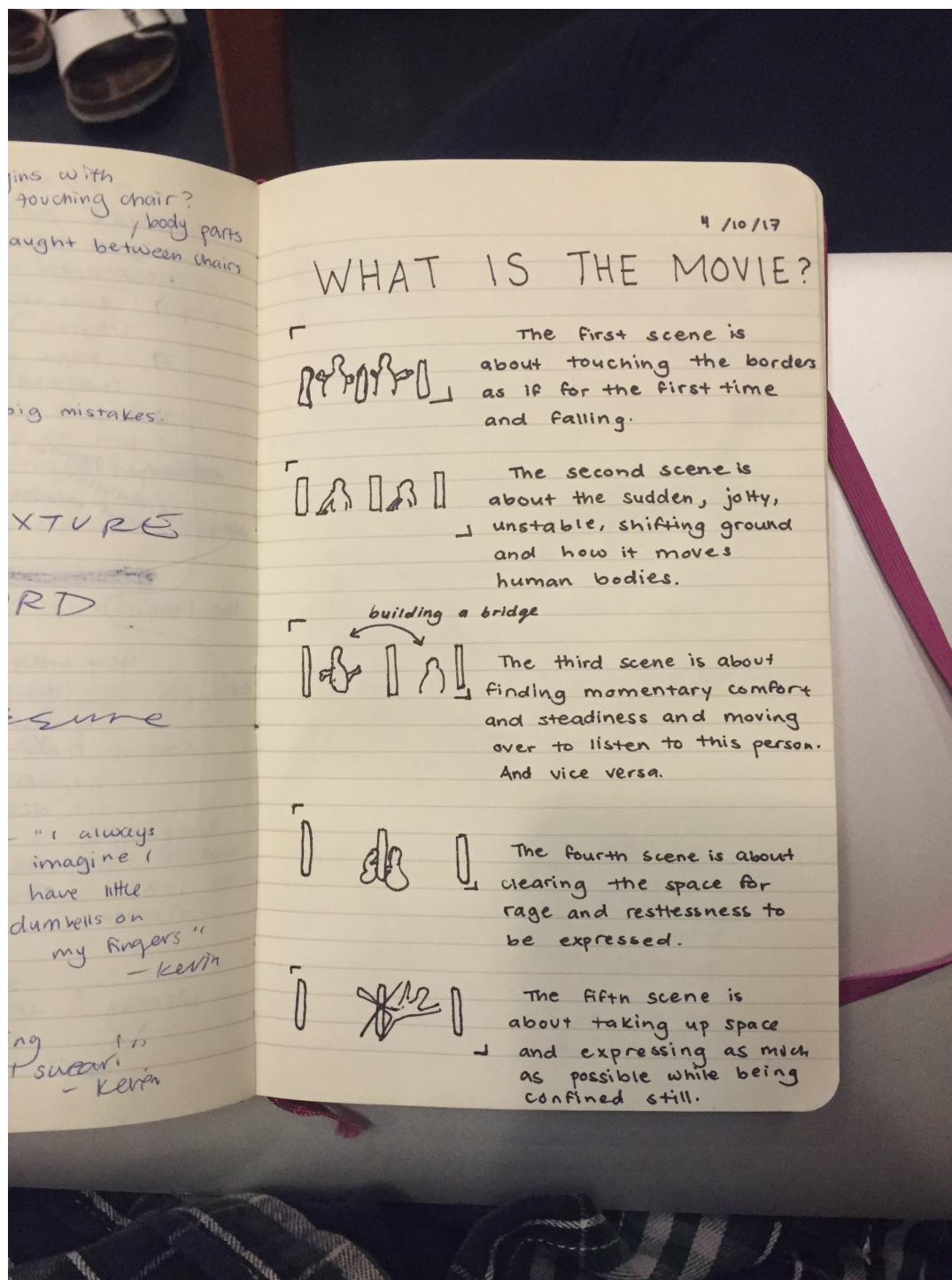


I am now realizing that the gesture of using one hand to press the other to the floor also appeared in my original “I want” solo. It’s stunning to me that my body made this connection outside of my conscious awareness; even before I had a name for what this gesture meant, I had a somatic understanding of the visceral and emotional experiences that it symbolized. As I continued developing my solo, I paid increasing attention to this gesture, and returned to it as an expression of feeling forced to occupy a certain kind of existence within this institution.

As I felt the piece becoming more cohesive, I tried to answer the question: “What is the movie?” I could feel that underlying connections were being made that I didn’t yet

have words for, and I did my best to articulate them through drawings and written descriptions. I wanted the dance to generate power – to end by being big and expansive; to go beyond the “walls” of the chairs. Although it is not pictured in the following appendix, beneath my final drawing of the dance, I wrote, “The sixth scene is about love.”

Appendix C. My exploration of the question, "What is the movie?"



I wanted the dance to end with a depiction of the fierce loving it takes to collectively organize and put pressure on the structure of this institution. Therefore, I asked my dancers to dance to the edge of an imaginary wall, to make their bodies as big as possible, and to fall forward at the end of the dance. We planned that the lights would go out during this fall, leaving it to the audience to determine whether or not the dancers were able to push through this imagined wall. In rehearsal, one of my dancers observed, “It begins with falling and ends with falling.” This comment made me smile – I did not intend for this dance to loop back in this way, but it had (coincidentally or inevitably) happened. However, I noticed that there were some important difference between these opening and closing falls. During the first fall, the dancers are seated and appear not to be falling on their own accord, but rather in response to an outside force pushing them to the ground. In the second fall, the dancers outstretch their arms and fall forward out of a walking movement phrase, which suggests that they are *moving themselves* instead of *being moved*. In this final fall, the dancers’ bodies, like their agency, is much bigger and expansive. We do not see the effect of their final fall, as the lights go out while they are in the air. However, because the dancers have already fallen twice during this final movement phrase, there may be an expectation among audience members that they will continue this momentum and keep walking. Certainly, audience members hear the thud of the dancers’ feet hitting the ground after they catch themselves from the fall, suggesting that there is some sort of breaking through of the wall, and forward movement. The message I wanted to send with this ending phrase is, “We aren’t going to stop.” I hope this last gesture conveyed that.

As I developed the opening and closing sections of the dance, I became increasingly aware of how important it is that the energy of each movement phrase continues to run through the piece like a connecting stream. Sometimes, when I noticed my dancers becoming worried about their ability to carry out the movements, I could see that physical stream being interrupted, and the intended performance quality of the dance dissipating. This was especially true during the week leading up to our performance week, as we tried hard to time the movements with the music. In one of our final rehearsals, I tried to switch our attention to really performing the movements, regardless of if they timed up with the music and with each other's movements. I told my dancers, "I don't care if you 'mess up'— if you move at different times and do completely different movements from each other. Make big mistakes! Commit!"

As we went into performance week, I continued to repeat this word to my dancers: "Commit!" It became both a potent instruction and an inside joke within our cast. But it worked. I could tell when my dancers were committing to the movements, and I could feel their commitment allowing a cohesive performance quality to emerge.

An added layer to this instruction to commit was the very real presence of my dancers' personal narratives and voices in the dance. When we began working on their duets, I encouraged my dancers to speak aloud words that they associated with each movement they had created in response to the prompt of locating themselves in this institution. At first, I had told them that it was okay with me if they improvised their spoken text slightly every time they danced, but I found that I had very different emotional reactions to the different versions they performed. I also found that my dancers were stopping to figure out what they were going to say each time they performed, which

delayed their movements in a way that disrupted the continuity of their movements. I ended up giving them papers with lines from their original texts that I felt were most clear in communicating their narratives. I asked the dancers to review these lines, and to rehearse them so that they could really own them. They asked if it would be okay for them to adjust the wording slightly in performance, and I encouraged them to do that, to speak the words in a way that comes out naturally. We ran through this section multiple times, giving the dancers an opportunity to really commit the words to their bodies, to feel them fully. I began to notice a stark difference between the embodied text and the way the dancers had been performing an improvised text earlier. They felt like they belonged more to the dancers, because they had been engrained through repetition into the dancers' bodies and voices.

Appendix D. *Dancers Samantha Simon and Morgan Weidner dancing with commitment.*



In our dress rehearsal, I could hear and feel a new level of commitment and embodiment in my dancers' performance. Kevin's suggestion that they talk as if they are talking to one person, as well as Suchi's suggestion that the performers speak up and out instead of straight into the audience, greatly enhanced their performance. When we looked at the photos from our dress rehearsal right before our opening night, we couldn't believe how much of a world had been created. And while the lighting and the costumes helped with this, it was my dancer's facial expressions, especially in the photographs of them speaking, that stood out to me as the most noticeable markers of this new world. In all of the photographs, they appeared to be specific characters that maintained their identities throughout the entire show. They were people, doing what Cynthia Oliver, Leslie Cuyjet, and Bill T. Jones do so seamlessly: embodying text and the experiences that provoked them.

Appendix E: *Dancers Samantha Simon and Morgan Weidner during Samantha Simon's solo*



CHAPTER 7: REFLECTIONS ON PERFORMANCE

It is difficult to say how the performances of *Here* went without videos of the performances. Yet, I am reminded again and again that this is what makes dance so special: it is a living and temporal art form that can create communication between those inside of the dance and those outside of it. From the inside of *Here*, I watched my dancers proudly from offstage, pressing my hand to my chest, hearing their voices as they lifted their heads and looked out at the audience. From the inside of *Here*, I felt my body lurch to side to side with the music as the sense of pain it was holding expanded from my chest and stomach. I felt myself pause after rolling, falling, or landing from a jump. I felt myself taking time to feel myself fall, or to look at my hand before it lurched to the floor. And I felt my dancers walk back onstage with a sense of calm and pride. I could see their chests open, feel *my* chest open, and dance with the knowledge that my friends would be holding up the dance with me. Although I tried to channel my own sense of compassionate power during our ending movement phrase, I also felt this feeling arising every time we neared the end of the dance. As we moved together, I felt that we were expressing compassionate power: an open, sensing determination to continue fighting for each other, with love.

Being both a choreographer and dancer in this piece caused me to feel both trusting and scared about the performances. I feared that I would completely forget my movements during my solo, or that I would enter the stage too late. At the same time, I felt immense gratitude for my dancers, and pride at what I had created. Now, I am reflecting that this is what some activists must feel: a calm commitment to jump into action paired with the nervous knowledge that making mistakes may be inevitable.

At the beginning of our tech week, I was particularly concerned with remembering the movements of my solo. After a tech run, I explained to Kevin that as a dancer, I feel much more comfortable improvising solos than trying to remember pre-set choreography. “Then improvise!” He said. He encouraged me to give myself permission to improvise in the studio, and to play with the movements as I danced them. He also reminded me that it’s okay to pause during my solo, to take time to figure out how I want to move next. I invited pause and play into my dancing, and I found that this gave me access to a more embodied experience. As I looked out the audience, at my hand, and at the ground, I paused to really let my focus land on these different places. I could feel myself having an interaction with my audience, environment, and self, rather than devoting my attention to executing the movements of my solo in a way that would make me praised as a spectacle. It’s a funny thing, to stop oneself in the middle of a dance concert to remind oneself to divert focus away from technique and more towards embodiment. But I think it’s a testament to our dance program and to the supportive dance faculty that students here are able to feel permitted to dance in the spirit of their personal values.

Having watched the dancing of Bill T. Jones and Cynthia Oliver’s company, I have certainly felt my own values around dance shifting. It has become much more clear to me that the embodiment of words and movement is necessary for transmitting emotional experiences to an audience. Furthermore, autobiographical dance can illustrate the connective tissue between different facets of society, which makes it an especially powerful tool.

While I am unsure of if *Here* fully conveyed what I had hoped it would communicate, I know that I must trust the reactions of audience members as a guide for how the performances went. I am skeptical of putting too much weight in audience reactions, because I know that those who may have had negative experiences with the piece most likely wouldn't express that to me. But I was comforted by the fact that people whose opinions I care about came up and talked to me about the piece afterward, and sometimes told me that it had even made them tear up. After our dress rehearsal, Cynthia said, "I'll tell you later how much I loved your piece," and that meant a lot to me coming from a dancer and choreographer and person I deeply respect and admire. Suchi also said, "You should be proud of what you've done," which I really took to heart because she does dance activist work. I sensed that she was talking about more than the dancing, that she was talking about the world my dancers and I had chosen to create onstage and share with our audience. Her saying that I should be proud made me reflect that maybe I had been successful in creating something hopeful for the audience. Maybe the grieving my dancers and I shared onstage also indicated a desire for a different way to be together in this institution, and that that desire had started to be fulfilled by the final group phrase. Maybe I had set the stage for compassionate power to be experienced and shared. I wish I had concrete evidence for this, but I also feel the beauty in this guesswork (activism and art will always be guesswork! Will always be learning by listening to how people are interacting with my work!). My housemate came up to me after our Saturday matinee and said, "I now feel how important it is for there to be collective organizing and community in this place." While that realization was likely a

culmination of many experiences, it humbled me to think that this dance piece might have helped affirm her feelings about community and collective organizing.

I am trying to get more comfortable with trusting my art, with acknowledging that because I care deeply about the social implications of my art, creating will always be a process of sending out a project into the world and then listening for how it echoes back. I am excited to continue getting comfortable with the trial and error that I know will inevitably be a part of my art-making experiences.

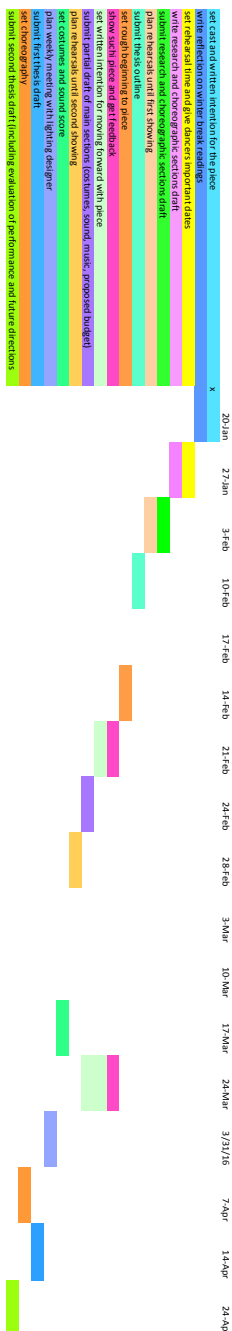
And, I am excited to continue supporting collective organizing and the brave, expressions of compassionate power that are happening right now in the Scripps community. I know that as an artist, I want my work, above all else, to be about my relationships to community. As a dancer in my own piece, I was saddened by the empty chairs in the audience, at the thought of who was unable to make it to the show because their energies were being expelled elsewhere. And I was reminded that it was a privilege for me to be able to dance and devote myself to this choreographic project even as some people were having difficulty feeding themselves and going to class. I held these people in my mind as I danced. As I held them, I began to respond more viscerally to the music and to the experience of dancing such an intimate dance piece for my peers. I recognize that the experiences that I was having and sharing onstage were very much my own, but they felt connected to a much deeper collective pain that I am still getting to know. I am excited to keep learning. To keep responding to this learning by creating worlds and asking, “Is this what this place looks like to you, too?” I am excited to keep listening. To keep collaborating. To keep building from deep within the relationships that I care most about nourishing. May the work continue, always.

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Additional Appendices

Appendix F. The original production timeline for my choreographic thesis.



Appendix G. *Proposed and Actual Budget*

Proposed Budget: \$0 (all costumes and sound will be developed free of cost)

Actual Budget: \$0

Appendix H. *Press Release Information*

"My piece uses text and movement to explore the challenge of locating oneself in this particular institution (Scripps College). It interrogates the question, 'What happens when what we need budges up against what we are given? How do we use our limited capacities to exist / resist / and reconfigure this place to meet our needs?'"

**Appendix I. Costume Concept – muted primary colors with yellow to indicate
*restlessness***



Appendix J. Program for Scripps Dances 2017

~ PROGRAM ~

Meta

Choreographer: Cynthia Irobunda (SC '18)
 Music: James Blake – "Point"
 Performer: Cynthia Irobunda (SC '18)

Here

Choreographer: Maile Blume (SC '17)
 Music: Drehz – "Exhale"
 Dan Romer – "The Air," "Other Lives"
 Performers: Maile Blume (SC '17), Samantha Simon (SC '17), Morgan Weidner (SC '17)

Choreographed in partial fulfillment of the Senior Thesis requirement in Dance at Scripps College, Here uses text and movement to explore the challenge of locating oneself in this particular institution. It asks the questions: what happens when our personal needs conflict with the structure of this institution? How do we use our limited capacities to exist / resist / and care for each other in this place?

Together

Choreographer: Jennifer Sheasley (SC '18) in collaboration with the performers
 Music: Rotem Hecht – "Beautiful by Choice," Drehz - "Heart Cry"
 Performers: Emma Browse (SC '18), Mia Farago-Iwamasa (SC '17), Cleo Forman (PO '20), Taylor Haas (SC '18), Anya Krause (SC '18), Maggie Patella (SC '18)

Sustain

Choreographer: Suchi Branfman (SC Faculty) in collaboration with the performers,
 Eden Amital (SC '17), and incarcerated men at California Rehabilitation Center
 Music: Ben Harper – "The Three of Us," "Whipping Boy"
 Steve Reich – "Music for Pieces of Wood"
 Sound Score: Text by residents of CRC, recorded by Ernst Fenelon Jr.
 Performers: Maile Blume (SC '17), Caroline Bourscheid (PZ '16), Nia-Renee Cooper (SC '18), Rae Fredericks (SC '17), Cynthia Irobunda (SC '18)

Created both within the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC – a medium security state prison) and the Scripps dance studio, this collaboration between Claremont College students and incarcerated "brothers," asks how we sustain ourselves, whether inside or outside the prison walls?

In and Out

Choreographer: Madelyn Shaughnessy (PZ '17)
 Music: Maxence Cyrin – "Where is My Mind"
 Performer: Madelyn Shaughnessy (PZ '17)

Moving in and out of experiences: experiences with oneself and with others. As a graduating senior, I want to dedicate this piece to leaving the Claremont Consortium after four years of incredible growth.

Koredjuga/Komodenu

Choreographer: Phylise (Fatou) Smith (SC Faculty)
 Musicians: Justin Dixon, Andrew Kemble, Kyle Lee (PO '20), Jessica Poole
 Song Arrangement: Jessica Poole
 Costumes: Fana Bangoura
 Performers: Maile Blume (SC '17), Daisy Brambila (PZ '18), Nia-Renee Cooper (SC '18), Julia Griffin (SC '19), Olivia Howie (PZ '18), Sharon Keenan (SC '17), Harry Polstein (PZ '17)

Koredjuga is a dance from the Malinke' ethnic group of the northeast region of Guinea. A song that accompanies the dance is "Komodenu."

~ INTERMISSION ~

