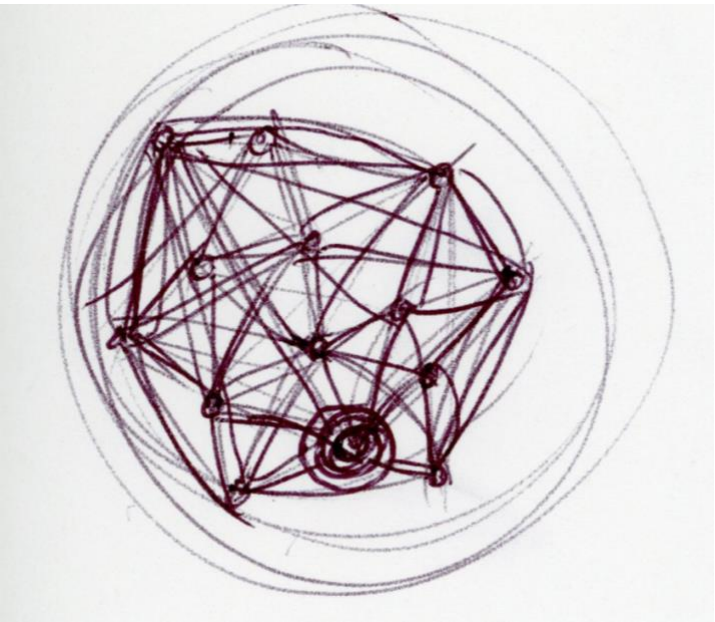
GENERATIVE PRACTICES IN DANCE:

Gleanings and Experiments in Group Movement Improvisation and Collaborative Future-building



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BY EMMA J. LITTLE

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Recognize that finding the essence of an idea need not be an exercise in reductionism.

Liz Lerman, *Hiking the Horizontal*, xvii

Statement about Embodied Knowledge and Ownership

Significant, if not impossible, translational challenges arise from attempting to capture in words the sheer complexity of embodied knowledge and its modes of transmission. Nearly all the theory and philosophy in the field of dance is passed down dancer to dancer, or teacher to student, experienced, transmitted, stored, and transformed in the multi-sensory medium of the body, and not through the written word. Verbal citations are gestures of honor, commenting on the impossibility of capturing true inheritance and iteration. Similarly, this thesis is like a sieve, able to catch only certain fragments of knowledge from the continuous flow of ever-evolving embodied practice. I meanderingly attempt to record and cite in writing some of that knowledge, knowing that my linguistic interpretations are limited in their capacities to capture and transmit to the reader the infinite ways of feeling, conceiving, and experiencing in the body.

Preface: A Glimpse Inside Movement Improvisation

A dancer learns that what one practices, one becomes. A body of nerve endings transforms and coagulates into the habitual patterns it carves through space again and again.

Movement improvisation is the practice of attending to the relationship between mind and body. An improviser's work happens in the flash of a second, yet what happens in that time could be broken into infinite different processes and examined as such. The moment between stimulus and reaction is the moment where the dance happens: the improviser improvises in this infinitesimally small gap.

First, there is listening. The mover listens to the space around themselves. Their neurons fire as they take in the surroundings of their environment, the movement and placement of others—in a sense, they make an architectural analysis of the space. This architecture is not purely material. It is an architecture of relationship, one which is imbued with emotional and cultural meaning in its most foundational sense.

The mover listens to themselves. Where am I in this architecture? *How* am I in this architecture? What does this moment feel like, in all possible interpretations of the word "feel?" All the sensory information flooding the dancer's body rushes to the brain, which, with lightning speed, draws shapes, energies, conclusions—perhaps even language—around the incoming information in an attempt to make sense of the moment. This is the process of thought.

How does an improviser know what to do next? Rather, how do they *decide* what to do next? The improviser calls upon their intentions in the improvisation, however explicit or conscious those intentions may be. Does the improviser fall into movement habits? Do they interrupt themselves and try to do something unexpected? Are they improvising to appear a certain way to an audience or to create a particular aesthetic? Does the improvisation have a task or goal? Something must inform the improviser—a guiding framework that influences the decision-making process. It is the reason and purpose for the improviser's movement. This "score," this framework, sculpts itself from thought into physical manifestation through the body of the improviser. Improvisation is thought made real. Whatever decision the improviser makes is ushered immediately into the physical world, carried out through the body in space.

Introduction

Major Ideas

In that infinitesimally small moment in which an improviser makes their movement decision, we can see that *something,* conscious or unconscious, must guide the decision being made. (Why this one choice out of a cast of millions of possible decisions?). This *something* is the "score." It is essentially the context for why and how the improvisation is happening and gives both meaning and a sense of purpose to the decisions being made by an improviser. In this research, I propose that there is no such thing as an improvisation without a score—a score is the very reason or purpose for movement.

Group improvisation at its most fundamental is the practice of relating to a whole. Individual improvisers within a group operating in a score must make split second decisions in which they intake huge amounts of architectural, spatial, and social meaning. They then make decisions about how to respond to what is happening in the space and in the other bodies around them, not only with their thoughts, but with the full commitment of a moving and breathing body. Within a group, an individual gets the opportunity to practice cultivating an incredible amount of self-awareness, group awareness, and most importantly, awareness of how the group and self interrelate. This cultivation goes beyond the individual experience, for inherently a group is not an individual; a group is a product of the overlapping and interrelating experiences of individuals. To some degree, a body beyond that of each individual—a collective, if you will—gains a sense of agency and knowledge about its own internal movement.

In this thesis, the word “togetherness” is used to describe this phenomenon. In this context, the word “togetherness” can be used very broadly to describe the occurrence of complex social and relational dynamics, one that is not limited to the warm and fuzzy ideal of perfect group union but is simply describing what happens between everyone involved in a moment of physical gathering. “Togetherness” stresses the connections between individual points in a group, acknowledging an emergent “whole” that is not an additive unit (i.e. “the sum of its parts”) but is rather a complex “something-ness” beyond the simple cumulation of its individual parts, illustrated visually in figures 1 and 2.

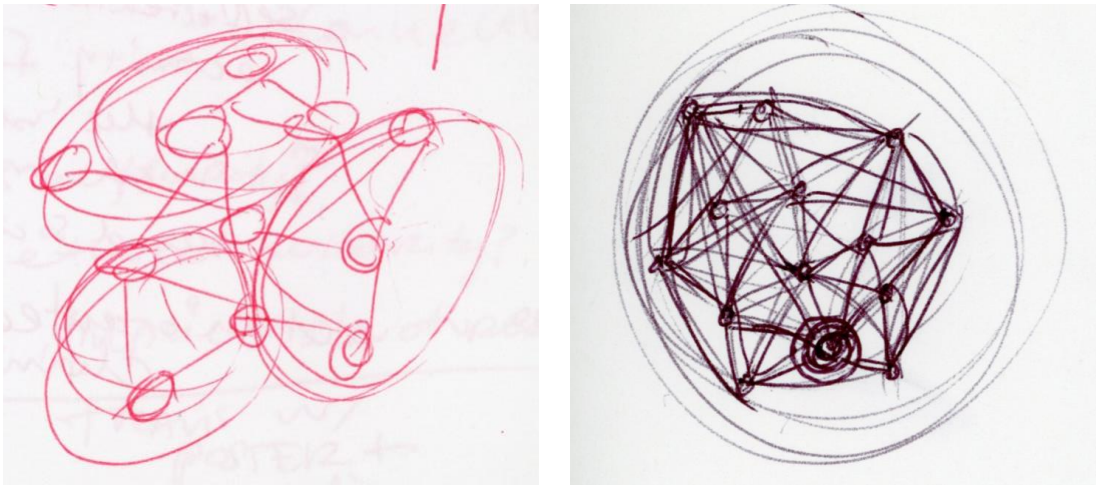

Fig.1 and 2. *The Net*: A representation of bodies in space experiencing a “something-ness of togetherness.”

The field of dance, as I’ve grown up in it, has been and continues to be preoccupied with this work of “togetherness”—making living together better, or dancing together better— in a multitude of ways. Dance art in the United States is increasingly steeped in activism, community work and outreach. Having explicit, public, social justice missions has become a strong trend among dance artists, companies, and organizations. Everywhere you turn, dancers are interested in community, in collaboration, and in

healing. I think for many of us movers, dance has acted rather functionally in our lives; in its best moments, dance offers public spaces or spaces of "togetherness" wherein certain freedoms of expression in the body, in relationship, or in acts of play are permissible for exploration: respite from and antidote to an increasingly individualized, isolating, and dis-embodying postmodern world.

This is true of myself, and such experiences of growth, community, and a certain kind of "magic," which I have had throughout my dance training, were the genesis of this project. Not all of these experiences were warm, fuzzy, and positive; rather it was the complex and difficult stuff about relationship, negotiation, and collaboration that provoked me the most. It was in and through my involvement with dance that I received an education about privilege, identity, and socio-cultural meaning. This teaching was and continues to be multifaceted, engaged with depth, nuance, and perception. Most importantly, rather than this knowledge being fixed, objective, or stagnant, I learn it experientially and fluidly, as a subject—I learn it viscerally and sensationally. I learn it through and because of the body, knowing that the body houses not only my mind, but every experience I've had.

This thesis project engages with two different genres of dance: community dance and dance improvisation. Throughout the project, I have toggled back and forth between the two, since certain aspects of each set of practices and guiding principles have been relevant, but neither fits this research exactly.

Community dance is used to describe a very wide variety of dance practices, usually invoking the participation or inclusion of "non-dancers" within the context of institutionalized dance, with the intention of widening access to movement forms. Of

course, this kind of definition is often wrought with problematic, elitist distinctions between what is considered "dance" and what is not. The field of community dance is actively sensitive to this conundrum and for this reason the definition for what community dance actually *is* remains sticky and unclear.

In the development of my thoughts about this thesis I was very drawn to the field of community dance. This thesis shared with the field the underlying goal of positioning active dance practice within the larger context of society. However, it often seems like the field of community dance is about bringing dance out into the larger world, whereas what I am interested in here is bringing the conversations of the larger world into dance spaces in the hopes of gleaning strategies for organization and healing that can benefit both dance spaces and communities in "the larger world." Community dance is often focused on the therapeutic, cultural, or socio-economic benefits of widening the prominence of dance and accessibility to it in communities. I still am unsure how the idea of community-building inside of a dance space fits into this. At the very least, I have always felt drawn to community dance conversations because they are almost always willing to talk about sexism, racism, and ableism (at large, politics) in dance and because there is a shared ambition of doing work that is about healing and connecting, both of which I see as foundational to the work I dream of doing.

I have settled into calling this work "group movement improvisation" because of the direct dance lineages it traces, but in some ways it has never quite felt right. The weight of "improvisation" translates too much artistic pressure or creates an emphasis on originality and creation that doesn't support the deeper sense of inheritance, healing, human ritual, or connective tissue that this work encircles. I find that improvisation finds

more of a home in either “high art” circles or in gritty experimental corners of the dance and performance world that are often quite niche. The existing field of improvisation and the literature surrounding it is experimental, diverse, and varied, and so by virtue of being a little off-kilter and dealing with the interactive and spontaneous processes of the body and the mind, this thesis work certainly overlaps and finds veritable homes in the terrain covered by the field. This thesis is not concerned with aesthetics or arguably even with choreographic or artistic practices in a classical sense, and thus it is important to clarify this distinction within the label of “improvisational dance” and recognize the project’s alignment with some areas of the dance improvisation field and not with others.

Group movement improvisation is quite popular in the Western contemporary dance world today and is a standard element of workshops, festivals, and residencies. Group movement improvisations as a category include an incredibly diverse range of gatherings in which dancers are asked to move improvisationally in a group setting. As the aesthetics of improvisation and community gain popularity in the art and dance worlds, it is very common for teachers and choreographers to incorporate group improvisational segments into their technique classes and rehearsals. Improvisation is also becoming more widely used in commercial and competition dance settings. Given the widespread use of improvisational practices in the field today, the methodologies, philosophies, and interpretations of certain improvisational concepts are extremely varied. However, it is not uncommon to encounter what Kent De Spain describes in his book *Landscape of the Now* as a “romantic notion that still exists about movement improvisation, that it should be free, unstructured, even unconscious” (158). Nothing

encapsulates this idea better than the popular term “open score,” used to describe “free” and unstructured improvisational practice.

A “score” is a structure of parameters that define the identity and purpose of a given improvisation. Often a “score” is provided by a facilitator of an improvisational space as a list of rules about the inner logic of an improvisation, such as “only use straight pathways and change direction with right angles” or “if you accidentally bump into someone, laugh, or melt into one another.” The score could delineate types of movement, i.e., “dance softly with no hard edges or lines.” There are infinite ways that a score can exist, anywhere from very explicit rule-like parameters to abstract, interpretive, even implicit guidelines (“the color red”). The score serves as the ultimate authority in an improvisational space—the parameters that contextualize everything that happens in an improvisation.

While the ideal of the “open score” is both deeply beautiful and attractive with its promise of total freedom and expression, the reality is that no one comes into an improvisational experience without unconscious structures, assumptions, and frameworks already informing their behavior and decisions. There is no such thing as an improvisation without a score—a score is the very reason or purpose for movement. Because group improvisation is a practice of relationality and an exploration of social and collective dynamics, it is important to ask questions about what kinds of unconscious structures or patterns of behavior people bring with them into what is labeled an “open score.” The scores we have are carried. They are the meat and flesh of the thoughts we have about what we should be doing, and how we should be interacting. They consciously and unconsciously determine our actions, the way we inhabit our bodies to

communicate our size, our shape, and our demeanor. Can we uncover our patterns of relating to one another in an improvisation? Is it possible to examine deeply enough to see our own biases and our trained patterns of response to others? What "scores" are we as individuals and also as collectives coming into a group improvisation practice with? The fallible "open score" becomes a tool for inquiry and a creative springboard when the concept is not embraced as an achievable reality.

In examining the role of the facilitator and the existent structures of organizing bodies, people, and energies in space, this thesis settles upon questions of where power and authority lie in group improvisational spaces. I argue that power is always present—that is the myth of the open score—there will always be authority in the space, whether it exists in an explicit score or implicit score, or some multi-layered marriage of both. The implicit score can be inherited ways of thinking or "shoulds"—imperatives for how to be or conduct oneself in relationship to others and to the environment. When a facilitator enters a space, they assume a lot of power, becoming the site of authority in a gathering space. They hold much of the power that dictates the movement of people's bodies and the means and terms of relationship in the space.

At the heart of this research, I am grappling with authority and with the experience of being in the position of the facilitator. Specifically, the research is asking questions about how to defer authority from a single figure onto the collective in the interest of "being in togetherness better"—more fairly and more democratically. This requires an ability to see a group of people as something beyond a collection of individuals, allowing the existence of a kind of power or authority that rests in the connections between things and people, one that rests in "togetherness." For a group of

people, it requires a cultivation of an awareness that belongs to something beyond the awareness of the individual experience, for inherently a group is not an individual; a group is a product of the overlapping and interrelating experiences of individuals. The "collective body" beyond that of each individual gains a sense of agency and knowledge in the space.

The practices of facilitating and organizing which serve this purpose—in other words, the practices that are intent upon widening the scope of human interaction into the realm of possibility for other, collective forms of authority to exist in the space—are what I loosely define as "generative practices." They are practices invested in physical action and development as united with the theoretical values of paradigm shift toward more responsiveness, connectedness, and trust. In essence, generative practices are the praxis of building toward a future grounded in collaboration and connection.

Project Description and Methods

This project began with an intuition, an unfolding awareness that all my experiences in dance have been—if not explicitly, then implicitly—political. Political, and physically immediate. This thesis and my engagement with a number of texts, teachers, and practices charts a path through what is realistically years of creative research that has been deeply personal and layered, following, as it has, my own evolving awareness. It's unpacking the "magic" that I've felt in group movement experiences—but to call it "magic" too easily risks overlooking the accumulation of skill and knowledge that lives inside the facilitators and the dancing communities that perpetuate, refine, and experiment with these practices daily.

To achieve this, the research was divided into two phases of "gleaning" and "experimentation," the two basic actions which describe the methodology of this research throughout the entire process. The first phase was a collection of interviews and the second was a series of workshops.

I began with the hypothesis that the ideal "open score" is a fallacy. As the project developed, I became motivated by asking how authority could be shifted onto a collective "togetherness" that challenged the inherited patterns and behaviors of an open score. A search for existing "generative practices" in the field of dance ensued, with the intention to investigate what elements of those generative practices in dance are nascent and distillable as tools or approaches to organizing and facilitating people. My approach emerged from questions I have wrestled with as both a facilitator and participant of group improvisational experiences in dance. I am working both practically and theoretically within the tradition that I was trained in and the embodied and practical inheritances that have shaped my own perceptions and philosophies. Because of the incredibly wide array of improvisational dance practices around the world, it is important to state that the group movement improvisation practices in this research are located within a Euro-American concert dance tradition stemming from the western postmodern movement of the 1960's and 70's, and perhaps even more specifically within concert dance traditions in the United States.

The first phase of the project, which I refer to in this manuscript as *Gleanings*, consisted of oral interviews conducted over Zoom in early 2022. I interviewed three current facilitators and practitioners of group movement improvisation with whom I had previously worked in improvisational capacities. The interviews operated as roughly

hour-long conversations, primarily focused on each of the three artist's practices related to their own work negotiating the role of the facilitator within group movement practices. Inquiries into each artist's unique philosophies of scoring and structuring group improvisational experiences guided the interview questions.

I chose to interview three artists with whom I had worked before in group movement improvisation capacities, with the assumption that our past shared physical experience (and my familiarity with their work) would help create a baseline of understanding when discussing such complex ideas as improvisation, structure, authority, "togetherness," and collaborative generation. This past relationship with each interviewee was also important to the self-reflective and subjective ethos of this research, as I am not only acknowledging, but mining the experiences which informed and inspired my own thinking and practice. The interviews were designed to be conversational, to capture the emergent differences in each artist's perceptions and constructions of knowledge around this kind of work, an approach largely informed by De Spain's interviews with expert movement improvisers in *Landscape of the Now*.

Taken together, the interviews with all three practitioners gleaned some initial insights from these questions (among many others): what are the techniques of creating collective possibility that generations and networks of embodied practitioners in dance practice every day? What are the techniques for organizing people around a space of emptiness with the intention to build something new? The interviews also provided suggestions for structuring group improvisational experiences that I implemented in the second phase of the research.

The second phase of the research, which I refer to here as *Experiments*, occurred as a weekend series of three improvisational workshops with dance majors at Ohio University. These "score laboratory" workshops, which took place in the dance studios at Putnam Hall on February 19th and 20th, 2022, were conducted with a core group of seven dancers (eight including myself as facilitator).[1] The workshops were an amalgamation of exercises and practices gleaned from my readings, thinking, and interviews leading up to them, with some basic organizing principles. Two workshops, each roughly one and a half hours in length, occurred on Saturday February 19th and a third and final workshop of the same length occurred in a different studio the following morning. The first two workshops were testing the hypothesis that a "collective body"—a "something-ness" of group awareness (the "magic")—can be found or cultivated in an improvisational space through intentional facilitation techniques and scoring. The third workshop was an experiment in stripping back the authority of the facilitator figure with a direct attempt at shifting workshop leadership onto the participants. As an experiment, this workshop also attempted to push as close to the ideal of an "open score" as possible by operating with the direct intent to "remove" authority or influence in any particular direction from the space.

The ongoing, quasi-third phase of the research is a process of self-reflection which has informed the research from the very beginning and continues to mold and shape the meaning-making of these experiments and gleanings as I write. The questions guiding this thesis emerged from a desire to understand the context for my own work in the field of dance and improvisation. They are reflections on aspects of the field that I see

[1] One participant was missing from the first workshop due to COVID-19 related reasons.

as potentially problematic, or areas where I sense a lack of discussion and have questions about my own methods and intentions as an artist and practitioner. As both a thinker and a practitioner—a citizen and an artist—within the field of dance, I know from experience that much of the rich and valuable knowledge in the dance field that often goes unrecognized is developed personally, interpersonally, and experientially through very subjective means. Rather than claiming "objective" research with a nod toward the importance of reflexivity, I see this research as an experiment in not only recognizing subjectivity as a vital element of inquiry (especially in the arts), but also as a suggestion that a sense of personal development and a critical examination of one's own practical or embodied knowledge and experiences can be an explicit academic research pursuit. The understanding that I have as a researcher at this point is that my subjective experience is built into the many layers of meaning which I am discerning about practices of group movement improvisation: no single or universally applicable truth will be arrived upon in the work. Furthermore, an explicit goal of this thesis (alongside the attendance to the central research questions) is the development of personal practices for myself as an artist that I hope are responsive, just, and ethical and can lend themselves to larger cultural movements which strive to evoke social change and reconciliation, such as those involving anti-racist and de-colonizing praxis.

The most apropos categorization for this project that I have found in the greater field of research and research methods is Patricia Leavy's description of social research. A qualitative approach to social research describes the workshop phase and the interview phases. Additionally, Leavy articulates six purposes of social research, three of which this thesis predominantly aligns with: *exploration*, *community change or action,* and

evoke, provoke, and unsettle. Leavy's description of a research intent to *evoke, provoke, and unsettle* speak most clearly to me of the methodology and philosophy of this thesis:

> This kind of research may aim to disrupt or unsettle stereotypes or "commonsense" ideologies, serve as an intervention, stimulate self-reflection, or generate social awareness. Research conducted with this purpose may follow a generative model whereby the inquiry itself is the research act. In order to conduct research with the aim of evoking meanings, we may also end up conducting exploratory or descriptive research. (Leavy 6)

Essentially, the intentions and methods of the research are grounded in an attitude of practicality and necessity. When I left the weeklong American Dance Festival (ADF) Winter Intensive in New York City in January 2020 (an experience which was foundational to the development of this research) I wrote in my journal a list of the group improvisational experiences I had had which felt "magical" or which had changed me or my understanding of the world in some way. Included was a list of goals for bringing the sense of community and curiosity I had felt at ADF back to my own institution, as well as a series of rambling questions which boiled down to this excerpt: "how can I form the best experience I can out of the tools, time, and space that I have, for and with the people I am around—for my community?"

Thus, the ultimate goals of the research are to increase and critically reflect on my own knowledge and skills as a facilitator of an inherited tradition of group movement improvisation and to experiment in a process of developing, through creative practice, approaches to gathering and collective movement that prioritize shifting authority onto a group collective and are more responsive, just, and ethical.

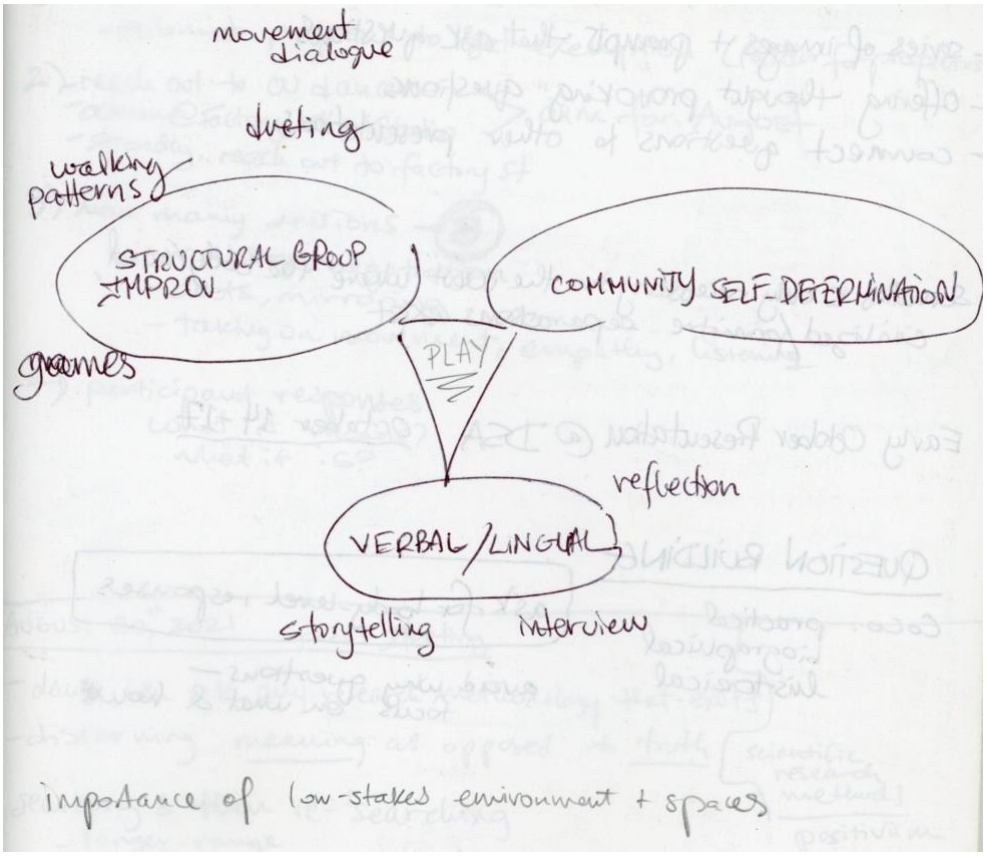

Fig. 3. An early map of what I considered to be the major components for practicing "being better together." From my journal, June 2021.

Formational Influences

My project evolved through three distinct thematic phases, for which different sources served as guiding resources. These are: a focus on the characteristics and mechanisms of group movement improvisation and the political implications of embodied inquiry, an exploration of the role of the facilitator and where authority lies, and a look into what generative practices are and a search into the unknown for new possibilities for where authority can lie. The most prominent of those influences that led the development of the research through these thematic shifts are highlighted in this

section of the thesis. Though sources I used in this research fall into these three main categories of influence, there is much overlap. Each source provided information about every aspect of this research to varying degrees.

Each source was approached with the question of *how*—how is "togetherness" cultivated? Ultimately, each source was viewed as a part of the search for practices that place authority onto a collective "futuring" and onto a kind of "being together better."

The foundations of my current interest in group movement improvisation and generative practices occurred in high school during study of Lisa Nelson's famous Tuning Score method under mentor Glenda Mackie. In our practices of the Tuning Score, I was first introduced to the skill set required of an improviser—listening and thinking with the body. The Tuning Score is designed to refine and coagulate improvisational spaces, particularly to create cohesion when groups of people are improvising together. Its methods draw a group of movers into conversation with one another and the space (where otherwise they may just be preoccupied by their own dancing) and reorient them to the purpose of improvisationally crafting a cohesive image, theme, or idea together.

Simultaneously, I was growing up dancing in an educational environment heavily informed by renowned choreographer Liz Lerman's creative community work.[2] This included dancing in a multi-generational company, Rainbow Dance Company (RDC), which stressed processes of choreography-as-research and often centered humanistic inquiries that dove into social, emotional, and political issues. The kinds of dance

[2] This is through the teaching and artistic presence of Michelle Pearson, a former member of Dance Exchange, Lerman's company.

practices that I began to inherit from a young age were often concerned with "how to dance together better" or more intrinsically, "how to *be* together better."

These two experiences of my adolescent dance training also taught me about the integration of intellectual inquiry and the physical act of a dance practice. In college, I grew interested in postmodern improvisational movement practices because it was within this field that I saw most clearly the integration of inquiry and research with the physical practice of the body. With improvisation I could use my body to have conversations and be engaged with asking questions. Improvisational practices, in the Western postmodern dance tradition, have a rich history most exemplified by an explosion of experimentation in the mid-twentieth century involving a canon of practitioners familiar to most Western dancers' ears. Among this cohort are the eight American artists interviewed in De Spain's book *Landscape of the Now*, a text that informed my very first tutorial in improvisational practices and continued to be a touchstone throughout the development of my thinking into the research problems of this thesis project. Several of the artists interviewed in De Spain's book appear as major influences elsewhere in this thesis: notably, Lisa Nelson, Deborah Hay, and Nancy Stark Smith.

De Spain's introduction frames the text explicitly "not as a book for academics: it was written for practitioners," (7) which runs parallel to the intention of this research project as a creative marriage between critical inquiry, or academic research, and actual group improvisational practice. In my own writing, I have borrowed from and adapted ways in which De Spain dealt with interviewing masters of incredibly varied and complex movement practices; for example, structuring around themes that I, the interviewer, have identified. I have also borrowed the format of surrounding longer direct

quotations from the dialogue of the various interviews with my own discussion. Of complex practices, De Spain states that "the purpose of the book is to investigate and articulate some of the ways in which experienced improvisers negotiate and survive that complexity, ways that they organize and conceptualize their practice to bring structure to improvisational experience" (3) and I have approached (especially the interview portion) of this thesis inspired by this ethos.

Theoretically, the chapter of *Landscape of the Now,* "Structures," was a foundational reading for me in the development of my thinking about the nature and necessity of the improvisational score, raising what I've called in this thesis "the problem of the open score." The ideas present in the chapter, especially those of Steve Paxton[3] and De Spain himself, were what led me to connect phenomenological or political theory from other fields with the physical practices of movement, dealing, as they both could, in the language of the body inhabiting and interacting with "structures."

Most prominent among the non-dance resources influential to this thesis is the work of Sara Ahmed, a feminist theorist and scholar whose writing is often at once analytical and sensory, provoking readers to *feel* theory in the body. Ahmed brings together a diverse range of theoretical and analytical methods in her writing to "explore how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 1). Through her work, Ahmed has developed a somewhat novel intellectual approach to the concepts of emotion and embodiment by questioning philosophical assumptions such as the idea that emotions are an individual and internal

[3] "Perhaps, most commonly, that's been my ideal state, to try to begin [with no structure], but one discovers one is a structure. —Steve Paxton" (qtd. in De Spain 158).

experience. In doing so, Ahmed is developing an understanding of emotion as relational and physical, acknowledging its cultural potential to shape and delineate "real" time and space: "Emotions are not only about movement, they are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 11).

Ahmed's descriptions touch upon some of the fundamental processes of "togetherness" in a way that collapses the duality between the physical fact of proximity and the cultural and emotional processes at work when people gather. She writes: "movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 11). Ahmed's work offers the possibility of an intellectual framework that can discuss the complicated processes at work in a group movement setting, offering provocative ways to deepen the discussion of how relationality, choice, movement, cultural context, and meaning (to name a few) intertwine in a group improvisation practice.

Her article "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" was the first to clearly chart, for me, the physical reality of the relationship between individual bodies and the structures of racism and sexism, supporting my wonderings and investigations begun through dance improvisation (especially improvisation done in groups). Drawing phenomenological pathways back and forth and between body and socio-political issues has remained an important part of this research, even within the writing of this document as the practice of gleaning theoretical or thematic gems from the physicality of the interview material and the thesis workshops. Ahmed's work, in particular, became a jumping off point for my own thinking in the realm of physical imagination and generative practices; I began to

suspect that these “phenomenological pathways” were navigational guides ripe with the possibility of breaking old habits and systems and the generation of new ways of being in “togetherness.”

The investigation of authority and a focus on the role of the facilitator in group improvisational practices came to the fore for me when I attended ADF’s Winter Intensive in January 2020. Led by the dean of ADF, Leah Cox, the weeklong intensive was packed with classes which explored the year’s theme: physical imagination. It was here that I first participated in both Leah’s and Eric Geiger’s group improvisational workshops, both of which were completely new formats of practice for me. Leah’s work with physical modes of exploring the self and its layered attitudes veered closely to Authentic Movement practices[4] while Eric Geiger’s work introduced the language of a “collective body” arrived at through shared movement practice. The experiences catapulted me into new ways of thinking about how to structure group experiences so that new ways of being in space together—for example, being together with deep awareness of authentic layers of self, or with an embodied understanding of collectivity—became accessible and encouraged. I was struck by both artists' ability to craft these experiences so intentionally for the participants, leading to a focus on facilitation and the eventual inclusion of interviews with both artists during the thesis research.

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[4] A consciousness practice developed by Mary Whitehouse is the 1950’s that emphasizes witnessing and moving from impulse. A more thorough explanation is available here: disciplineofauthenticmovement.com/discipline-of-authentic-movement/a-brief-description-of-the-discipline-of-authentic-movement/.

An additional resource that shaped my thinking about facilitation was Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering.* The book is a practical guide to designing and hosting successful gatherings of all kinds, drawing from Parker's years of experience as an event planner, consultant, and facilitator. Parker's concept of a "generous authority" spoke particularly well to my questions about the role of the facilitator. Generous authority is the host's use of explicit rules and structures in designing and facilitating gatherings. The intention of generous authority is not to control for the sake of power, but for the sake of the guests and their ability to have new and fuller experiences of "togetherness." Parker writes of rules and clearly structured gatherings: "In the explicitness and oftentimes whimsy of these rules was a hint of what they were really about: replacing the passive-aggressive, exclusionary, glacially conservative commandments of etiquette with something more experimental and democratic" (114). These ideas of generous authority and the structuring of gatherings have obvious parallels with "the problem of the open score" and translate easily into group movement improvisations in dance.

The development of a focus on "generative practices," growing from my original inquiries into where authority lies and how group improvisation functions, was the next step of the research sparked by the interviews and several critical texts. The written texts that most supported this shift into the realm of researching possibility were Deborah Hay's *My Body, The Buddhist* and adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy.* Hay's reflective book on her decades of work in dance with philosophies of the body and consciousness (work which she never labels herself as "improvisational" but is widely considered as such by others in the field) put voice to many of the intuitions about generative practices that I had felt or come to know physically in the research.

Meanwhile, *Emergent Strategy* became a critical referential text during the remainder of the research, informing the inclusion of concepts such as future-building into the thesis work, centered as they are in the text of brown's book. brown's work draws from her experience working in non-profit and activist organizing, as well as her identity as a feminist and a woman of color inspired by the writings of science fiction author Octavia Butler, to lay out a framework called "emergent strategy." This framework is a collection of elements that cohere into "strategies for being better humans" (17) or "ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions" (20). Grounded in science fiction and imagination, the concept of emergent strategy itself defies definition, for it operates like a theoretical basket, holding all things flexible, adaptive, and "miraculously" complex.

Much of brown's book is a call to shift the paradigms for how we interact with one another and organize collaborative spaces in service of future design. She stresses the importance of "futuring," articulating a novel term called "visionary fiction"[5] which encompasses a wide range of future-oriented genres and "intentionally explores how change happens from the bottom up" (163). Reading brown's emphasis on practicing a new paradigm through imaginative and generative strategy felt to me as if I were reading about collaborative improvisation. I imagined a group of movers constructing an imaginary world for themselves in a studio, crafting and negotiating their independent visions around and with one another, and learning in real time how to cohabitate and move in "togetherness" to build a symbiotic future. brown's descriptions of "movement" as an activist describing social or political change felt oddly metaphorical from a dance

[5] A term credited to Walidah by brown in *Emergent Strategy*.

perspective, the sentences shifting in meaning as I read them, yet maintaining their coherency and truth. Inherent in her argument is a necessity to recognize that even inside of a collective future, not everyone's futures have to look a certain way; it is, to brown, a necessary exercise to practice creating visions of the future that aren't homogenous or minimalist, but instead incorporate the inevitable complexity and diversity of life. In *Emergent Strategy,* this future-building exercise is vital to humankind's ability to survive in response to a changing world.

brown's book galvanized my own belief in the possibility for change offered by embodied practices in dance, theoretically supporting and inspiring the research. Organizationally, I was informed by the writing and research of De Spain, brown, Ahmed, Hay, and additionally Liz Lerman in her memoir-esque book *Hiking the Horizontal*—all of whom worked in different ways to capture complex philosophical concepts in sensorial, subjective styles that emphasized knowing from experience—a phenomenological approach. They reminded me that this project is about the strategies for building something new, and not about strategies apt only for destruction or critique. They set this thesis on the trajectory of a generative spirit rather than a primarily discursive one—one that emphasizes methodologies of collectivity and collaboration.

Part One, Gleanings: The Interviews

Introduction

The first phase of the project involved IRB-approved interviews with current practitioners of group improvisation in the field of dance. These interviews collected their perspectives on how group improvisation works, what its purpose is, and some of the ways of leading or structuring it. I interviewed three current dance artists —Coco Karol, Leah Cox, and Eric Geiger—over Zoom in January and February 2022. The interviewees for this project were selected based on my prior experiences with them and their influence on my own knowledge of group movement improvisation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, with the option offered to schedule additional interview or conversation time if desired by the interviewee.

These interviews took place as guided conversations, with an emphasis on dialogue, heavily influenced by De Spain's format and approach to interview methods. In this text, De Spain's use of fluid, personal questioning was effective in maintaining the subjectivity of each interviewees' approach to the practices of movement improvisation. This conversational method facilitated deeper reflection of each individual's processes and philosophies, allowing the diversity in their approaches to emerge—even within a group of practitioners with decades of overlapping research in the field. Thus, these interviews were not standardized. While I asked all three interviewees about certain themes and points of interest (including touch, future-building, and reflective practices), I also tailored questions toward each interviewee, building from the specific experiences I'd had with each of them and my prior knowledge regarding their improvisational work.

From the very first interview, the list of questions I had prepared quickly became irrelevant; the natural flow of the interview-conversations broached the topics I was curious about with much more depth and specificity to that artist's work than my questions would likely have accomplished. I believe this approach toward data collection is better able to "accurately" capture elements of subjective experience or phenomenological knowledge and thus was better suited to the qualitative nature of this research project. Because of the complexity of the subject matter and the importance of subjectivity in artistic and embodied practices, I will often refer to these interviews as "interview-conversations" to help capture the nature of their occurrences.

All three interviewees are multi-faceted dance professionals and for each of them, group movement improvisation practices and the facilitation of these practices, certainly falls within their larger creative and professional pursuits in ways that were not fully discussed in the interview-conversations. My intention was to capture and glean parts of our conversations and overlapping interests in service of the research questions of the thesis, not to record historical or biographical data about these three artists. Thus, my descriptions of their work and ideas in this thesis are in no way comprehensive regarding the artists or even their practices themselves and reflect my own filter of interests regarding this research. The practices and perspectives gleaned from the interviews informed the development of the workshops held at Ohio University with dance students as the second phase of the thesis research.

The interview-conversations occurred with friends, colleagues, mentors, and connections of my own for several reasons. Due to the size and nature of the field, dancers and dance artists (especially within the United States) represent a tight

community of shared ideas. These ideas are often being explored in shifting and overlapping groups of people that come together ephemerally for certain projects or workshops. The size of the field is such that any inquiries often result in no more than one-degree of separation between every active practitioner in the field. Additionally for these reasons, group movement improvisation practices are particularly prone to having complex, inscrutable, synergistic lineages of development. It is common practice in the field of contemporary concert dance for a teacher or facilitator to verbally cite a practice's origin when facilitating that practice with a group of other dancers—if that origin is known to them. This often means that any given practice is generally cited as coming from the person a facilitator first experienced it with, even if the practice is actually an accumulation of gathering and organizing techniques from a myriad of influential sources over time (possibly over generations). Additionally, each facilitator or teacher may change or alter a practice, or take aspects of a practice and repurpose them, for any number of artistic or creative research purposes; this happens quite frequently in the field. Thus, with the acknowledgement that my own training and current knowledge of improvisation and group facilitation was founded through my experiences with teachers in workshops or otherwise, this interview process was also intended to be a practice in reflexive research with opportunities for glimmers of insight into the ways in which the philosophical underpinnings of group movement improvisation—as well as the practical methods of score-building or structuring group improvisations—are inherited in the current field of dance.

This section deals with "gleanings." These are scattered, mined, and disparate ideas that I have collected over time to support the work done in this thesis. The

interviews described and discussed below were conducted prior to the development of my central thesis idea. Thus, the interviews themselves were guided by meandering processes of inquiry and intuition, and inherently resist cohesive form or statement-making. I have distilled important formational ideas gleaned through this interview process below, which helped to build and support the emergence of the central focus on "generative practices."

Interviews with Coco Karol: Questions, Structure and Generous Authority, and Addressing Need

Coco Karol is an independent dance artist and teacher located primarily in New York City, whose work in cross-disciplinary performance is often rooted in local communities and processes of embodied inquiry.[6]

My previous connections with Coco were formed in April of 2021 as part of my coursework for a community dance tutorial, when she came to Ohio University for a two-day guest-teaching residency. I worked closely with her during her short time in Athens, interviewing her, taking class from her, and participating in a movement interview[7] process with her. We examined processes of question-building that made up movement interviews, as well as questions at the root of shared experiences of embodied inquiry.

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[6] For a fuller bio, visit Coco's website: www.findingcoco.net/about.

[7] Movement interviews are a format of embodied interview developed by Coco in which movement is used in conjunction with verbalization, transforming access to personal memory and narrative. More information on this rich process can be found on her website: www.findingcoco.net/movement.

I conducted two Zoom interview-conversations with Coco in January and February of 2022. From our rich conversations, three particularly impactful "gleanings" emerged: using questions as tools in group movement improvisations, considerations for how to approach structure and authority as an organizer and facilitator, and the thematic undercurrent of "rising to meet need."

At the time of our first interview-conversation, my research questions were just beginning to settle into the scope of generative practices. Our conversation began with an explanation from me of the process I had undergone from focusing on a process of decolonization or "un-doing" to a generative process of imagining a collective future. Coco approached the interviews from her experience as a facilitator of group improvisation experiences, bringing forth her knowledge from ones she had led or participated in which were particularly relevant to themes of generation, imagination, and future-building. We talked about the necessity of relying on asking uncomfortable and uncertain questions such as "what are we trying to do now?" or "what am I actually trying to say?" or "how do we go from here?" or "where do we go from here?" These kinds of questions had also formed the groundwork for the improvisational practices that Coco introduced us to in our modern dance technique class; most notably, a questioning structure inherited from Deborah Hay: "what if I were to presume that..."

Questions, by nature, live in a space of "futuring," investigating the uncertain and the unknown. For me, gleaning the concrete tool of using questions was a significant development toward the identity of a "generative practice" within my research. It helped to describe the ethos in which a "generative practice" dwells and cultivates—an ethos of the uncertain and the unknown. The facilitation gem that arose for me out of Coco's work

was her brilliant framing of questions that allowed them to become practical and in-the-body: she described a tool she often uses in her own group work of collectively creating a list of written "presuppositions" that guide the intention, inquiry, and value-system of the group throughout a movement research process.[8] I used this tool of a collectively generated list of shared presumptions as the groundwork for actualizing collaborative future-building in my workshops in February. By turning a question into an assumption (essentially, into a score)—for example, what if we were to presume that there is no such thing as a neutral body in our movement in the space together[9]—then the choice-making paradigm of participants is transformed. They experience a new attitude toward what their own body and the bodies of others *mean* in space, and a new framework for movement in "togetherness" is tenuously explored. In the process, a kind of "futuring" is physically built out of a "what if" statement of uncertainty. Additionally, this kind of questions-based embodiment has the potential to "lighten up" and transform challenging social-emotional processes by turning them into processes of inquiry, exploration, or even play.

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[8] I later mis-read my notes, and in the thesis workshops we created a list of "presumptions" (which was effectively the same thing).

[9] Coco offered this example—specifically the hypothesis that a body in space can never be neutral—from her experience facilitating a community-based project in Istanbul about protest and performance. The assumption that a body in space can never be neutral is very similar to the problem of the open score, running parallel with the idea that everyone always enters a space with a score, or an orientation.

Coco spoke to this kind of potentiality in our interview, when she described her long-term project with hospice workers called *Gestures of Care*. She highlighted the process of taking something heavy and transforming it into a future-space, or a generative practice, using questions as a tool:

> For *Gestures of Care* it was about the gestures that we use to care for one another … it's about meaning-making of actual physical gestures … and so in that there was a clarity that really helped me. When someone was in a grief process, in a bereavement, I could say 'we're not actually doing that here, we're looking at the gestures and the meaning-making.' And you have a lot of meaning-making to do when you're in a grief process, so there's crossover. When you've worked in care there's a lot of grief that must happen for any essential worker, or hospice worker, or child who has taken care of a parent (and other emotions—anger, relief, and complex things). I think that keeping the clarity of what your question is and the future-building [is important]—keeping it in a generative space. Not to discount all the stuff people are going through, but like 'what are we building,' 'how can we use the space to imagine a different future or a different scenario' can be a framework for all of that stuff. (Karol)

I found this approach to centering questions both useful to and affirmative of my own process with the thesis project. This informed the methodology and design of each step of the research from the interviews to the workshops, and even to the writing of this manuscript.

As a facilitator, Coco's careful intentionality and attention to structure were very notable, and within my research, I saw this as a unique and definitive philosophy about how power and authority should be approached as a facilitator of shared spaces of movement. Coco stressed clarity and structure in many different aspects of her approach to facilitation; for instance, she organized touch in group settings by giving it "highly specific" intentions, and she suggested using strict allotted time measurements for organizing the different segments of group experiences. Coco described having these clear parameters as providing "really, really generous support" and I could not help but draw a connection to Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering* and her concept of "generous authority."

I was interested in the structures of authority that Coco implemented that deferred leadership from herself and onto another entity. For example, a particular project she cited asked "how can we really make this a group-led process?" as a leading research question. I saw Coco's use of structures like a "list of presuppositions," strict time management, and a repeating opening and closing ritual to her workshops, as examples of ways Coco defers some of her facilitator authority onto exterior entities that can in turn be shaped by the input and feedback of the collective. Particularly, the collaboratively created "list of presuppositions" functions as a way to defer authority onto the collective with a distinctively generative and future-oriented intention. These structural strategies aim to make true group-led periods more achievable with use of given, agreed upon parameters.

My conversation with Coco about group-led processes also brought up a major theme of this thesis research: an emphasis on need and the practicality of physically

addressing it. A couple of phrases gleaned from my interview with Coco continued to resonate with me and shape the development of my thinking and the design of the workshops and generative practices that went into them. These were “rising to meet need” and the idea of “collective rest.” “Rising to meet need” illustrates what can be the very source of action and movement in a shared space, speaking to movement that is spawned from a necessity. This necessity may be the need to play, to connect, to stretch, to support, or to express, to name a few examples. Within the scope of this research, I see movement rising out of necessity as key to the cultivation of generative spaces because it requires careful attention to oneself and to the group—i.e., moving to meet your own needs as well as the action of rising to meet the needs of an “other.” The idea of “collective rest” grew from the idea of necessity, as Coco and I discussed the very real fatigue of dancers, particularly those in university settings, struggling to emerge from the pandemic. Although this was a passing comment within our interview-conversation, I remained intrigued by this notion of “collective rest,” and it eventually became a very large part of the workshop phase of the research.

Interview with Leah Cox: Physical Imagination and the Importance of Low-Stakes Spaces

Leah Cox is a dance artist, arts administrator, and educator primarily located in Austin, Texas. She is a professor at the University of Texas and is also the Dean of the American Dance Festival in Durham, NC.[10]

I met Leah when I attended ADF's Winter Intensive in January of 2020, participating in her group workshops exploring that year's festival theme of "physical imagination." A number of these workshops investigated embodied practices developed by Leah, inspired by the therapeutic modality Voice Dialogue developed by psychologists Sidra and Hal Stone.[11]

My interview-conversation with Leah Cox occurred over Zoom in January of 2022. Leah shared her experience as a facilitator of what she called "open-ended" group improvisations—or group settings that focused on group self-determination and thus were not a traditionally directed improvisation. We discussed the concept of "physical imagination," various aspects of it, and the many ways of working within it. For this research, "physical imagination" is simply a larger umbrella term, another way of talking about generative practices that isn't limited to group settings, but is perhaps more like a

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[10] A more in-depth look into Leah's education and facilitation approach is available online in her "Paean for Class" page: leahcoxdance.com/new-front-page/.

[11] Voice Dialogue operates through the acknowledgement that everyone is made up of a diverse collection of selves. www.voicedialogueinternational.com/.

state of being or an essential tool. An important gleaning from this interview-conversation was the assertion that, whether understood as "physical imagination," "generative practices," or otherwise, these kinds of generative energies require low-stakes spaces where risks can be taken through the act of play. Subsequently, we discussed the political potential of these spaces, conceptualizing "physical imagination" as a tool for learning how to be together in better, more equitable ways. Leah also addressed the role of the facilitator and the challenges of navigating the limits of open-endedness—more specifically, how to be a responsible and effective facilitator while attempting to cultivate a group-led process.

Leah addressed the role of the facilitator and the challenges of navigating the limits of open-endedness—more specifically, how to be a responsible and effective facilitator while attempting to cultivate a group-led process. I was drawn by the idea of stripping back facilitator-directed structure and authority from a shared space, pushing how and where the line could exist between a fertile open-endedness that begets imagination and generation, and an openness so wide as to lose all sense of direction and purpose, allowing old habits or patterns to dominate. These questions directly wrestle with the problem of the open score and did eventually inform the experimental design of the workshops, particularly the third workshop. Of course, no one answer to where this line is or how to create it emerged in the interview-conversation (or workshop). However, Leah offered a powerful insight from her own experiences that reached into accessing a sense of trust in the collective as a grounding tool for facing the uncertain and the improvisational:

> There's a way that you can communicate that you know what you're doing in how you ask people to be accountable to the problem, the open-ended problem, and how you invest them and care about them, and ask them to care about one another. And a lot of that then gets into issues that are very tricky—tricky's not the right word—they're issues about how you hold the space, and how you stay present yourself … We're gonna make something together, what could it be and how can it interest all of us. (Cox)

Like Coco's idea of a "list of presuppositions," Leah's philosophy of facilitation centers the establishment of shared value-systems, leading into a kind of group accountability. These value systems center a dedication to one another within the collective, and to the collective experience of "the something-ness of togetherness." Additionally, this prioritization of a collective agreement leans into the praxis of collaborative future-building in which the gathered community sets internal, actionable intentions for their own upcoming experience—most notably the intention of committing to that *shared,* upcoming experience.

This collectivity, or "togetherness," came up explicitly as "we" statements in Leah's description of the physical imagination and how it plays out in the group movement spaces she facilitates. In the following quote, Leah literally voices the shifting of her authority off her own figure and onto the others and the group in the space, such that they can "make something out of nothing together":

> This is the physical imagination: I have a feeling, I'm working from an energy. [As a facilitator, saying,] 'I know we can be together. I know we can do this. WE have to do this. I'm not going to lead you through something, we are. I'm gonna

> facilitate, I'm gonna throw a little this, I'm gonna throw a little that, and I'm gonna listen…and I kinda hear something…OK, let's go there.. and then, OK, let's go there. Anything you think up we're gonna go for it and it's gonna be okay.' Then how do we make a connection, how do we make meaning—that requires imagination because there's no right answer. It might require a little creativity too. And then people realize they are making something together out of nothing—that founds basic trust in the world, in one another, and in yourself. (Cox)

This foundation of trust through the cultivation of a "togetherness" is the grounds for learning and risk-taking spaces to occur. When these risks, which can be physical, emotional, social, and more, are taken in collectively agreed-upon low-stakes spaces where considering one another's needs is prioritized, they become less dangerous and stressful. They then allow us to have new experiences and learn from them.

Particularly considering how social risks (for example, forming new connections, sharing physical touch) can be taken when the context is "play" and the stakes are low, illustrates the potential for the mechanisms of physical imagination or generative spaces to affect political landscapes. Speaking of this potential, Leah and I shared the following exchange:

> Emma: We come into rooms with scores—that is the foundation of a lot of things, but also including racism, homophobia, sexism—those are the scores that we carry for physically relating to one another based on our bodies—so that has been on my mind, but it's such a huge thing to think about and communicate and I'm not sure how exactly it fits into what I'm

> doing besides knowing that there is a lot of political potential and politics inside of people moving together physically.
>
> Leah: What happens if you change the score? So what, we all have scores, it doesn't matter—to move it a little more openly—to speak of bias. We all have scores in there, and there's a lot of shame around it, a lot of secrecy. As soon as there's a feeling that something is no longer permitted, there's shame. You're going to have this issue—once there's a fear of being called out. The beauty of a score is that it lightens it up. It moves it into the realm of art and creativity, and it implies that I can change it. (Cox)

This discussion of the potentiality of a movement space to more effectively address challenging social-emotional processes harkened back to my interview-conversation with Coco Karol in which she discussed the generative space available when something like grief or anger is transformed into an embodied inquiry. Leah describes a very similar process here with addressing the internalized biases that are an embodied part of structures of oppression like racism, sexism, ableism, etc. Within the lens of this research, the potentiality of these "lightened up" spaces are that they can be explored together, and thus become a shared space of embodied processing and change that directly address internalized patterns shaping our relationships to and with one another.

As a gleaning, Leah's work with Voice Dialogue in my original interactions with her at ADF elucidated the individual processes of working with carried structures of thinking or feeling. In her physical Voice Dialogue workshops, participants worked with

the concept of having multiple selves—child selves, protector selves, playful selves, etc. Her workshops challenged us to physically embody the authentic selves that surfaced through her guidance, even if they weren't "desirable" and perhaps felt "risky" to us in a dance space (such as inner voices that didn't feel like dancing, or felt apathetic towards others, etc.). By stressing permission, Leah's workshop allowed each participant to practice holding a lot of inner awareness around the orientations and attitudes guiding them through the shared space. This permission and inner-awareness directly addressed the shame that Leah speaks of in the previous quote, helping people arrive into an attitude of low-stakes risk-taking and learning that serves the creation of a collective and of a generative space. This lens of personal internal negotiation and risk-taking as a score was a significant gleaning for me, and one that I applied to practices experimented with in the first workshop.

Interview with Eric Geiger: Being an Ethical Facilitator, the "Collective Body," and the Integration of Immediacy

"Dance is risky. Being together in a room is risky." —Eric Geiger

Eric Geiger is an independent dance artist, performer, and educator based in San Diego, CA, who frequently teaches at the American Dance Festival. Eric is not only a facilitator of group improvisation in educational settings—he also often explores and utilizes improvisational practice in his performance and creative work. His improvisational workshops "Can how we're moving be what we're making?" were part of the curriculum at the ADF Winter Intensive in 2020.

My interview-conversation with Eric Geiger was held in February of 2022 over Zoom and lasted about an hour. Our conversation shifted fluidly and touched upon a myriad of intersecting topics related to group movement improvisation and its facilitation. Discussions of how to negotiate the power and responsibility inherent in the role of facilitator, the idea of a "collective body," as well as the tenuous nature and inherent risk of collaborative generative space, were significant gleanings for this research.

The "holding hands and running" score which I had previously done with Eric at ADF's Winter Intensive in January of 2020 was a focus within our conversation. Participating in this score with Eric planted the seed for the idea of a "collective body" which eventually transformed into an assertion of "the something-ness of togetherness" in this thesis. This score, from which I interpreted a running score to practice in the later thesis workshops, is a score in which a group of people holds hands, forming a chain, and attempts to run around the room together. The running begins on a small scale and slowly escalates until speed and momentum become a curious breaking point between something that provides total support of one's body weight and direction through the chain of the arms, and something that causes people to fall, separate, or swing from the chain. An explicit part of the score is the practice of always coming back into connection with the chain of arms and continuing "running" as soon as possible. Discussing this score with Eric elucidated many gleanings that were significant to this research.

For example, the physical touch and physical interdependence in this score illustrates, in embodiment, "the net" (see fig. 1 and 2). Participating in this score at ADF gave me the strongest sense of being a part of a "collective body" that was "more than the

sum of its parts." This was due to the very concrete design of the score (the tensegrity in the arms and the joints of connected hands in the chain could hold and support people being flung through the space) that truly physicalized "togetherness," connection, and interdependence—not only as a metaphor—but as a genuine condition of relationship within the space and time delineated by the score. This experience illustrated, for me, how concepts of "togetherness" could be readily accessed and explored within different physical paradigms of relationship through the act of score-making. This was foundational to the development of my own ideas with regards to this thesis research.

When I asked Eric about the role of facilitating or directing this improvisation, he communicated such careful considerations of ethical power and the responsibility of the facilitator, even in ways that considered the space of "futuring" within the power structure of a group movement improvisation:

> I'm always in it [the improvisation]. I need to be 'in' in order to be having the experience to pull from to create some language around it. It's so much about what I'm seeing and [my] proximity to it. If I was outside, it would be very, very different. It is a kind of a Feldenkrais-like[12] way of guiding, where I'm really just calling out *what's already happening*. And, if you're 'in' [as a facilitator], it's a different position of power as the person who is guiding that you have to take on with a certain kind of responsibility—and hold yourself accountable. But you are the one, I mean, there is A Teacher in the room, although everyone is teaching and being taught

[12] Feldenkrais is a somatic practice. For more information, visit feldenkrais.com/about-the-feldenkrais-method/.

> simultaneously, but I do realize I am in a different position of power as the one who is guiding. So with that, I don't take that lightly, and mostly what I'm attempting to call out is what's already happening. For example, if I'm lying on the floor doing an Awareness Through Movement lesson [a Feldenkrais exercise] and someone is guiding me through and they are calling out something that is happening—even if I am already aware of it, it creates, it *expands* the way I'm experiencing what I'm already in, and allows me to increase my capacity in what I'm already in. At the same time it's a way—you know you mentioned politics earlier, you didn't specifically mention social justice but—ways of decentering this kind of one person 'teacher-ness' if I'm calling out what's already happening in the room. [For instance,] if I've called out something during the 'holding hands and running' score I have witnessed that is closely in proximity to something that you're in, Emma, and I'm calling that out, then that's a way that you, Emma, are also teaching the group—and being informed. That the group is now informed by something I'm seeing Emma in. Of course, even then, I'm aware of my lens, it is a responsibility, it is a position of power, but with that, I attempt to track what's going on in the room, maybe even more so than if [I were participating without facilitating], so I take that responsibility on. (Geiger)

Eric's method of verbal facilitation focuses on calling out what is already happening in the space, rather than giving directives for things that should happen next. This method has significant implications for how the power of a facilitator in a group improvisation

can be shifted from the singular vision or directive of a leader to a more inclusive, collective sense of agency and determination held by the community of people moving in the space. Through this kind of facilitation, the future of the improvisation is more collectively determined; the future trajectory for the improvisation becomes an accumulation of things presently emerging from various individuals within the group. This way of facilitating by calling out what is already happening, albeit through the lens of the facilitator, lends itself as a tool in service of collaborative future-building.

Eric also offered a framework for thinking about failure and risk in relationship to creative research and generative space, one that is rooted in the work of queer theorists.[13] Eric outlined this framework in response to my explanation of my desire to create within my thesis workshops a generative movement space void of an expectation for performance or product:

> In terms of moving away from these kinds of normative values of 'product' or something at the end—or you said 'presentable'—it takes some *effort*, in a way, to work against those kinds of norms and it's always worth it. And it does take some kind of resistance because there's such a strong force to 'wrap it up'—I think you used the word 'solidify'—to gather it up, these normative notions of completion, productivity. It's capitalism, it's all kinds of things, it leads into the social and political—larger things—but it is, it's hard. Something I've been talking a lot about lately is—lots of queer theorists [have talked about this], this is not new—but that resistance also comes with its own set of stakes. You really have

[13] Eric cited *The Queer Art of Failure* by Jack Halberstam.

> to be willing to lose. To lose out. There's so much loss involved in that, in really creating a space, a queer space. And I say queer not necessarily in terms of sexuality, but in terms of something 'other,' something different from what we know or something that we're more familiar with, or something more normative or normatively valued. We're setting ourselves up to lose, in a way. We're losing access to things … you might lose a grade. At the same time, simultaneously, there's so much we gain. There are so many other kinds of beauty that we gain from, new kinds of beauty that we never knew existed. (Geiger)

This framework of failure or loss which acknowledges the effort and importance of carving out generative spaces (which are, by definition, intentional spaces of risk) directly translates to the goals of "evoke, provoke, and unsettle" within creative research processes (Leavy 6).

Recognizing the effort exerted in "carving out" generative space by and for a group of Ohio University dance students reified my understanding of this thesis research as grounded in a place of necessity or urgency for my given community and spoke to Coco's idea of "rising to meet need." And, when one of the thesis workshops, in terms of the success of the facilitation methods I was experimenting with, "failed", these ideas suggested ways to frame the outcome as necessary, placing them within the larger picture of experimentation with generative spaces and the management of power in collaborative future-building.

It's important to note, however, that inside of this discussion of "failure" and queer theory, I do not claim the creation of a "queer space" as part of this thesis. Instead,

the application of these ideas of non-normative spaces to the dance world that I'm familiar with can challenge my own thinking, as well as challenge the standard rehearsal environment and its typical logic for gathering bodies together in dance spaces. Using time and space without the need to produce any end product is in many ways a non-normative practice within a university dance setting—while we are made to feel negatively indulgent and/or privileged for taking time off of producing to rest and play in the context of our existent structures of time and money, it is also necessary for the health and well-being of the people and the community. This idea of resistance against the pressure to productively "wrap it up" infuses the whole of this thesis research, not only theoretically but in its physical manifestations, informing the very format and style of this manuscript that I am currently writing.

Throughout our interview-conversation, Eric's ideas evoked a sense of immediacy for me. His way of understanding and framing improvisation totally collapsed the space of separation between the political/theoretical concepts of power, authority, agency, even queer theory, and the physical practices of "togetherness" through movement. This, to me, was part of the essence of generative practice that I was hoping to glean and spoke to the practical ethos of the project as something which addresses immediate needs and takes place in a very "real" embodied way. Even risk is pushed to a very "real" and tangible place within the wildness of the "holding hands and running" score, as the escalation of the score often pushes to the point of falling or losing control of momentum. With this immediate reality of risk, Eric emphasized the necessity of mitigating risk by facilitating a physical culture of care and resiliency within the score. Cultivating a sense of community support and careful consideration of ourselves and others as the group

pushes into spaces of risk is a very large part of the score's structure and a large part of the facilitator's responsibility. The score intentionally pushes into spaces of risk both because of a trust in the collective and also as a way to access and then reassure trust in the collective—in that we may and do fall, but that we are alright, we get back up again, and rejoin the group. Eric said that no one has ever been injured, even in the wildest "holding hands and running" scores.

Eric's articulation of this kind of immediacy and "realness" arose speaking of the "holding hands and running" score: "where there is a group of people that is attempting to figure out something in real time together…that is much more interesting for me…I'm more interested in seeing people in process, in real time. The beautiful misalignments and the failures and the increased (in)capacity right before my eyes." The action or the movement in this score also becomes necessary; the root of necessity is having a problem to solve or overcome. Eric explained this central theme of capacity/incapacity, which I see related to the practicality and necessity of a movement response, as an underlying philosophy in Feldenkrais: "There is often—there can be—a constraint. You are attempting to organize around that constraint as a given. Holding hands and running is the constraint. We break apart, but always with the intent of coming back together."

Part Two, Experiments: The Workshops

Introduction

The most experimentally designed phase of this thesis occurred as a weekend series of three improvisational workshops with a group of seven dance students at Ohio University.[14] I invited these seven dancers to participate in these workshops, because I had previously worked with them in some capacity and believed they would all be curious about the ideas put forward in the workshops. For example, a core group of five had collaborated with me in the fall semester on a choreographic project for the BFA Senior Capstone concert. Our process had been heavily improvisational, so they came into the workshops with a baseline of familiarity with moving together and with me as a facilitator. The participant total was eight with myself as an involved facilitator. These "score laboratory" workshops were an amalgamation of exercises and practices gleaned from my readings, thinking, and interviews leading up to them, with some basic organizing principles, including a vital piece I call "reflective practices." Two workshops, each roughly one and a half hours in length, occurred on Saturday, February 19th in a

[14] The incredible participants and collaborators in these workshops were Micaiah Clouse, Ellen Hesketh, Kenyatta Jones, Maralee Joyner, Jaiya McKenney, Ashley Osborne, and Nicole Peterman. Six of the participants were undergraduate students, and one was a graduate student.

Putnam Hall studio. A third and final workshop of the same length occurred in a different studio the following morning.

The basic format of the workshops was planned and executed thematically as follows: the first, trust and comfort building, the second a deepening of this "togetherness" and an exploration of the "collective body," and the third an attempt at group self-determination where I could step back as facilitator. Thus, the first two workshops were testing the hypothesis that a "collective body"—a "something-ness" of group awareness (the "magic")—can be found or cultivated in an improvisational space through intentional facilitation techniques and scoring. The third workshop was an experiment in stripping back the authority of the facilitator figure with a fairly direct attempt at shifting workshop leadership onto the participants. This workshop attempted to push as close to the ideal of an "open score" as possible by operating with the direct intent to "remove" authority or influence from the space.

As organizing through-line components of the workshops, I included an archival scroll, a shared list of presumptions (both practices suggested by Coco Karol), and a final closing exercise of the group lifting each individual participant up off the ground. The archival scroll was a large roll of white construction paper that stretched the length of the studio and was scattered with a supply of writing utensils. It remained throughout the duration of all three workshops, available for any kind of drawing, writing, or reflecting. While participants also had private journals of their own, the scroll served a different purpose by providing a public, shared reflective surface which could also be collaborative—i.e., participants could write and draw things together. The list of presumptions was a collaboratively generated public "manifesto" of sorts that was written

out as a statement of values, priorities, curiosities, or hypotheses that orient or inform the culture of the space throughout the three workshops. The statements generated by the group are shown in the image below (figure 4).

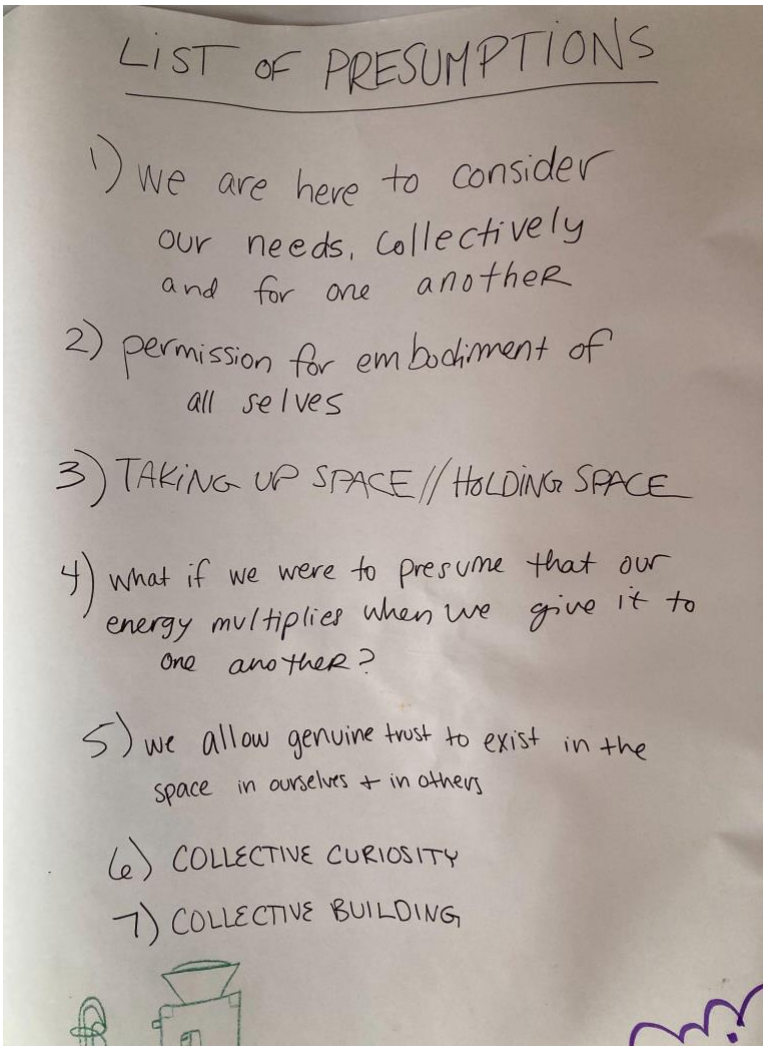

Fig. 4. The “list of presumptions” collaboratively generated during the experimental workshops. Seen here on the archival scroll, February 2022.

Built into the methodology of the workshops was a notion of “reflective practice” that had been a part of the research for a very long time in several iterations. It began early as a focus on lingual elements (see fig. 3) but eventually broadened to include any medium of reflection or meaning-making. From early on in my experiences in group

improvisation practices in dance, I have noticed a pattern of improvisation, into reflection, back into improvisation, and so on. For instance, the research in embodied communication and improvisation that I took part in at ImPulsTanz with Raul Maia and Thomas Steyaert utilized a cyclical process of improvise-discuss-improvise-discuss, and I noticed that my own practices in my choreographic process for the fall Senior Dance Concert fell into an identical rhythm with my cast of seven dancers. Nancy Stark Smith's Underscore has a deeply entrenched reflective practice at the end of each group improvisation called "harvesting" which includes time for individual reflection and then collective sharing and reflecting. It seems that even to begin to navigate the complexity of an improvisational experience requires periods of reflection, either verbally, in writing, or in the body itself. These practices help keep the theoretical or "mind" aspects of an improvisational practice in relationship with the physical practice and vice-versa and help an improviser make sense of and develop what they are doing or investigating in a moment of movement.

For group improvisations, reflective practices are dually important for their ability to reinforce shared meaning-making and theoretical exchange of embodied ideas. They also, at times, provide structures of affirmation and trust-building between members of a group improvisation. Each of the three interviewees had different perspectives on reflective practices, but I particularly integrated the use of some of Coco Karol's suggestions (the archival scroll and the lists of presumptions) and Leah Cox's suggestions (the use of time and specificity of reflective activities) into the structure of the workshops. Many of the reflective practices I used, such as taking a walk with a partner

and verbally reflecting on your experiences, are common practices in the dance field that I have encountered in a myriad of dance contexts.

Going into the weekend, I created plans for structuring each of the workshops. The structure of the first workshop was more concretely preconceived than the structure of the following two. I made this decision to encourage input from the participants and to encourage flexibility and active listening from me as a facilitator in response. I followed my plans for each workshop, but also facilitated organically and responsively, which meant that I sometimes made spontaneous decisions in leadership and workshop design.

The original drafting of my plans for the workshops are included as images below (figures 5,6, and 7). Due to the necessity of being responsive and intuitive as a facilitator, it was an expected outcome that the workshops took shape in unforeseen ways, veering off, at points, from the original plan. Because of my prior experiences facilitating group improvisational experiences and from the emphasis placed on listening and responding by the interviewees, the need to lead with flexibility and intuition was anticipated.

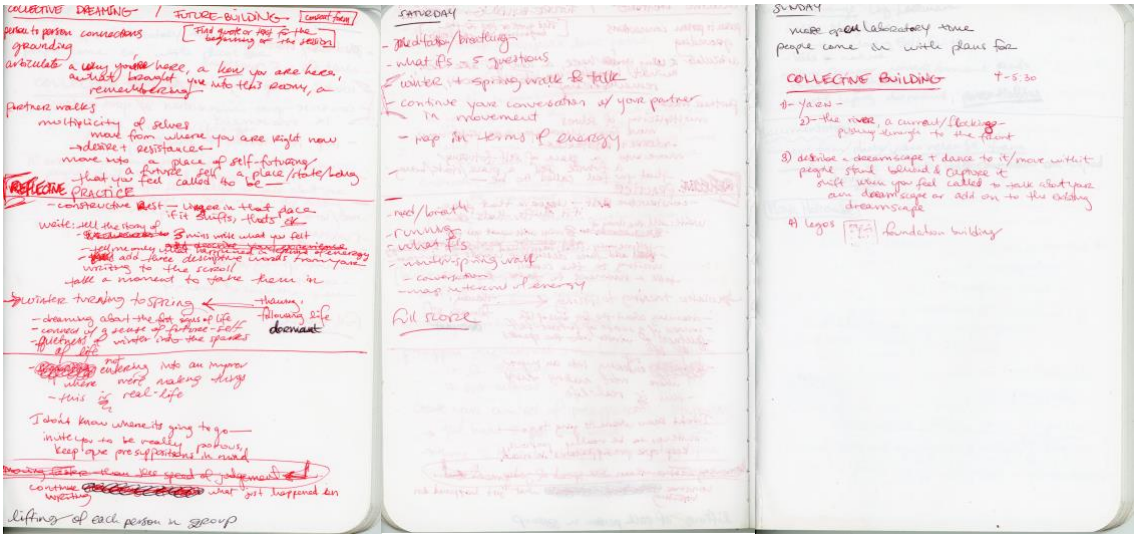

Fig. 5, 6, and 7. The original plans for the workshops, illustrating their organization from more structured to more open over the course of the three gatherings.

The First Workshop

The most important goals that I set out for the first workshop were successfully achieved. They were 1) to establish trust and comfort with one another and the space and 2) to generate a written, shared "list of presumptions" that could inform the remainder of the workshop series.

The first workshop began with a short introduction sitting in a circle on the studio floor. I thanked the dancers for joining and we went around the circle introducing ourselves by name, pronouns, and responding to a prompt regarding how we felt and what color we "were" in that moment. I gave a brief preface of the project (at this point, I was still finding some of the language for the research, so I talked about some of my thoughts and questions). My introduction stressed the experimental nature of the gatherings and the emphasis on play. I also expressed my hope that we could find a way, by the third workshop, to shift to a collectively determined sense of direction for what this carved-out time and space could explore.

This verbal introduction flowed into the first moving practice; I led everyone (including myself) to stand and begin walking around the room as I continued describing the research. I read aloud quotes from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* and Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*. I emphasized the importance and priority of a sense of permission in the workshops and offered questions about redefining our relationships, as dancers, to gathering in these familiar studios. I transitioned my verbal directions into the first group movement improvisation practice, an exploration of permission and the multiplicity of the selves introduced to me by Leah Cox at the ADF winter intensive. We stayed in this improvisational modality, exploring the multiple selves and their physical

embodiment. I used this exercise to invite everyone as fully as possible into the shared space, creating opportunity for everyone to access deep internal awareness about how they were making decisions, performing, or arriving in their bodies and in their movement. This improvisation was intended to invite the dancers to embody their "authentic" selves in mediums beyond what might traditionally be thought of as acceptable in a dance improvisation, anything from wild flailing to playing tag, to drawing on the archival scroll—even talking to one another. I eventually stepped out of the improvisation while continuing to give verbal cues and shuffled through a randomized assortment of music to play in the space. This was a tool borrowed from Leah Cox's workshop at ADF wherein different music played in the space elicited responses from different selves (parts of the self that were loud and expressive, parts that were gentle or aggressive, parts that were observational, parts that were contemplative, etc.). At the very least, the music provided a background against which it was easier to recognize one's own emotional location or state of being.

I led the dancers through experimenting with open or closed eyes, to practice attuning to both themselves and to their relationship with the space and with one another. After staying in this improvisational movement practice for about twenty-five minutes, I prompted the dancers to find a partner. We transitioned into a reflective practice where everyone walked around the room in pairs, and each partner shared something they discovered or felt for a strict two minutes (timed by the facilitator) while the other partner merely listened and gave bodily affirmation (but did not verbally respond). Then the partners switched, and, in thirty seconds, the other partner reflected back something that they heard the first partner express. This reflective practice was intended to transform the

more private, intimate atmosphere generated in the improvisation into a space of explicit permission and sharing. This built trust between participants and gave everyone a chance to feel seen and heard. It also allowed a shared meaning-making to occur, as people got a chance to build language around a distilled, self-selected part of their experience. Not only was this exercise a chance to frame individual meaning, but it was also an opportunity for that personal framework to be translated through someone else's language or understanding of meaning.

After this, I led the dancers to find themselves in constructive rest on their backs with their eyes closed. As a further reflective practice, I invited the dancers to take note of how they felt or what energies were moving in the mind as well as "below the surface of the mind" in the body, and how these experiences were connected. I also asked them to take note of some of their memories of the last half hour of improvisation. Lastly, I gave a prompt of visualizing a "future self" or an energetic existence of a future self and let that prompt sit with them for about five minutes.

The next chunk of the workshop was dedicated to discussion and sharing. We formed a circle on the floor and had a free-form conversation (which I occasionally spurred on with questions) about things that came up for people during the practices or things they shared with one another during their partner walks. Themes of rest, play, and child/adult selves arose during this discussion. I've included some of the text from the participants below (with their permission) because their expression of their discoveries was insightful and unique to their experiences:

Regarding rest, play, and community:

Ashley Osborne: When we get older, we have more responsibilities and we become more independent. In our society, individual self-made-ness is how we measure success, but like, are you really self-made? That's what we glorify. When you're a child, we are socialized to be in community and have playdates and playmates, and we have to intentionally carve that into our schedules now. And we don't do that, we don't prioritize that now, because we have responsibilities, and the stakes are high. It feels risky once we start to climb a ladder of success. I noticed that no one hesitated to put our bodies in a resting or lying down position. It's like, when will we arrive at a place where we are well rested on a day-to-day basis? Or when will we break free of needing to produce to feel worthy or valuable?
Emma Little: I'm working on this thesis project, and I see, being in the dance department or community, like everyone's not okay—we *are,* but we also aren't. How do I ask time of you all and how do I ask for space to do something where we can do what we need for a while and like sit in that, the space that we have; it's so precious. This is very much an experiment—like, it feels so wrong? I have some underlying guilt—this is my thesis? It should be more research-y! But, no, we need this. This is what we need.

Ellen Hesketh: It almost takes more energy to do something for fun than it does to do my work. When my work is done and I can do something fun, I

really don't want to. I want to just lie in bed—it takes a lot more energy to be like, I'm gonna go hang out with my friends today.

Regarding physical imagination, "futuring," and the selves:

Ellen Hesketh: It felt like a daydream or dream state when we were grooving with our eyes closed, but I actually felt more awake and present after we ended.

Jaiya McKenney: I chose a self, in the beginning, and moved as I thought that self would move, and then I began to feel [that self].

Emma Little: What about the "futuring self" in constructive rest?

Maralee Joyner: I liked the questions that you posed, but I didn't have any answers to them at all—to anything. I wasn't able to envision things. But I was still really filled with this feeling that I just couldn't put into words or describe at all, so it felt like I was answering the question, but I have no tangible answer.

Nicole Peterman: The word "future" to me feels so far away, so it's hard to picture, but going back to when we were moving, it felt like there were two selves that were battling. Like [there was] the child self in the body

> that just wanted to play, but my mind was almost this other self of 'future'—I guess it is 'future'—but like, all the stuff I have to do in the future or near future…but my body was like, 'let's play.'

After a short body break, we gathered back at the scroll to intake everyone's drawings and responses that had been archived. Then we met to come up with a collective "list of presumptions" that could guide the rest of the workshop time together. I offered a couple of examples, one of which became the first "presumption." The theme of rest and sustainability emerged again in this conversation. We then generated the following list, recorded on the archival scroll:

List of Presumptions

1) We are here to consider our needs, collectively and for one another
2) Permission for embodiment of all selves
3) TAKING UP SPACE // HOLDING SPACE
4) What if we were to presume that our energy multiplies when we give it to one another?

The last "presumption" followed the format of Deborah Hay's embodied research questions, passed in practice to me through Coco Karol. The question "what if we were to presume that our energy multiplies when we give it to one another?" grew out of a discussion about the conflict between the need for immediate personal rest, and the simultaneous need to invest in community and connection. In discussion, we reflected

upon existent structures in which performing basic work or life tasks is so energetically expensive that there is not enough energy left over to invest in things that sustain one or improve one's quality of life—like our communities, families, and friends.

We closed the workshop with two shorter score exercises: the first, a score interpreted from Eric Geiger's "holding hands and running" score[15] and the second, a score in which each participant took turns being lifted into the air by the rest of the group with little verbal communication.[16] I participated in both scores, giving verbal cues during the first but not the second. The lifting of the last person signaled the end of the first workshop.

The execution of many of the practices I had planned took more time than I expected. I found that the plans I had created for the first workshop (see fig. 5) could

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[15] I cannot really say whether I practiced the "holding hands and running" score or not, having only a limited understanding of it in its original specificity, form, and intent. I credit Eric Geiger for the original score and for the original experience I had that inspired *this* "holding hands" score. I borrowed certain elements of Eric's score which I remembered experiencing and followed the emerging movement patterns arising in the moment.

[16] This second score was inspired by two precedents: in her interview, Coco Karol briefly described a group lifting practice, which reminded me of a ritual for graduating seniors practiced by my own high school dance company, RDC. Additionally, the decision to close each workshop with this group lifting exercise was inspired by Coco's use of repeating opening and closing structures as organizing tools, which she described in our interviews.

carry over into the second later that evening (with modifications in response to the emergent themes generated in the first workshop). The reflective practices, particularly the more free-form discussions and the building of the list of presumptions, which involved all seven participants, simply required time for people's thoughts to be expressed and discussed. However, with permission and experimentation being at the foreground of the workshop, fully leaning into the time things took felt permissible. This allowed an interesting and rare experience in working together without feeling rushed. I believe this attitude toward time was also a factor in establishing a sense of trust and authentic service of the collective experience within the space, given that it provided opportunities for the richness of people's experiences and contributions to rise to the surface.

The Second Workshop

The original goal of the second workshop was to access a sense of "togetherness" or a "collective body" by building upon the events of the first workshop. The continuation of exploring an underlying sense of "futuring" was also driving the organization of the second workshop, manifesting in the choice of structuring around two major "generative practices": a second, longer round of the interpreted "holding hands and running" score and an original concept for a score which was still developing in my thoughts called "Turning Winter Into Spring." Both scores had an underlying movement toward building or accessing something "yet to exist" —i.e., "futuring" or collaborative future-building. The creation of the list of presumptions and the discussions verbally (and physically) about sources of rest, energy, and connection in the first meeting built a lot of

momentum that carried rather organically through to the second workshop. The participants arrived after the three and a half hour hiatus more talkative, energetic, and outwardly eager to move and be present. I also intended for the second workshop to operate in a more consistently moving modality, so that sitting discussions took less of the workshop time.

The workshop began with a five-minute check in and discussion of anything new on the archival scroll. To transition into movement, I asked everyone to form a standing circle in the center of the room and close their eyes. I vocally facilitated while physically participating as this first "holding hands" score moved through many stages. I attempted to lead from Eric Geiger's philosophy he imparted during our interview, which was to facilitate by calling out patterns of movement or actions already emerging in the space. With eyes closed, we developed a motion of internal, individual shifting. Then with eyes opened, I reminded everyone of the fourth presumption—"what if we were to presume that our energy multiplies when we give it to one another?"—as an underlying prompt for the upcoming practice. We transitioned our shifting into a shared motion, rotating back and forth around the circle. I verbally led the cue to join hands and begin "running," a word I explained meant a continuous sense of jogging or forward motion in time. I described how "running" was a flexible word in this score and could be used to describe eventual evolved actions or other movements (even those which approach "dancing"), but that the intention of the score was to stay "running" and always come back to "running together."

With this intention verbalized, people began to shift back and forth in space, eventually causing a rupture in the circle of hands and transforming our collective shape

into a line. In the interest of safety, I emphasized a sustainable pace, a sense of ease in the spine, and a feeling of connection to the floor through one's own body as well as through everyone else's bodies. I encouraged everyone to trust that they were safe in their connection and attentiveness to one another and to allow risk-taking and falling to happen. This led into a crescendo of energy in the space accompanied with a lot of laughter, as people were flung around the room, sometimes losing physical connection with the line, but always maintaining a sense of group cohesion. As I sensed fatigue set in, I encouraged everyone to let the run slow down, but to get more curious about what kind of support was available in the collective structure of our bodies that could minimize the effort being exerted. People began to experiment with balancing on one leg, leaning into the internal support and weight-bearing tension of the collective, as well as the support and "free rides" offered by the centrifugal forces of our movement. Eventually, the group began to break hands, and so I encouraged a sustaining of the centrifugal sense of connection and support even without physical contact. A swirling, falling, intertwining group movement emerged, and as the fatigue in the room grew, I verbalized that crashing into one another was okay and could be done with a softening and supporting response. More falling into one another for support occurred. Moments of touch, which began as rolling points of contact, quickly grew into more eager, lasting contact duets or trios in which people were offering more and more of their body weight. As I felt the group needing a rest, I prompted us to find a sense of collective rest within one another. We found a quiet standing sculpture of rest in which we were all simultaneously resting and supporting another. We stayed in this position for a few minutes.

I gave a cue to "break" the improvisation and we all got water and our notebooks and came back into the space for a reflective practice. I set a timer for three minutes and asked everyone to make their own list of five presumptions or "what if" questions. In retrospect, I wish that I had used less authority here and allowed everyone to construct their own meaning-making or reflective practice from what had just been a very informationally rich improvisational experience. Instead of a simple "harvest,"[17] however, I led everyone to find a partner and share their list of presumptions. Then each partner picked their favorite presumption from the other person's list and wrote it on the archival scroll.

[17] "Harvest" is a term used by famous postmodern improviser Nancy Stark Smith to describe an open-sharing vocal format of reflection after a group improvisation practice. It is a codified part of Smith's *Underscore* practice.

Fig. 8. A time-lapsed video of an interpreted version of Eric Geiger's "holding hands and running" score as performed in the second workshop. February 19, 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lkr8Bbo1LSA.

The second generative practice that occurred was what I call the "Turning Winter Into Spring" score. This score developed originally from my interviews with Coco Karol when I brought up the fatigue, burnout, and disconnection that I felt was present in the dance department. She suggested a practice of finding "collective rest" and I was inspired by the sense of rest and generative dieback I noticed in the natural world during those winter months. The score used notions of necessary rest, hibernation, exposure and "stripping back" (like trees without leaves), and restorative and potential energies. It also described a gradual and not necessarily linear shift from a "winter-like" state into a state exploring "elements of spring." These elements include notions of pure intent, efficient and necessary placement, production, and movement, and sparks of life—essentially, only following what feels important enough, exciting enough, or generative enough to give energy to.

The score was developed in verbal discussion with the group during the second workshop. We talked about our individual experiences of winter and spring, and how that relates to both energy and rest. As the conversation came to a close, I led the group into a simple individually-driven walk through the space as we finished sharing our final thoughts about these themes. I prefaced that we were going to enter into a movement exploration of these ideas together for a significant amount of time and emphasized rest, necessity, and the permission to explore any interpretation of "winter turning into spring" that came up. I also called back to the sense of collective energy and centrifugal

connection from the previous “holding hands and running” score and prompted everyone to keep cultivating that experience.

I did not verbally facilitate after prefacing the score except to call a definitive ending; I just participated with everyone else. The improvisational experience unfolded, lasting for about thirty minutes. A lot of physical touch, stillness, and gentle slow movement occurred, and the sense of permission in the space was palpable.

After a period of individual reflection in journals or on the scroll, we added three more presumptions to the list:

5) We allow genuine trust to exist in the space in ourselves and in others
6) COLLECTIVE CURIOSITY
7) COLLECTIVE BUILDING

The workshop closed with us performing the group lifting practice again. Everyone departed that evening in a warm, positive, and connected manner.

To me, this “Turning Winter Into Spring” experience during the second workshop was a truly “successful” generative practice. A handful of the participants have recently expressed to me the sense of “magic” that they remember feeling during the score. I feel that the inability to fully express the “success” of the score is part of the proof that it was generative, for the experience managed to transcend some discursive language abilities and exist in a space somewhere more embodied and felt. I think that success of this score was likely made possible by the practices that came before it, which set up the group for

experiencing trust, permission, and intentionality on that level in a shared setting—in other words, I'm not entirely convinced that the score itself is inherently generative.

I think it's also important to note that I believe it is not necessarily just a shared sense of positivity after an improvisation ends that means it was successful (although that positivity did seem to be present in this instance), but rather that something authentic and meaningful was gained or experienced. In this case, we managed to develop a score in which we rose to meet some of the needs felt on both collective and individual levels. We managed to create a temporary universe that provided something meaningful and necessary to the group—not just to the majority, but to everyone. This is the embodiment of collaborative future-building and the definition of a generative practice.

Fig. 9. A time-lapsed video of a generative practice and improvisational score developed in the second workshop called "Turning Winter Into Spring." February 19, 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kamgLDOmJDM.

The Third Workshop

Originally, all three workshops were intended to build momentum toward deeper and deeper exploration of generative practices. However, I think that to some degree, the apparent success of the Saturday workshops created a break, or significant shift, in this momentum of the group. Although the intention was the continuing development of the gatherings in service of the emergent needs of the group, the most immediate, articulated needs of the group had already been met within the first two workshops. In retrospect, I believe that the next best step would have been another slow, deep bout of reflective practice aimed at making meaning out of the incredible richness of the experiences on Saturday. However, as a facilitator I can see now that I was unable to let go of the framework I had crafted for the workshops beforehand. Thus, I retained the goal of testing the ability of the collective to lead the final workshop or to somehow self-determine the practices. This meant I spent the workshop trying to strip back my own authority in a variety of ways, hoping that the collective would receive agency and power.

At the end of the second workshop, I tasked everyone, including myself, to come to the third workshop with five ideas each for a score or a thing to do related to a collectively decided upon "presumption" from the list. One participant suggested using the last one: "collective building," so we generated a shared document on a piece of archival scroll on this theme. However, rather than suggesting an emergent score as I hoped it would, it seemed like a dead-end in terms of movement. I brought a large ball of textile cord as one of my five suggestions, which we moved through several iterations of movement experiments with. Unfortunately, this exercise also felt somewhat contrived,

and the experience of "togetherness" felt distant. I experimented with explicitly stating that I was not going to lead, then prompting the participants to talk about their individual desires and needs with partners in the space (in retrospect, it is clearer how paradoxical those actions are). When this rather aggressive approach left a strange, uncomfortable feeling in the room, I took some responsibility for the space again and prompted a couple of final movement improvisation scores that veered incredibly close to an "open score" with no directives. The first of these last two scores was one of the strangest improvisations I have ever been a part of. The sense of the improvisation ceased to exist shortly into the exercise, and we all found ourselves sitting in an uncomfortably aware, uncertain, and stagnant place together. To try again, I offered a final improvisation with the premise of "what if we were to presume that our energy multiplies when we give it to one another?" I expected the improvisation to take a long time, as many generative practices do (as people go through many stages of settling, tuning their awareness, and building trust and relationship). However, the improvisation lasted an absolute maximum of ten minutes. From the places where people began in isolation or separateness, they almost immediately moved toward one another again, toward a sense of group identity. The improvisation ended with a bizarre movement of all of us moving our hands in a rapidly shifting pile of hands.

Toward the end of the workshop, I could only think of Eric Geiger's offering about the risk of failure inherent in resisting what is "normal." As a closing, I reflected these ideas about non-normative practices to the group and thanked them for their participation in "carving out" time to experiment together. We closed the workshop again with the group lifting practice.

It was not necessarily a conscious decision for me to so aggressively test the hypothesis that the occurrence of an "open score" resting on habits and inherited patterns would feel so "anti-generative." It was not my intention to test authority as it exists in the role of the facilitator with such force, either. However, I believe that this workshop managed to expose some intuitions I had about authority and facilitation that I did not yet trust and generate new hypotheses which I am still questioning. The belief in the paramount importance of a facilitator taking responsibility for their authority—because the authority cannot simply be removed within our society's current paradigms of relationship—was significantly strengthened for me. This experience provided personal evidence in support of Priya Parker's concept of "generous authority," and made me question the implicit ways in which power, authority, and decision-making agency is willingly given to a facilitator figure by the group. I am more actively questioning how our desires may lead us to unconsciously shift, a majority of the time, a part of our agency into a structure of authority. Part of this I see as being related to a shared desire for "togetherness" present in most of humankind; I felt that the final improvisation of the workshop where everyone seemed to want to quickly find one another—to find the entirety of the group—was illustrative of these broad ideas.

Personally, I considered this last workshop to be a "failure," albeit an informational one. This workshop put in the effort toward asking questions and attempting to create generative spaces so open-ended that neither the community nor the facilitator knew where to go. It dabbled in uncertainty just like a generative practice would, raising an essential question in the research: where is the line, as a facilitator, between letting go of authority so that the collective has access to it, and letting go so

much as to let the group fall back on habitual patterns and lose all generative energy? It did not provide any answers or even any specific tools or practices to be carried forward—there was no product at the end of this workshop, only more questions.

Fig. 10. A time-lapsed video of the third workshop showing playing with the idea of collaborative future-building and referencing images of "The Net" (see fig. 1 and 2). February 20, 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EgJubBi1wQ.

Final Notes: Organizing Principles and Emergent Themes

Far too many themes and patterns emerged from the combined knowledge of all the written, experiential, and conversational sources that influenced the development of this research for me to highlight them all. However, several emergent "gleanings" were most prominent or consistent in their appearance throughout the work. Many of these also happened to be most relevant to my own development as a facilitator of group movement improvisations and offer me the most fruitful lessons or strategies for future explorations. I have pulled out several important threads from this web to highlight their essential place in the internal integrity of this thesis' research topic, and to draw attention to yet more ideas and themes branching from these to be explored in future projects.

Risk and Trust

> "We might learn to let ourselves bump into things; not to withdraw in anticipation of violence." —Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 30

The confluence of play with group movement improvisation was an early emergent theme. This concept of play is, to me, rooted in the existence of low-stakes spaces where risk and experimentation can occur without severe consequence. Of course, these spaces require a basic trust to exist between participants of a group improvisation, trust in the authority figure or facilitator, and trust in the score, practice, or exercise being used to structure the experience. I believe generative practices may need an element of

lowering the stakes. There is an important distinction here between low-stakes spaces and the idea of safety, which often means a complete ban on risk or risk-taking. Indeed, the ability to push boundaries and be risky is important to facilitating a generative energy, and so the concept of "safety" very well might be in direct opposition to a generative intent. Instead, lowering the stakes is about encouraging risk-taking and making practices of experimentation more accessible.

These themes emerged in conversation with all three of the interviewees. Coco raised the distinction between safe spaces and generative spaces early on in our interview-conversation, while Eric simply and eloquently asserted that "being in a room together is risky." Leah's discussion of working together in physical imagination practices brought about a discussion of play and the importance of "moving it [a shameful or negative response] into the realm of art and creativity." She related the physical act of group improvisation directly to the mechanisms of play and imagination:

> Then how do we make a connection, how do we make meaning—that requires imagination because there's no right answer. It might require a little creativity too. And then people realize they are making something together out of nothing—that founds basic trust in the world, in one another, and in yourself … And, you know, kids do this all the time. (Cox)

Addressing Need

This thesis research grew from a personal desire to be of service to something beyond the level of the individual, an intention which I now see clearly reflected in generative practices of group movement improvisation emphasizing collectivity or

"togetherness." There was always a very practical drive for me within this research, one that saw addressing need or moving from necessity as the ultimate pathway to human connection, and to the fleeting "magic" of improvisational experiences. The first two workshops with dance students at Ohio University (which were by far more successful than the third) were created with a pointed intention of addressing the need for rest and community expressed by the participants. Practicality and necessity were also at the heart of the two most successful scores—the running score and the 'turning winter into spring' score—as motivations for movement. In the former, the necessity of the movement was created by the physical restraint of holding hands, of centrifugal force, and of the simple task of staying connected. In the latter, necessity was channeled as a more internal distinction used to discern where energy could be exerted, gained, or shared in the improvisation. Necessity in movement intent arose as a need for collective rest and shared, healing touch.

The more I learn, the more I see the lines drawn between moving from impulse and honesty, and the necessity of that movement as it rises to meet some kind of need.[18] This kind of movement and accompanying attitude was evoked in both Eric and Leah's interviews. Leah used the phrase "something of this world" to describe the way that adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* communicates its message, and this phrase has stayed with me as a grounding descriptor that I desired to apply to all aspects of my

[18] "Rising to meet need" was a phrase that Coco Karol used in one of our interviews to discuss how she positions touch in her own facilitated group experiences. I found that this phrase spoke beyond touch, translating to many considerations of the research.

own project. Eric's articulation of necessity arose in our discussion of improvisational structuring as both a practice and a choreographic choice and was uniquely connected to his own experience as a Feldenkrais practitioner. Speaking of the "holding hands and running" score, Eric said, "where there is a group of people that is attempting to figure out something in real time together … that is much more interesting for me … I'm more interested in seeing people in process, in real time. The beautiful misalignments and the failures and the increased (in)capacity right before my eyes." Eric related this central theme of capacity/incapacity (the root of necessity is having a problem to solve or overcome) to the underlying philosophy in Feldenkrais: "There is often—there can be—a constraint. You are attempting to organize around that constraint as a given. Holding hands and running is the constraint. We break apart, but always with the intent of coming back together."

Importance of Capturing Current Practices

> "It's cool…I've been doing these kinds of group embodied inquiry things since 2012, or 2013 really, and I never thought to really "zoom out"... to talk to you, I'm zooming out a little bit and seeing how it's worked." —Coco Karol

While the driving force of this research was inquiry-based, a side effect of the process was a small collection of current philosophies and practices in the field of group movement improvisation. This may serve as a kind of time-capsule window into practices which are often under constant development with little referential record; because of the embodied and experiential nature of these practices and their transmission through

physical means, there is often little attempt to capture or describe actual improvisational scores in their complexity and nuance. Even Kent De Spain's *Landscape of the Now* discusses the ideology and philosophy of each improviser's work, but does not capture a lot of distinct, detailed information about the scores, practices, and improvisational structures themselves.

However, even a survey of embodied practices as small as this thesis unearthed a rich variety of considerations and patterns distillable enough to inform creative experimental research design in the category of group movement improvisation. In some ways, this process of conversation about the role of facilitation and the cultivation of "togetherness" was a "reflective practice" of the kind I described earlier, promoting a sense-making and meaning-making around improvisation that generates further inquiry and development. The tools for creating these "magical" experiences of "togetherness" or transformative inquiries through group improvisation are a valuable resource that I believe to be overlooked in part because of their lack of representation in academic format and publication. While I am not necessarily advocating for the translation of these forms into academic language—in fact, I think there is danger in concretizing and disembodying knowledge that is inherently fluid and experiential—I do advocate for more recognition of the value epistemologically, practically, and socially of improvisational movement forms and practices.

Perhaps we can create or embrace formats of knowledge keeping, dispersal, and sharing that are more inclusive of intuitive, phenomenological, experiential, decentralized, or embodied sources.

Conclusion

In some ways, I see this entire project as a kind of failure in the sense that Eric Geiger reflected to me during our interview-conversation. I am making a thesis which entertains a lot of ideas and as a written document does not fully synthesize or capture or define. It is a failure of a final project for school, a failure of a creative project for there is no product, a failure of a written thesis for there is so much still to be untangled and discovered from what I've laid out in a dense 60-plus pages. This thesis, as a project and as a document, was a chance to flirt with the unknown, the illegible. For me, a chance to carve out, in places against the grain, the generative space where all ideas can be entertained, can send out roots and flourish a little with the chance of adding something brave and new and connected to the world. This written document has no choice but to be a part of this process, which moves toward the illegible and the rambling by nature of the questions it asks and the space it wishes to create in order to keep asking questions. This, to me, is the gift that dance as a research tool supplies and that is all this thesis has wished to support—an expansion of possibilities through the techniques for supporting people in the shared, generative, embodied spaces they create among themselves. What are the techniques of creating 'possibility' that generations and networks of embodied practitioners practice every day? What are the techniques for organizing people around a space of emptiness with the intention to build something new? By asking these questions, an infinite box was opened, the answer within the question within the answer. I do believe there is so much value in these ideas and these practices, and I believe that this small project has the ability to expand infinitely. It brushes up against, not new, but perhaps 'non-normative' ways of organizing human knowledge wherein the nuance,

complexity, and embodied nature of many kinds of knowledge—particularly the knowledge of "how to be together as human beings"—is manifest. My hope is that this thesis may offer a way of seeing or understanding that influences a change in thought, or even encourages a newfound trust in entertaining and listening to our embodied ways of thinking. Even a slight hesitation, arising from listening more deeply to ourselves and our surroundings, can lead to a different choice, and our choices lead us to a more just future.

This thesis, through interviews with expert practitioners and experimental workshops within my dance community, explored the complex mechanisms of group movement improvisation. It investigated the role of the facilitator and the nature of authority in these spaces, proposing the hypothesis that authority is always present in the space and offering up the possibility of considering new places for that authority to lie. The project upholds that some group improvisational practices, such as many "open scores," in the pursuit of giving up centralized facilitator authority, overlook the danger of implicit biases and patterns subsuming the power in the space. The kind of authority that this research dreams of is shared, emergent, and greater than the sum of its parts. It futures ways of being together, examining old patterns and challenging the ones that don't serve an equitable, shared "togetherness." It offers new possibilities for relationship instead of relying on unquestioned habits and systems. Thus, this research explored the concept of "togetherness," in physical relationship and in conscious awareness, asserting that a "something-ness" exists beyond a collection of individuals—a kind of "collective body." By mining intuition, this project explored practices to be gleaned from the field of

dance that serve as generative practices for cultivating group awareness and shifting authority onto a collective, collaborative sense of "futuring."

Taken outside of the scope of dance practices, the research finds parallels in community organizing work, in activism, in feminist and queer political theory, in complexity science, and, especially through adrienne maree brown's work *Emergent Strategy*, with imaginative practices of science fiction or future-building. The more I have read and researched these topics, the more I see this generative energy manifested as a call for a praxis of "togetherness" that values living and its sustainability, through an emphasis on connection, inclusion, and relationship. Only recently—within the last two weeks of writing this manuscript—have I stumbled upon the definition of praxis as understood by the late human rights activist and political genius Hannah Arendt, described here by Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves:

> Arendt's theory of action and her revival of the ancient notion of *praxis* represent one of the most original contributions to twentieth century political thought. By distinguishing action (*praxis*) from fabrication (*poiesis*), by linking it to freedom and plurality … Arendt is able to articulate a conception of politics in which questions of meaning and identity can be addressed in a fresh and original manner. Moreover, by viewing action as a mode of human togetherness, Arendt is able to develop a conception of participatory democracy which stands in direct contrast to the bureaucratized and elitist forms of politics so characteristic of the modern epoch. (d'Entreves)

Arendt's vision of praxis evokes many alignments with the topics discussed in this thesis; perhaps most notably, the idea of "togetherness" as an action, a movement, or a muscle.

I am enthralled by the possibilities of political discovery and change that I believe are available through dance and its related family of embodied practices. Creative research in dance can offer spaces of metaphor, experiment, and play which unite the theoretical with action, developing the strength of political thought in muscle and flesh and actuating change in our physical embodiment of "togetherness." "Togetherness" is a muscle: this thesis is an exploration of that.

The practice I have had over the years of attuning to my body and to others in the space has provided me with the ability to think, imagine and understand viscerally and sensationally. Kinesthetically, I am aware of my orientation, my timing, my appearance, my relationship. I become attuned to leading and following physically. I know what happens in my body and how it changes the way I present in the world when I feel fear and anxiety, or conversely when I feel safety and joy.

I know that it is my dance training that has allowed me to do this. I am not talking about suddenly waking up to injustice or systems of power. I am not talking about feeling okay, nor am I talking about "solutions" or acceptance. I am not even sure if I am talking about empathy. I am talking about the attunement of my imagination and my thought to the realities of space and time. I am talking about using physical input to inform me of the many mechanisms and systems of which I am a part. I am talking about the mind recognizing its ability to manifest physically in the world. I am talking about kinesthetic awareness.

If anything, I hope through this research to have shed light on ways of thinking about power, "togetherness," and mechanisms for organizing and change that are uniquely situated in the current field of dance. The constantly evolving practices of embodied knowledge and relationship in dance improvisation are a goldmine of functional tools, community-building practices, and imaginative and generative exercises. The most salient research is always about raising more questions, and it is my experience that the best art and the most earnest dance improvisation does this excellently, layering symbols on metaphors on perception over and over to stretch the circumferences of our knowledge and question-asking capacities. The ability we have as human beings within creative work to "play our way through" complex issues, the gift of collaborative experimentation and low-stakes risk-taking we have in the arts is, to me, sacred. It is an antidote to what I described earlier as an "increasingly individualized, isolating, and dis-embodying postmodern world." "Learning to be together better" is an increasingly urgent necessity in our world and requires a praxis of connection, responsiveness, and imagination. Creative, embodied inquiry practices create availability in the tissues of both the mind and the body as one. They invite a readiness for change and renegotiation by cultivating curiosity, awareness, honesty, flexibility, and thus, resiliency and sustainability.

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