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Sonder: Locating the Unessentialized Self in Movement Practices

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Sonder: Locating the Unessentialized Self in Movement Practices

By

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Abstract

This research will contend with the ever-present endeavor in many models of contemporary dance practices to ‘be yourself’ – to seek out an illusive core of your being, and engage with your essential self. Through a survey of cultural studies and social identity that includes the contributions of Judith Butler, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Todd Reeser, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, the idea of an essential self will be challenged, throwing into question the dominant conception of self used in contemporary dance practices. Through a brief review of two historical conceptions of self in dance, that of Isadora Duncan and the post-modern dance movement, the fields of cultural and dance studies will be in dialogue. Our challenge in contemporary dance is to review the way that we are working, as the voices against a notion of an essentialized self speak boldly in the fields of cultural studies. What happens to our practices of ‘finding’ ourself if ultimately there is no singular, stable, true, self to find? As a response, this thesis explores the notion of “becoming self,” building on the work of Kimerer LaMothe and Beau Taplin. My performance piece *Sonder* and the resulting analysis contribute to the larger dialogue between the fields of cultural and dance studies.

Self and I

“Listen to me, your body is not a temple. Temples can be destroyed and desecrated. Your body is a forest—thick canopies of maple trees and sweet scented wildflowers sprouting in the underwood. You will grow back, over and over, no matter how badly you are devastated.”

~ Beau Taplin

This research is born of a deep desire for personal inquiry, which is demanded in both the study of humanities and in contemporary dance. This is spurred by the constant unfolding of experiences throughout my life, both recent and late, which lead me to question the nature of self and the primacy of identity within contemporary dance. It is also the result of the unique curriculum and pedagogy of the joint Bachelor of Fine Arts Program at Dominican University of California and Alonzo King LINES Ballet, which allow for an immersive experience with academic and artistic fields. While the desire to search within for a stable, identifiable self – a temple – is understandable within the field of dance, a field dominated by techniques and the disciplined body, the image of a temple produces an idea of self that is unhelpful. Just as a forest, though appearing to have a quantifiable identity, is comprised of emergent nuances and complexities – life and death, renewal and aging, a of myriad shades and temperatures – in dance, we, too, rather than “finding” an enduring and essential self, must use an alternative framework of “becoming self.” To conceive of self in this way – with an unstable core that is, in many ways, not locatable – allows us to reconcile our lived experience with the multiplicity of our future. This premises the idea that, in any given moment, one is being oneself. Our lived and embodied experiences are playing a dynamic role in emergence of self. Dance, thus, pushes at the boundaries of what we can feel, sense, perform and become throughout our lifetime.

It became increasingly apparent through interacting with cultural theory, and understanding my own embodied experiences, that there is tension between my conception of self and the way in which contemporary choreographic processes were interacting with the idea of selfhood? self. While there is no singular model for making dance in the twenty-first century, there are certain contextual shifts which have impacted trends in dance-making. Jennifer Roche, in her work “Embodying Multiplicity: The Independent Dancer’s Moving Identity,” explores the current shifts of the division of labor within dance, from which we can understand what contemporary choreographic processes might be asking from dancers. Where the canonical dance and company structures built around specific choreographers’ work may have been commonplace throughout the twentieth century, Roche sees the contemporary emergence of the independent dancer who is at once a “self reflective and creative entity” (106). The dancer is no longer a docile body to whom choreography is dictated, but rather an agent of collaborative movement investigation. In many rehearsals dancers are asked to improvise, manipulate and create movement that is ‘their own.’

I come to question the notion of ‘self’ as someone who has participated in organized dance classes since the age of three. I also arrive at this question with an idea of myself as queer; a queerness that is beyond physical attraction to the same sex, but also including a history of bullying, of being sexually abused, and of the interwoven feelings of shame that arise from such experiences. I know this queerness through my body, more than I can understand it theoretically. I am acutely aware that I cannot take this skin off to reveal a core of myself that has not had experiences which are critical to shaping my place within the paradigm of gender, sexuality, race and class. As dancers, we are not able to step into a studio and assume a new body, leaving

behind a self that had lived in the world and become a vessel for movement generated by another body. Simultaneously, when invited in both choreographic and improvisational settings to dance “like myself,” I questioned the usefulness of ‘self’. It limited a conception of selfhood to the ideas which others placed upon my body. There was an associated fear of dancing as a queer and abused body - is that the value that I held in a room of bodies? Was this the embodied knowledge that I could bring? This fear, paired with a radical commitment to pushing at the edges of myself, brings me to this research. It motivated me to lead a process that sought not to draw fixed answers about ourselves, but to use the six months that my dancers and I had together to understand the many ways that we can conceive of ourselves. This work does not intend to be an outright rejection of the identities that are important to the ways that people come to know themselves, but a recognition that no category can contain the vast abundance of ourselves.

Self and Society

Central to the framework of cultural studies, as it currently stands, is the contribution of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler will serve as our place of origin for this research, a launching point from which we can explore the theory that both preceded and succeeded *Gender Trouble*. We shall embark on a telescopic review of theory, which mirrors the choreographic process of *Sonder*. This centering of Butler also serves as a reminder of the intrinsic relationship that discourses of the body, self, identity, discipline and power have with dance and the various studies of dance practice. We will see that the work of Nietzsche and Foucault are as important in understanding an essentialized conception of self in dance as they were in assisting the provocative work of Butler. Simultaneously, the contributions to cultural theory that have occurred subsequently also offer fertile grounds for reckoning with ‘self.’

While seeking to expand the scope of late twentieth century feminism, notably—although not limited to - the intentional inclusion of queerness in reckoning with gender theorizing, Butler introduced the idea of performativity. What Butler proposes is a reimagining of the way that gender operates, and where gendering is located, stating that, “...gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25). This introduction of performativity in Butler’s work is followed by the inclusion of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* where he stated, “...there is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything” (29). Butler goes on to assert that “...there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that

are said to be its results” (25). This views gender as being a dynamic element of action that is constantly acting upon the body. Rather than the subject, or the self, being intrinsically gendered - and by virtue of that gendering taking particular actions— the actions themselves are the process that is creating the subject, or the self, as a gendered being.

Butler uses the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault to explore how the reification of gender within the body is a process of absorbing and continuing society’s standards. Foucault, throughout the much cited *Discipline and Punish*, explores the power techniques that act on, and create, bodies. Foucault’s theory is that among the institutions which we spend our lives, there are rules that govern our interactions with other bodies and the environment around us. Disciplinary measures within these institutions create bodies which follow these rules. Foucault elaborates, “Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (146). Foucault’s work allows for Butler to understand how our performative standards of maleness and femaleness come to be formed and policed. The rules that govern Foucault’s model of formation of identity mean that these performative identities are not arbitrary, even if they are constructed. Butler, instead, asserts that gender ‘identity’ is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). So, while there is not a kernel of self that is located within, from which ‘identities’ emerge, there is a vast fabric of regulations that a person is engaging with, consciously or otherwise.

Disrupting the idea of an intrinsic, essentialized, gendered self has been part of a lineage of cultural studies that runs from Nietzsche’s rejection of ‘the doer’ as fiction through to Butler’s

Gender Trouble, with many contributors seeking to further clarify how the self is constructed. For example, Todd Reeser, throughout *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*, contributes to this reimagining of the self through a survey of masculinity and its related, yet divergent, relationship with maleness. He builds an understanding of masculinity as being culturally contingent, with a dynamic function within any given culture. Like Butler, Reeser understands gender 'identity' has the appearance of naturalness; however, where Butler sees rigidity as being an element of the rules that govern gender, Reeser states clearly that even these rules are constantly shifting and emerging. Reeser opts for the language of subjectivity - male subjectivity / masculine subjectivity - (14) as a way of recognizing that what we mark as social identity is built on an unstable and unfixed foundation. He states, "...even within a single cultural and temporal context, ideas of masculinity are far from stable and fixed... A male college professor may be viewed as unmasculine by a factory worker, for whom the idea of masculinity is closely linked to physical labor" (3).

Despite the instability of masculinity and femininity as a structure, tethered to it are our gender 'identities.' Male-ness and female-ness become talked about as though they are a singularly definable experience, that is, they are envisioned as something to be quantified and understood by the ticking of a box on a birth certificate. Butler asserts that the appearance of naturalness is one of the most powerful elements of the way gender operates, as the systems of discipline and power which govern these identities become invisible. Reeser, invoking the contribution of Butler, argues that throughout one's lifetime, a relationship with gender is non-linear: "[A boy] cannot actually become and then be a man, since subjectivity is too unstable to simply be a man. The man would have to continue repeatedly to become a man at many points

of his daily life. He might slip in and out of masculinity never able simply to remain a man without constant help and effort” (14). If one cannot be, and then remain, a particular gender, then one of the central and ubiquitous qualifiers of ‘identity’ fails to function in a way that affords our dependence on it.

Just as Butler’s idea of performativity is applicable to an understanding of the functions of gender, it can be extrapolated to the myriad social identifiers in our society. The contribution of Ta-Nehisi Coates, in *Between the World and Me*, describes the visceral experience of race in the United States. Whereas Butler’s work provides a theoretical framework with which we can understand how a subject, or self, is constantly becoming an expression of actions taken, Coates asserts that the oppression felt by marginalized bodies is not esoteric or abstracted:

But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (10)

Though the styles of their respective contributions to a conception of self differ greatly, Butler and Coates can agree that there is no stable, essential, black self that is located within the body that is oppressed, vilified, and tortured by racism. Rather, a body becomes racialized through that which acts upon it. Coates expresses this idea, stating, “...Racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature ... but race is the child of racism, not the father” (7). Coates provides a necessary reflection on the work of Butler, in particular by highlighting that, despite

race or gender being a performative construction (which creates itself through the repetition of actions, behaviors, and aesthetics) each is experienced viscerally and inscribes a corporeal memory. This has wider implications than advancing a discussion of 'self' within critical theory, with Coates' work serving as a reminder that systems of power are too often violent.

Self and Free Movement/Post Modernism

Conceiving and reimagining the self has been a critical part of the development of modern dance. Dance, as Kimerer LaMothe reminds us in *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*, is an “emergent phenomenon” (5). It is ephemeral and cannot exist separately from a dancer, and thus, the question of self has remained in flux, reimagined through various generations of dance makers. While Nietzsche and Foucault were influencing the work of Butler— and subsequent contributions to feminisms, queer theory, race theory and cultural theory more generally - the self has been explored in movement and choreographic research from the pioneers of ‘free dance’ (Franko 101, “Poetics of Dance”; referencing Gabriele Brandstetter), to the post-modern movement. In many of these cases, such as with Isadora Duncan, a conception of self was built in response to the discipline and codification present in ballet, the dominant form of Western concert dance.

Returning to Foucault’s understanding of the self created by techniques, we can contextualize this by asserting that the dancing self is created by dance techniques. To qualify this, though, the dancing body cannot exist separately from the ‘usual’ body, in that we do not have the luxury of assuming a new physical expression that stands apart from the other influences of life. The (ballet) dancing self, thus, embodies the various codes of conduct that exist culturally, and spends an inordinate amount of time practicing adherence to the regulatory framework of ballet. Mark Franko, in “Archaeological Choreographic Practices: Foucault and Forsythe,” contends that the classical ballet studio fits comfortably within Foucault’s conception of an institution in which the systems of power/discipline operate.

According to Foucault's conception of panopticism, the most effective structure for asserting power, one develops a consciousness of being constantly watched. The ballet studio, with an unfixed teacher roaming the room, a mirror, and often viewing windows, develops this consciousness and demands strict adherence to the rules of ballet. This allows for a regulatory system to be disseminated, removing the need for more traditional means of domination over another body. Franko asserts that ballet exists as a field of knowledge, as well as being an embodied practice, being "both a discourse and a discursive formation" (99). Franko writes that, "... for Foucault, power inscribes its effects on the body, and for dance scholars influenced by Foucault, choreography (and, to a lesser degree, technique) is the proto-type of that inscription" ("Archaeological Choreographic Practice" 99). Ballet produces a body that is divided into various parts, and reassembled, giving primacy to the idea of overcoming gravity. The body is disciplined to achieve a certain relationship to spatial conditions, such as other dancing bodies, the location of a front - either through the use of mirrors or a proscenium stage - among other markers of proficiency such as pointé. This process of inscription mirrors how Butler proposes that gender operates, at once performing a set of codes which reveals an 'identity' (whether that be gender or dance technique) and concealing the work that is required to achieve such a performance. LaMothe writes on this process, stating, "Patterns of movement we work hard to perfect become us. They become easy— so easy that they seem transparent" (69). Clearly, given the impossibility of separating the self from the body, the technique of ballet is seeking not just to craft a body for the purposes of dance; it is a technique that is acting on the notion of 'self.'

The phenomenon of ballet assuming a position of naturalness occurs not just in the studio itself, but in the discursive power surrounding the form. Dancers are often reminded of their

‘natural ability’ in ballet, as though ballet is a naturally occurring phenomenon. This would be similar to referring to a basketball player as having a ‘natural ability’ in a game that is very clearly a human construction of codes and rules. Yet, this use of language serves to obscure the location of ballet, placing it within the self/body of a person and dependent on the mythical, essential self which pre-exists an action, which Nietzsche and Butler boldly reject. Instead, what we are seeing is a constructed self and identity, “that grid of intelligibility through which bodies...are naturalized” (Butler 151). Thus, to question whether ballet is the ‘natural’ expression of the dancing body would have been a radical act at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Mark Franko, in “Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes,” translates and builds on the work of Gabriele Brandstetter. Franko and Brandstetter contend that in an effort to reject the steady march of modern Western society towards codification and industrialisation, ‘free dancers’ - Maude Allen, Ruth St. Dennis and Isadora Duncan - claimed the mantle of “authenticity” (101). For Duncan, the move for authenticity played out in an appropriation of classical Greek aesthetics, as a way of elevating the importance of self and placing dance as a ‘high art’ in the United States of America. While there were many elements to the development of Duncan’s view of dance (as discussed by Ann Daly in *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*), of importance was a disillusionment with ballet which was “... an embodied symbol of all that was wrong with overcivilized nineteenth century living” (26). For Duncan, in Butler’s terms, ballet lost its facade of naturalness.

Duncan was aware of her social import, speaking and writing alongside the presentation of her dances, giving us greater understanding of her work. Concerned with the “emancipation...

of the body and soul” (Daly 27), Duncan viewed ballet as one of the symbols of a restrictive system of rules that governed the lives and bodies of women. For Duncan, naturalness meant movement that was characterized by the evolution of walking, skipping and jumping, attempting to seamlessly move from one to the other. Where ballet class is dominated by the linear progression of set exercises, Duncan was uninterested in “fashioning” (Daly 30) and more so in change that was unfolding. These changes and movements, Duncan claimed, “must correspond harmoniously and naturally to the line, proportion, and symmetry of the human form” (qtd. in Daly 34).

The model Duncan employed was rooted in Delsartean practices which “...displaced the notion of the self’s essential (and thus unchangeable) ‘character’ with that of the self’s malleable ‘personality’” (Daly 26). Through motion, a dancer could engage with self-betterment, benefiting not just themselves but the world. On the one hand, Duncan, in rejecting ballet was embracing a model of self that was dynamic, however her philosophy became heavily reliant on essentialized ideas of womanhood. In her “Dance of the Future” speech, given in Berlin 1903, Duncan proclaimed:

She will dance not in the form of a nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette but in the form of a woman in its greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman’s body and the holiness of all its parts.

Through a rejection of the codes and conventions of classical ballet, the fashioning of the human body into a specific form, and the performance of narrative-based characters, Duncan found herself as an advocate of the ‘natural’ body. However, in this pitting of the ballet self against the natural self, Duncan and other ‘free movers’ ultimately participated in the creation of a

constructed view of naturalness. Given that Duncan explicitly centered gender in her understanding of ‘nature,’ we can return to Butler to understand this dynamic. Duncan, prior to the framework of Foucault, was clearly able to identify that ballet was the constructed set of rules which imbues a set of values, disciplining the body/self accordingly. As seen below, Butler uses Foucault in a way which rejects a feminism that insists on a womanhood that is fixed and found within ‘nature’:

The premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from “women” whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics. (4)

Here we see that Butler gives an understanding of gender which allows for the dance theorist to recognize that the ‘natural’ and ‘liberated’ movement of Duncan was itself a construction; although not performing the highly policed codes of ballet, it was engaging in a performance of femininity which was itself governed by the codes of society, and for which she assigned a “mission.” Indeed, in a search for ‘authenticity’ regarding self, Duncan reveals that seeking to locate a stable self is not simply a rejection of the codes of classical ballet.

The pioneers of the post-modern dance movement were operating with self-awareness in response to the lineage of both ballet and modern dance when they sought to reframe the relationship between the self, the body and culture. Where choreographic processes of ballet and

modern became codified and rigid, the dance that emerged in the 1960's signalled a democratization of the body in space. The body, as the signifier of the self for post-modern dance, was to be experienced on its own terms. The Judson Dance Theater was critical to the shifting conception of self, and the development of a post-modern dance philosophy. Sally Banes in her work *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, proposes that, more than anything, diversity of choreographic style and method were the hallmarks of the Judson Dance Theater (208). Inherent in this diversity was a rejection of the inscribed movement vocabularies which signify techniques of ballet and the moderns and an investment in exploring dance methodology rather than choreographic outcome.

While the contribution of the post-modern dance movement is too multiplicitous to engage with fully in this research, a belief in the exploration of methodology guided my own choreographic approach. Rather than centering the performative element of dance, where choreographic outcomes were the signifier of success, the counterculture rebellion of the 1960's was invited into the studio - breaking down, questioning, deconstructing, and reconstructing, every normative structure and function in dance-making - spurring a lineage of dance that wasn't bound by the constructed truths of the eras that preceded it.

Self and *Sonder*

What would become the title of the piece, *Sonder*, originated as an affirmation, and a promise, to the dancers with whom I would share this six-month process. The word ‘sonder’ originates in both German and French, meaning ‘special’ and ‘to probe’. However, the word is a neologism in English, coined by John Koenig as part of his online project “The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows,” which aims to fill linguistic holes for feelings which may be universal, but are often not described easily. Koenig assigns the word ‘sonder’ the following definition:

n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.

My desire at the start of the process was to remain committed to the idea that, although these four dancers were not strangers to me, there were nuances, and a vastness, to each that would not fall easily into categories of ‘identity.’ This immediately presented a challenge. Where Butler and Nietzsche would assert that there was no ‘doer’ behind a ‘doing’ (Nietzsche 29), how would I understand that there was a complexity regarding each of my dancer’s selves, and my own, that was not present?

Poet Beau Taplin’s passage, quoted in the introduction, provides an abstraction of the idea of self that was useful for taking the work of Butler, Nietzsche, Foucault, Reeser, and

Coates into a choreographic process. Taplin establishes an image of the temple, a stable structure that exists in one location throughout time. Rather than centering that fictional self, reminiscent of the self that Nietzsche rejects, Taplin invites us to see the self in a similar framework to the aforementioned authors. A forest appears to be a quantifiable identity, locatable from the outside, much like the human self - where identities of gender, race and sexuality seem stable and fixed. The forest, though, provides a less esoteric way to understand a self that is constructed through a series of actions, for the forest is constantly doing. The forest is an act of many actions, existing as various small growths, little deaths, shifting ecosystems and climates. Much like gender – or race, or a conception of self – it exists only through its actions, by growing back, over and over again. The forest is constantly becoming.

Kimerer LaMothe, in the work *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*, establishes a framework of viewing dance as movement-making that is concerned with the process of bodily becoming, “A becoming-form and a breaking-from-form” (7). Given the challenges that exist when using a written format to explore ideas of an essentialized self in a choreographic process, LaMothe’s work illuminates Taplin’s prose and was critical to the evolution of the choreographic process. LaMothe asserts that dance is a way of knowing (5), an ontological guide for dance itself and for ourselves, bringing together many threads that are also present in this research. LaMothe is careful to point out that bodily knowing is dynamic, shifting and constantly informing change - rather than an essential element of the self - stating, “It is a kind of knowledge that is not instinctual or innate but rather singular and context sensitive. It is unique to the ongoing, self-creating nexus of bodily movement that each individual is” (5). Given LaMothe’s view of dance as knowledge, it is possible to take this statement a step further,

towards the boldness of Nietzsche, and assert that choreography of dance is neither instinctual nor innate. There is no dancer that stands separate to the dance itself - just as there is no 'doer' behind doing. For this reason, in the process of creating *Sonder*, the focus was never about strict adherence to a regulatory code of movement. The choreographic process, which didn't seek to 'inscribe' movement on the self, served as a way to push at the edges of their own experience of self.

Building on the work of Butler, Nietzsche, Foucault, Reeser, and Coates, I took the view that the dancing selves in the room were constructed, but not arbitrary, and always engaged in a process of becoming. Through a variety of exercises I asked my dancers to engage with the experiences that contributed to their own conceptions of self. The goal was to do this in a non-identitarian way, without being fixed on the notions of gender, sexuality, ability and race which may be labelled by society at large, using what Reeser referred to as "subjectivity" (14). From Coates we know that the experiences that shape selfhood are visceral, corporeal, and tangible, and yet from Reeser we know that unpacking their meaning is reliant on a singular context. Reeser's idea of subjectivity, where the self is constantly becoming its many parts, strikes similarity with LaMothe's view of bodily knowing as a context-sensitive and a process of self-creating. As the choreographic process developed, it became clear that there was not a single story to be told from this piece, nor a singular stable context to view the dancing selves. I didn't want to pursue a narrative structure, nor was I interested in something that was, for lack of better terms, a "happy dance" or a "sad dance," a "gay dance" or a "black dance." To do so would disregard the complexity of the dancers and their audience. Rather than shy away

from complexity, I sought to invite the dancers to be more complex than the choreography at any given point in the dance.

One of the tasks in the choreographic process was to ask the dancers for movement responses to twenty words, followed by a ten-minute exploration period. After a short investigation of their perceived 'instinctual' responses, the dancers had generated and clarified twenty short movements that were in some way invoking these words. Knowing that we cannot separate the 'dancing' self from the 'living' self, these movements would be a representation of the dancers' culturally constructed and context-sensitive understanding of these twenty words. As a result of this, there wasn't a need to make a judgement about whether a movement response was 'authentic' or 'shallow.' Having clarified the movements, the dancers were asked to make each movement when the corresponding word was sung in the lyrics of the song which was used for this task. The dancers' complete agency in responding to the twenty words was now in conversation with a fixed order and timing of each movement. The task progressed to the next step once there had been a unanimous decision by the dancers that they felt proficient in their generated movement in this fixed structure. I then asked the dancers to repeat their movement to a song of a different genre, with different lyrics and a different time scale. The dancers were then invited to use only these movements to communicate a secret, or idea that they held about themselves, while simultaneously being aware of the corporeal memory of the secret or idea. This process of prescribing meaning to a movement, detaching, abstracting and then reassigning meaning, asked for a recognition that movement does not have to be assigned a singular, fixed, stable, enduring meaning for it to be meaningful. Rather, one meaning or interpretation simply invites another to exist, shaping a landscape of complexity.

The image of Taplin's forest was not solely about becoming complex, but also requires questions about edges. The edges of a forest seem to be defined clearly when the distance between the viewer and the forest is far enough, giving an illusion of a quantifiable forest. However, the closer one gets to the 'edge' of a forest, the harder it is to decipher where one forest ends and the rest of the world begins. The forest edge is permeable, a product of its many dynamic actions, just as the 'self' (from the aforementioned critical theories) is dynamic, permeable, self-generating, and unfixed. During the first solo, dancer Rachel Geller was asked to make a pause in the middle of the solo, despite there being movement which could come afterwards. Geller knew that at some point there would be a blackout, at which time the solo would end and the piece would continue, however she was invited to test the edges both of her own comfortability and the structure of the piece itself. I asked Geller to acknowledge the patterned, instinct-like feeling, that could compel her to progress with the piece, then to let that feeling dissipate. This moment became at once a challenge of Geller's expectations, a step towards uncomfotability and subjectivity, and a challenge to the audience's view of Geller as a "dancer." The edges of the piece, through this task, became exposed as unfixed and unstable. My hope was that in this moment of disruption, the audience would be curious about what Geller might be thinking in her moment of vulnerable stillness, and would begin to reflect (even if only for a moment) about the humanity of this dancer. Acting on both Geller and the audience, this moment of disruption would be a point for becoming, in which Geller would have an experience that pushes at the edges of her own conception of timing, and the audience would push at the feeling of 'sonder.'

Conclusion: Self and Becoming

“Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing ... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

- José Muñoz

This research aimed to draw on the scholarship of critical cultural theory, as well as a choreographic process, to contend with the notion of dancing ‘like yourself.’ From the work of Butler, Nietzsche, and Reiser, we are asked to see the self as constructed. Foucault, Butler and Coates implore us to see this construction as non-arbitrary, assembled with purpose and leading ultimately to embodied consequences. LaMothe and Taplin pave the way for this constructed, non-arbitrary self to always be in a process of becoming, where the limits and nuances of the self are relieved of any required permanence or singularity. Where the self might hang in a liminal space, without a fixed core or stable location, dance does not have to provide a single answer with which one can then move. When contending with my personal identity, the seemingly fixed categories beyond which Butler invites readers to imagine, I felt anguish that the meaning I had prescribed to various labels may be futile. Yet, there remains space for both an understanding of the culturally created body in dance - that which is affected by codes of gender, race, sexuality and dance techniques - and an admission of the power of movement to push against the edges of these definitions. Rather than entirely disregarding these definitions, movement allows more space within them— space to become.

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