

**THE SELF IN-BETWEEN  
A DECOLONIAL IMPROVISATORY PRACTICE**

by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts, Dance

2021  
The University of the Arts

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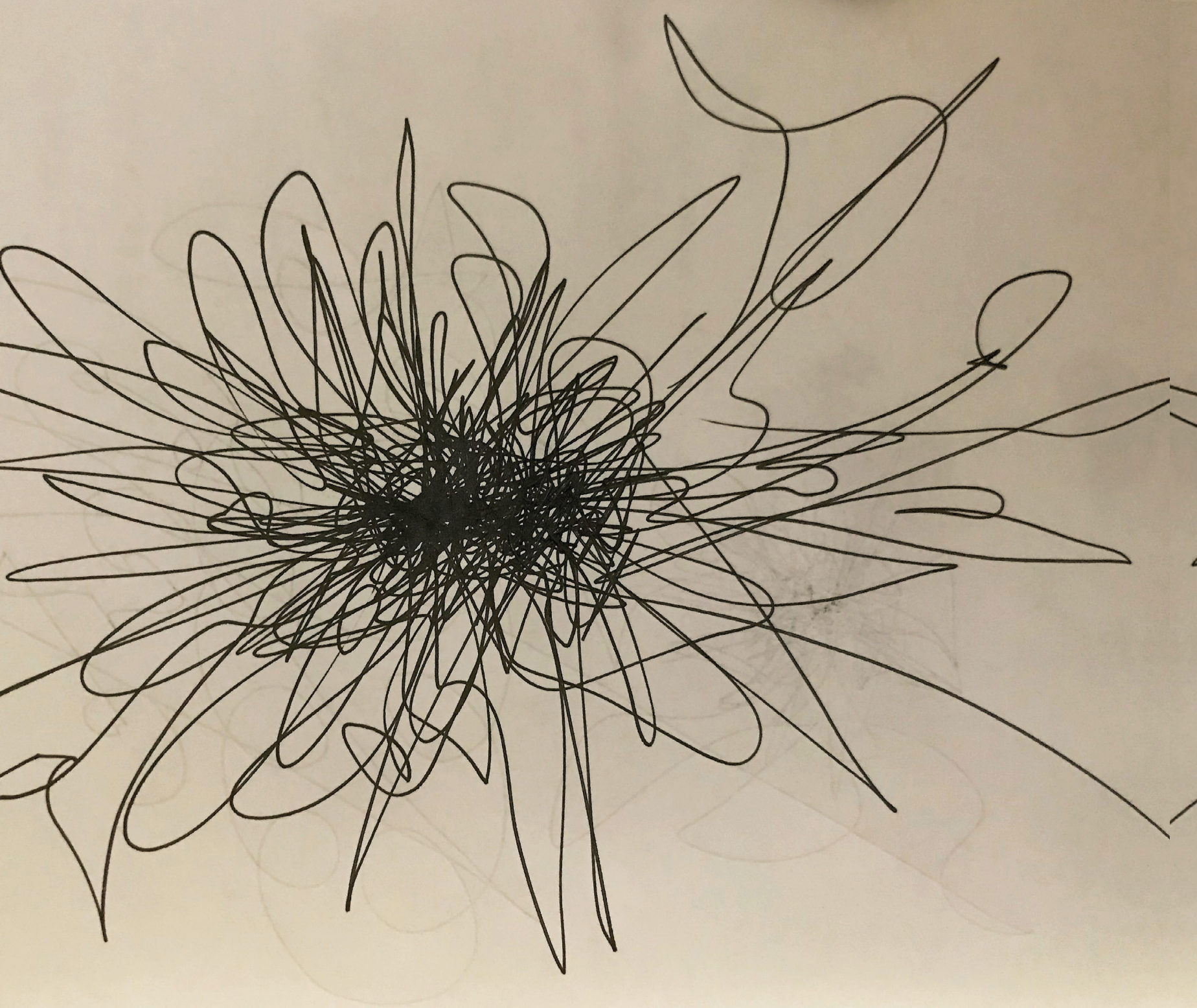
In-between

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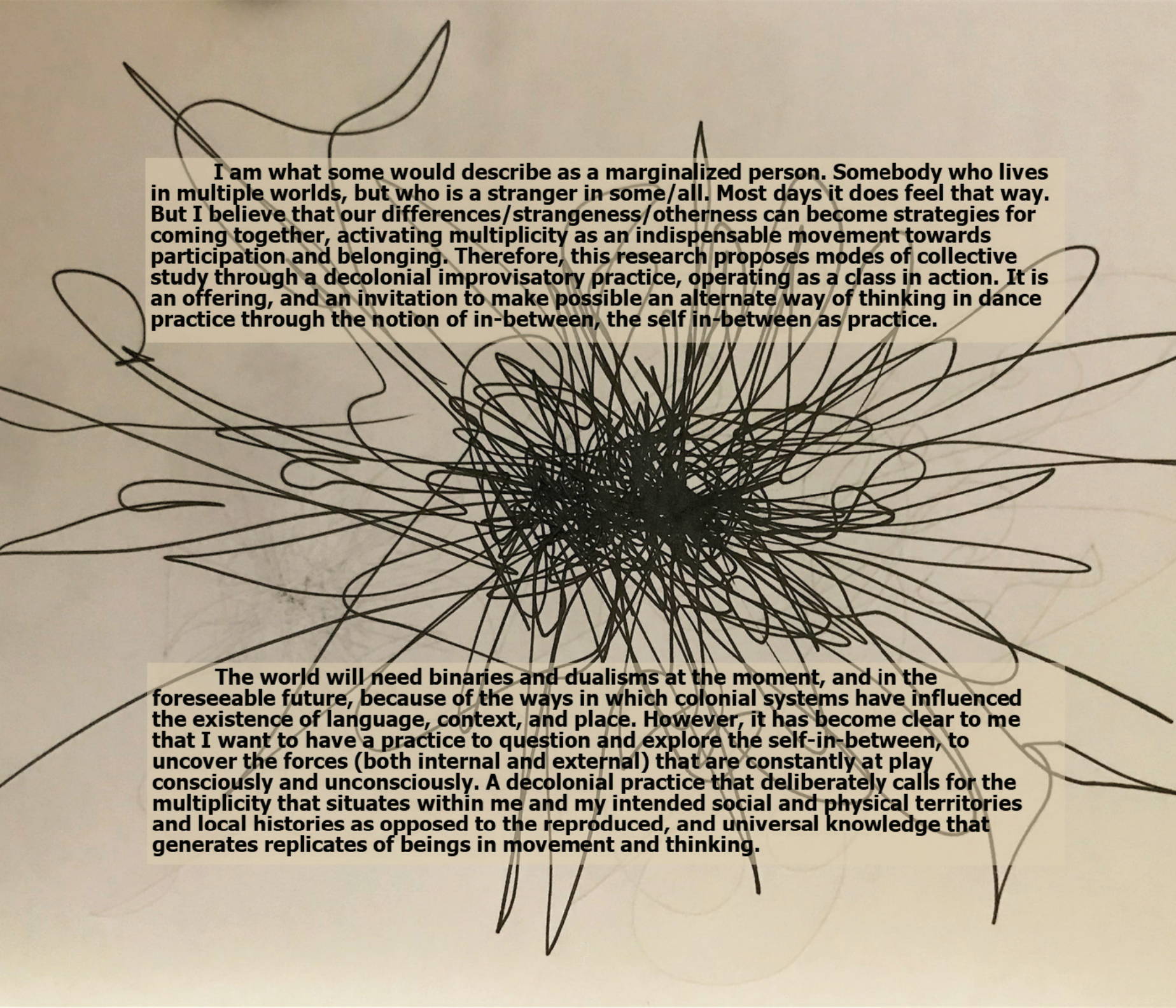
a space, a state and a process of multiplicity, a practice of its own that deliberately responds to and negotiates social and political conditions in real time.

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An abstract line drawing of a flower, possibly a daisy, with a dense, dark center and long, thin, curved petals radiating outwards. The drawing is done in black ink on a light-colored background.

**I am what some would describe as a marginalized person. Somebody who lives in multiple worlds, but who is a stranger in some/all. Most days it does feel that way. But I believe that our differences/strangeness/otherness can become strategies for coming together, activating multiplicity as an indispensable movement towards participation and belonging. Therefore, this research proposes modes of collective study through a decolonial improvisatory practice, operating as a class in action. It is an offering, and an invitation to make possible an alternate way of thinking in dance practice through the notion of in-between, the self in-between as practice.**

**The world will need binaries and dualisms at the moment, and in the foreseeable future, because of the ways in which colonial systems have influenced the existence of language, context, and place. However, it has become clear to me that I want to have a practice to question and explore the self-in-between, to uncover the forces (both internal and external) that are constantly at play consciously and unconsciously. A decolonial practice that deliberately calls for the multiplicity that situates within me and my intended social and physical territories and local histories as opposed to the reproduced, and universal knowledge that generates replicates of beings in movement and thinking.**



# THE CLASS

# Gratitude ස්තූතියි நன்றி

Before we begin, I encourage you to take a moment to say the words of gratitude which are customary to your traditions, or as you feel so moved, to acknowledge and honor those that have shed light on your path and provided the roots to your thinking.

.....

I pay deep gratitude to my family for not only raising me to stand strong and to dream, but also for supporting me and holding me through the good and the bad: my late father Rajeendra, my mother Shyama, my sister Uma, my brother Udesb and my partner, Dinesbka. Thank you for continuing to hold me throughout this time. I thank my ancestors for the genes passed on, the unconscious memories and knowledge, that come into play in ways I may not be aware of.

I am thankful to my dance teachers/artists in Sri Lanka for providing me with the stepping-stones in dance: the late Oosba Saravanamuttu, Kanthi Ranchigoda, Chandana Wickramasinghe, Vasugy Jegatheeswaran, and Yoshitha Abayasekera. I am equally thankful to my sports teacher for helping me realize my physical capabilities and expand my movement vocabulary, the late Angu Rajendran. And I am grateful to Shyama Perera, my former music teacher, for her continued belief in my work as a dancer.

I pay a deep heartfelt thanks to my mentors, and artists I have had the privilege of working with for challenging me and opening my understanding of dance and movement so wide, and for their generosity: Sandra Mathern-Smith, Baba Stafford Berry, Erin Law, Fadhel Kaboub, and John Cort while I was at Denison University; Jesse Zaritt, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Donna Faye Burchfield, and Shayla-Vie Jenkins at The University of the Arts; and Olivier Tarpaga, Julie Fox, and Dada Masilo.



I am equally thankful to the artists, theorists, and educators, across perspectives on the notion of in-between, understanding that with each angle explored, a critical definition continues to reveal itself. Thank you Royona Mitra, Silviano Santiago, Gloria Anzaldua, Ralph Lemon, Walter Mignolo, Ananya Chatterjee, Enrique Dussel, Maria Lugones, Wendy Harcourt, Rosalba Icaza, Virginia Vargas, Danielle Goldman, Fred Moten, Chandra Mohanty, Julietta Singh, Alison Jagger, Linda Tuhawi-Smith, Homi K. Bhabha, Keith Hennessy, M. Kraidy, Janet O'Shea, A. Hoogvelt, C. Lauer, Jose Munoz, Adela Licona, Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Victor Turner. I acknowledge that this list is not complete. I am thankful to the people whose creativity, resistance and research have made all of this work possible.

I am also thankful to all the students I have had the privilege to teach and work with. These practices would not have been possible if not for their willingness to experiment: the UARTS community, Kaniisha Wilson, Kaijo Caggins, Micah Spencer, Ajia Wilmor and Savannah Vawter. Thank you to the students in Sri Lanka I worked with on this research, especially during the lockdown period: Onara De Silva, Niren Ranasinghe, Dilkushi Wickremasinghe, Bhagya Virajini, Daham Anurada, Shashika Madushan, Lisa Marie, Sachini Natasha Egodage, Ayushka Nugaliyadda, Zahabiya Adamaly, Pio Fernando and Senaya De Silva.

I teach this class as a humble offering of gratitude and as a symbol of preservation, and acknowledgement of knowledge passed on. I am a product of endless generations of converging paths and dialogues, like a Kumbuk tree with roots spread far and wide.

Thank you!

The self in-between as practice. What do I mean? The self in-between is about locating yourself in the nexus of multiplicity, a confluence of dialogues taking place in tandem, where not only the so-called binaries could meet, clash, blur and/or dislocate, but also where being confused and disorientated are legitimate modes of inquiry, activating elements that are intersecting with one another. To practice the self in-between is a way of finding knowledge about the self and the world through dance/movement, a practice as a process of research in and through the body.

**The self in-between as practice.**



What is my body? මගේ ශරීරය තුළ ඇත්තේ කුමක්ද? What constitutes my body? **என் உடலுக்குள் என்ன**

**இருக்கிறது?** What is made visible in/through my body? **இடையே?** How many different types of forces intersect with my being? What does it mean to bring these forces into practice in motion? How could I practice bringing these forces in to play through movement? How does practice in and of itself generate political and social awareness?

නතර්ත දේශපාලනය හා සමාජය ගැන කතා කරන්නේ කෙසේද? Does the practice create a relational feeling? What does a relational practice feel like/look like? What does it do? Why is it important? **அது ஏன் முக்கியமானது?** What does it uncover? How do we language this? Should we language it? Can we move away from languaging dance in order to allow the embodiment and the doing to speak for itself? How does one bring their whole self into the space? Does this practice undo my learning? Especially those of colonial thinking? Does in-between take the form of a decolonial thinking? How can a practice of in-between form/give rise to knowledge? **நடைமுறையில் காலனித்துவ**

**எதிர்ப்பு என்றால் என்ன?** What is anti-colonialism in practice? What political and social territories are challenged and broadened through the practice of self in-between? How does one dive into the inner workings of the self by placing the body in a process of in-between? What happens when I place my body deliberately/consciously/ purposefully in a place of in between to understand myself? **எனது ஆழ்ந்த உணர்வுகளை என்னால் புரிந்து**

**கொள்ள முடியும்?** Can I dive deeper into how I look at myself and how the world sees me? If the world sees me in a particular way, how can I take ownership over how I am seen? How can I take ownership of how language is used to describe my identity? How can I expand on how this language is being used? What does it mean to bring different knowledges into contact with one another? මේ ආකාරයේ නතර්තයෙන් මට ඉගෙන ගත හැක්කේ කුමක්ද? What spaces of in-between are created when this happens? What forms of knowledge can I bring into contact? What happens if I pick three different and alternate forms of practice to place on my body simultaneously? How does this change the conversations at the margins? Does the center change? What happens if I bring into contact three different habits of mine in motion? What do these juxtapositions challenge? The colonial productions of technique or practice? Or does it not challenge? Or perhaps does it challenge depending on who is engaging with the practice?

What does the practice do? Are colonial binaries really binaries? What are colonial binaries? **இதன் பொருள்**

**என்ன?** What does that even mean? What happens when I straddle between colonial binaries? Can we move past binaries? What does this do to me as a mover? What does the practice of straddling between words uncover?



Grab a piece of paper and pen/pencil. Spend some time jotting down a list of words/terms/phrases to describe your identity. I'm curious to learn how we can get past singular terminology and binaries. **How can we complicate the ways in which we describe ourselves? How would one describe oneself in the most expansive way possible? Reflecting on the contemporary discourses of identity, could we move beyond/ rethink words that have entered popular discourse and/or perhaps function as universalized terms? How can we go beyond singular meaning and find multiplicity in language to describe ourselves?**

For instance, instead of me describing myself as "Sinhalese" and "Tamil", what other words/images could describe these two ethnicities? Instead of female, what other words/terms could describe the characteristics of my body or my being? And so on, and so forth.

Once you have done so, keep it with you. We will come back to it.

# **Introspective Blurring – Part One**

## **Figuration/Abstraction**

### **Step 1:**

Visualize symbols, gestures, and/or images that have been used to express cultural/social ideologies and structures. Images that connect with where you are situated culturally, nationally, etc. For example, a popular gesture in many south Asian communities is the palms coming together at chest level as a form of greeting someone. I am visualizing this gesture. Spend some time visualizing by closing your eyes.

### **Step 2:**

Think of memories/experiences pertaining to the image/symbol/gesture you visualized if you have not done so already.

### **Step 3:**

Return to step 1 and start moving in the space by thinking about the visualization and its intended meaning or use.

### **Step 4:**

Now start moving thinking about the memories/experiences associated with the visualization.

### **Step 5:**

Now trying doing both – could you move to both simultaneously – the intended meaning of the gesture/symbol and your memory/experience associated with the gesture/movement. Spend some time researching this in/through your body.

### **Step 6:**

Take a moment to reflect on this movement practice in the ways you feel moved to do so.

### **Step 7:**

**What happens if you decontextualize the gesture by allowing the gestural movement to travel from its “original” point of reference on your body? Spend some time on this. What happens when you decontextualize and what associations arise?**

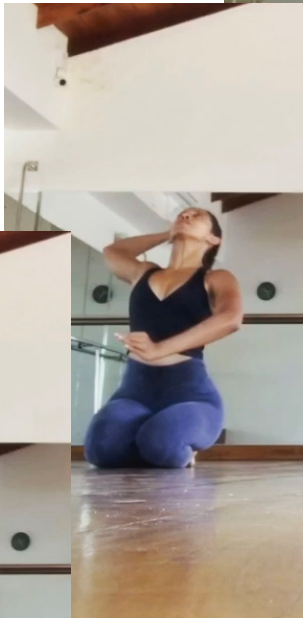
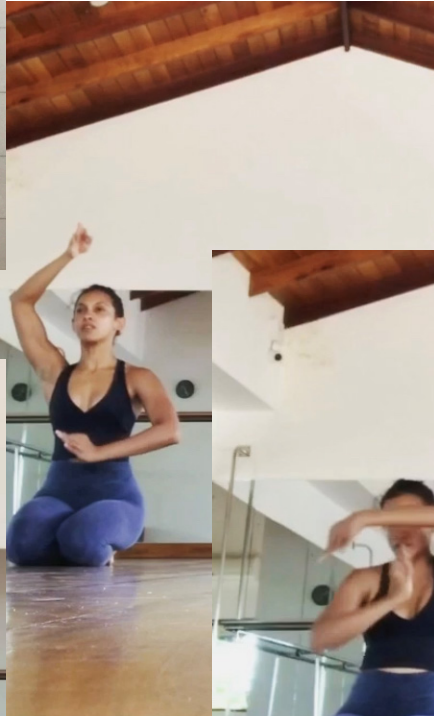
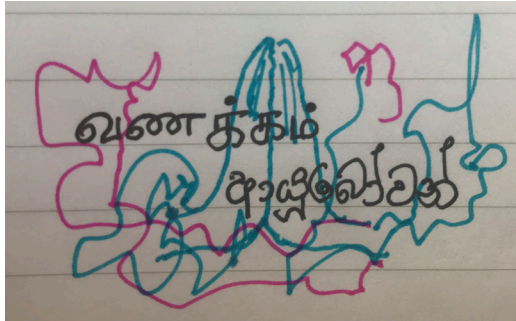
...

Write/draw your thoughts on this experience.



Its hard. சமீபத்தில்  
 To move through memories and  
 associations.  
 Its confronting. மோதல்  
 To bring them into contact with  
 its intended meaning.  
 Its Cathartic, though.  
 To come out of it like you've given  
 it justice. நீதி - ஸ்திரீதா  
 This gesture. This symbol. This movement.





I am sometimes mixed up  
 Deep, Confused, Sad, Disturbed,  
 An aching flesh desperate  
 For pathways  
 for links  
 for chains  
 for air.  
 fighting for the space to narrate my  
 own.

## **Introspective Blurring – Part Two**

### **Layering**

Go back to the list of words/images you noted in the beginning of this actioning.

**What does it mean to move in response to language?**

#### **Step 1:**

Spend a minute or two exploring each word. Get to know your body's response to each of these words.

#### **Step 2:**

**What happens physically when you start to layer the associations and words?**

Begin by exploring one word, and when you are ready start to add other words, layering word by word through movement. Let the words meet and clash through movement.

For instance, the words I wrote down for myself to expand upon my identity were heritage, lion, multi-language, multi-ethnic, multi-being.....I begin to move exploring these words simultaneously by adding on words through movement.

**What does it mean to layer each word on top of the other or side by side simultaneously on/in/through the body? What does it mean to overlap, layer and/or isolate them through movement?**

**What happens when we attempt to understand naming/labeling through movement? Does the practice change the perceptions between the terms? Does the practice change the meaning of each word when done through movement?**

.....

Write/draw your thoughts on your experience.

எல்லோரும் கலந்தவர்கள் | ஐதேம படுகி கிடுகி

It feels like a necessary entanglement.

Where the "others", "orientations", and "subjects" of desire

Dissolve.

Dissolve into what or who, really?

புதிர்|புதைகை

It feels like a mesh of processes

Where I am often left puzzled

Puzzled, not as confusion, but puzzled as assembling

நிலவியல்| ஐதேம விடுவா

It feels like an assembly of geography

Where home is no longer clear, but safe

Safe because somehow, somewhere, amid this chaos, home is in me,  
always in transit.

இயக்க நிலையில்| ஐதேம விடுவா

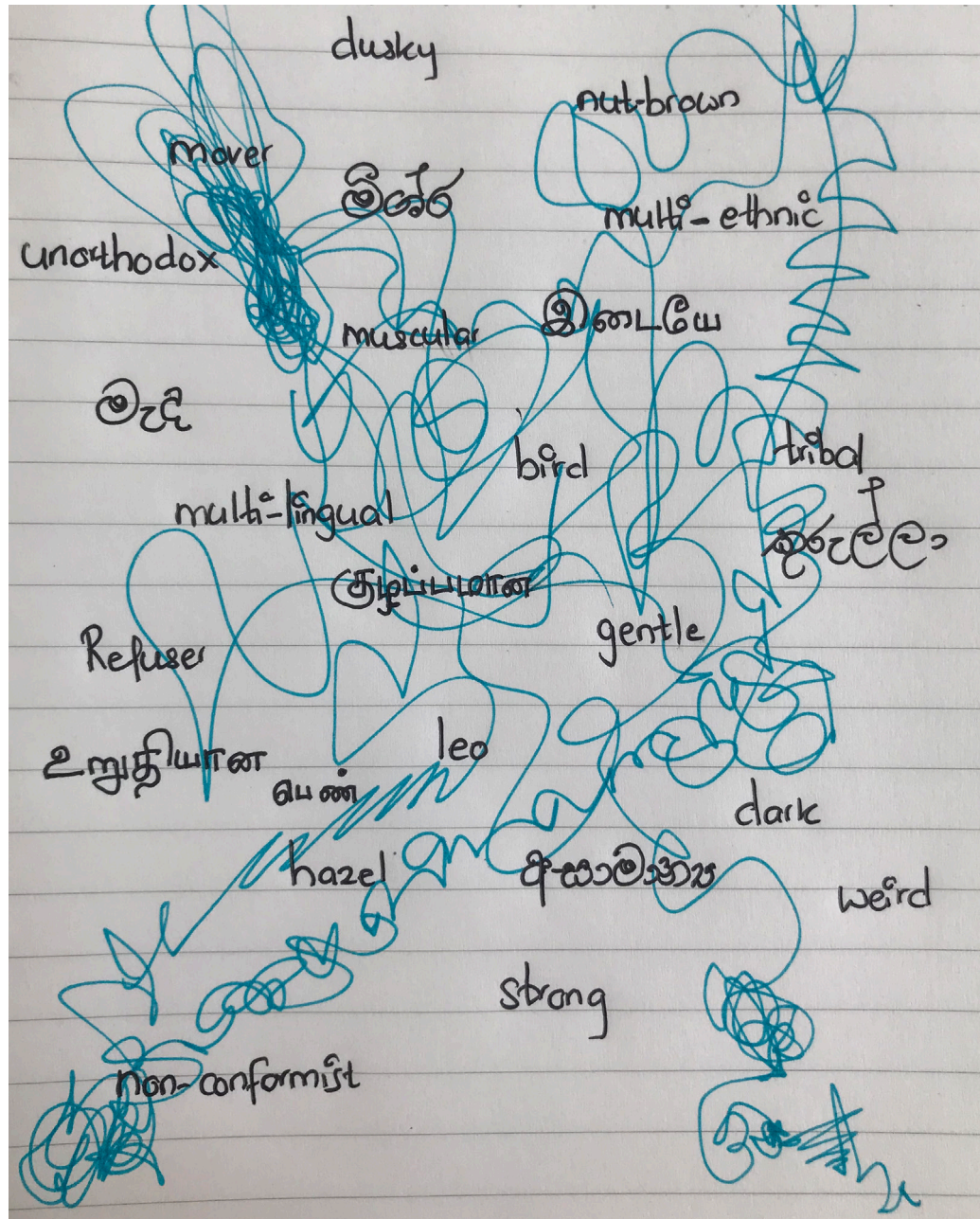
It feels like a disorientating transit

Where form is no longer absolute but falling apart

Falling apart to only come together

Thanks to the lives and deaths of stars





## Connectivity—Practice

**What happens if you go through a process of disrupting ideologies by calling the principles of different techniques/practices/habits into contact with one another as a way to rethink and shift the locus?** Bring into movement potentially conflicting practices and points of view in creative ways.

### Step 1:

Think of a technique/form/practice/habit you want to move in and place yourself in that container for a minute or two. Explore fully what it means to be inside that container. For instance, the container I would place myself in would be a technique like ballet or a practice like meditation. I would pick one and explore it fully in the space I am in.

### Step 2:

When you feel like you have gotten a sense of what it means to move in that particular container, start to move certain parts of your body in a different/alternative container.

For instance: If I were moving in a ballet container, I would then move my chest and my arms in a Kandyan dance container, exploring what happens physically when two containers meet in/through my body.

### Step 3:

Attempt to add another container to the mix so that there would be 3 containers of form/technique/practice contacting/clashing/meeting.

For instance, I would bring in a meditation container into the mix and explore what happens physically in/through my body when ballet, Kandyan and meditation come into contact with one another.

### Step 4:

Go back to your 1st container only and feel the sensations of this transition. **How does your body feel to go back to one container? How did your body feel when three containers were moving in/through your body? How does it feel physically and mentally?**

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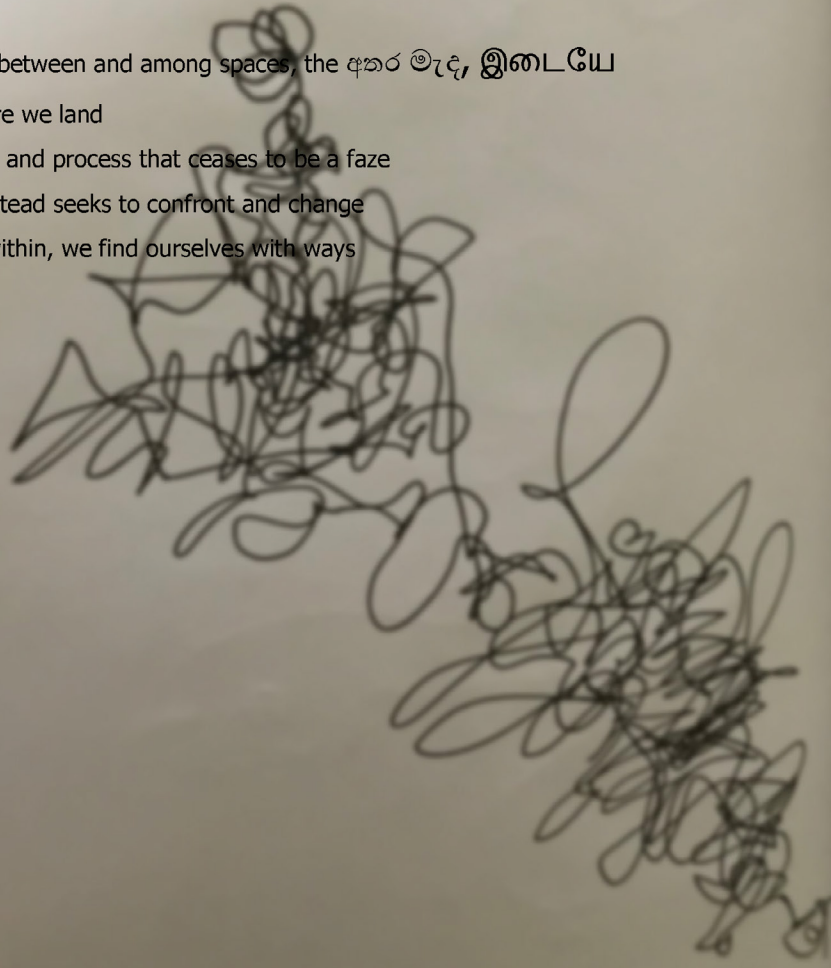
Write/draw your thoughts/experiences.





Life has always been a maze  
A passing through with multiple forces  
But we humans tend to reach for fixed wholeness, සම්පූර්ණත්වය, முழுமை  
When in fact, the wholeness lies in the in-between, ever-changing,  
Shapeshifting, challenging

The in-between and among spaces, the අතර මැද, இடையே  
Is where we land  
A place and process that ceases to be a faze  
And instead seeks to confront and change  
From within, we find ourselves with ways



## Straddling

In my experience in Dance, specific language for describing, visualizing, and interpreting human movement has been used reductively, through colonial processes, to not only create replication, but also understanding. For instance, terms such as “open”, “close”, “free”, “bound”, etc. have been used to help dancers understand how to move in a particular way. **But do these words mean the same for all of us?** The practice of straddling urges you to reflect on colonial binaries and pairs of opposites to uncover your own understanding of these terms and explore them simultaneously.

### Step 1:

Think of the word “open” and start to explore what open means to you in movement.

### Step 2:

Now think of the word “close” and explore what close means to you in movement.

### Step 3:

Now start to explore both “open” and “close” simultaneously. In my experience, this exercise works best when I give it time.



**Step 4:**

Take a moment to pause. Reflect on how that exploration felt.

**Step 5:**

Take another pair of “opposites” and repeat the process from step 1 to step 4.

.....

**How did this practice feel in/through your body?** Write/draw your thoughts.

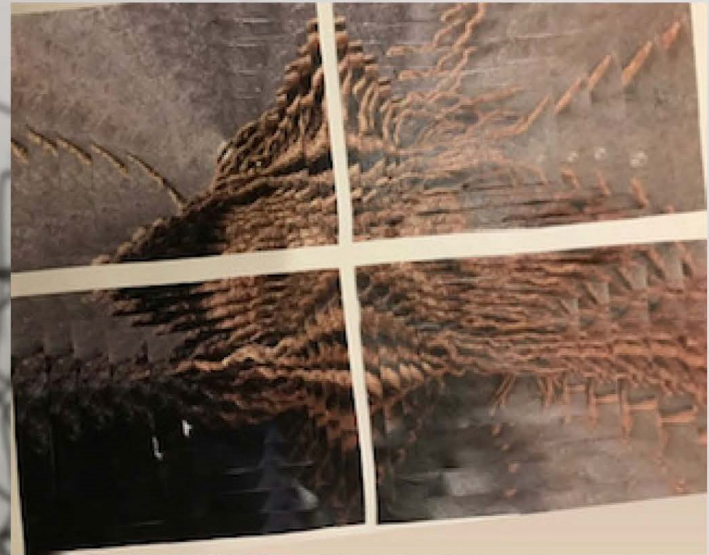
In the spaces of in-between,  
The cracks,  
The faults,  
The blurred lines,  
Exists beings.

Beings such as I  
An archive of multiple in-betweens  
Shifting between layers,  
Losing my path  
Reorientating my way  
Reimagining a place.

In-between ethnicities  
In-between thinkings,  
In-between fragments of philosophies and languages.  
I am an archive inhabiting the in-between.  
A living, breathing, moving archive.  
And as the earth turns between daylight and darkness, I shift between where society needs me to belong.....  
to where I feel I most belong.

A space constantly in flux,  
Morphing and shape shifting as I evolve,  
Dissolving in the thought of permanence.  
I belong in the spaces of in-between.

At a certain point  
I cannot distinguish one from the other  
Open, Close, Open, Close, Open, Close.....  
Isn't it one in the same?  
Perhaps, it is meant to be that way.  
Perhaps, in-between is a quay  
A place of facing.  
What is behind me?  
What is in front of me?



Who needs to do the work?  
Who needs to be the work?  
I ask, as I reflect on the work.  
But is it only I whom the work breaks down?  
Accessing parts of my being  
A place of discovery yet discomfoting  
But the work is about more than I.  
The work is about you and I.  
The work is about the spaces in between  
you and I?

## Site Disorientation

Sites are contested places. Whether it be a religious place or a public place such as a park, sites have intended use, meaning and codes of conduct. Sites also have personal memories and emotional negotiations. **What would happen if I were to go into a particular space/site and bring memories and personal triggers into contact with the intended use/meaning of the site? How would my body move?**

The practice of site-disorientation calls for a site of your choice, and to bring forces such as memory, identity, symbols, gestures etc. that connect you to the site into play simultaneously through movement. Not everyone has the privilege to go to the site, so you can visualize a site instead. By doing so, there will be a process of disorientation when you allow multiple forces to come into play. This is ok.

### Step 1:

Go to or Visualize a site/space—this site could be your home, an institution such as a temple or a park. Start to move based on the architecture of this.

### Step 2:

Now begin to bring in your memories/experiences with this site through movement, exploring what happens when your memories/experiences come into contact with the architecture/intended meaning of the site/space. **What happens if you bring whatever forces that come into your mind through movement into the site/space?** Allow your body to go through this disorientation. Collapse/dive/allow/fall into this disorientation.

### **Step 3:**

Take a moment to pause. Breathe. **How did you feel?**

### **Step 4:**

If you wish to take this practice further up, bring sounds/textures/objects into the site/space, and allow these materials to inform you.

.....

Write/draw your thoughts/experiences.





**To bring these practices towards a close, please find a place in your space to sit down or stand, and close your eyes. During this time, give thanks to yourself and take a moment to be in silence with your thoughts and feelings. A meditative moment for yourself.**

**Thank you for being with me on this journey.**



# **THE RESEARCH**

## Introduction and Background

As a child I would feel restless and tense, as if my whole body was going through a small tube somewhere in the middle of the beautiful limitlessness of the sea, whenever words such as "identity", "ethnicity" and/or "religion" were evoked in relation to my being. I did not understand fully what this meant, but I remember always experiencing a physical and emotional response. These responses only got worse as I grew older. I just could not come to terms with identifying myself with one thing. I felt trapped. I felt confused. I felt claustrophobic. My body was reacting to the never-ending voice in my head...

මම කවුද? මම කවුද? මම කවුද? මම කවුද? මම කවුද? நான் யார்? நான் யார்? நான் யார்? நான் யார்? நான் யார்? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? Who am I?... කවුද am நான்?

After all, we form identities to understand ourselves, and this sense of self is how we relate to the world and form connections. Therefore, having a recognizable identity is considered normal and necessary. However, my gut, my body, my mind said otherwise. As a child, I would dream about something else.

...

I was born in 1989 in Sri Lanka (referred to as ලංකා, இலங்கை) - a country that is home to many cultures, languages and ethnicities. I was born during the civil war, a conflict deeply rooted in ethnic discrimination of the minority group, the Tamils, by the majority group, the Sinhalese. I happen to be both. These groups are distinguished primarily by their linguistic tongue, their namesake; therefore, one's identity is inextricably linked to language. I have always had a complicated relationship with languages. The product of an international schooling system based on the British curriculum, I grew up speaking English as my first language, learning my two native languages at home, making me a trilingual being. Though to this date, I still find it difficult to speak in English, Sinhala, or Tamil without cultural nuances, and thus I never felt like I spoke any language the correct way. But when growing up in the middle of a war, understanding your language and understanding your identity were crucial. Although I was not directly impacted by the violence of the war, there were psychological impacts and confusion. Furthermore, it is impossible to have a comprehensive awareness of all the histories, contexts and social factors that constitute who we are and where we come from. According to Vedic religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, humans go through many incarnations, linked to the concept of continual rebirth. Whatever the suffering may be in life, it is connected to one's past actions. The law of karma in Hinduism and Buddhism is a law of cause and effect, and therefore our past includes our past lives. As a young child, I was curious to know what my past lives were. After all, if I have to create an identity for myself and assign meaning, my past lives should count too, should they not? But such questions only got me into trouble. History - it is open-ended and incomplete, and never truly made visible.



This confusion only grew deeper with time. I did not belong to one religion as I was raised to embrace all religions. I vividly remember one particular evening during my childhood when my father and I went from the Hindu Kovil to the Buddhist Temple to the Catholic Church, and the only reason we did not go into the Mosque was because women were not allowed. I am grateful for this upbringing. However, when relatives of both sides of the family would advocate for me to practice one religion over another, my head would spin, spin and spin. So much so that when the schoolteacher asked my seven-year-old self to pick a religion for the morning religion lesson, a mandatory lesson in schools, I snapped. I snapped big. I snapped like I was about to pounce on my teacher and was punished for refusing to choose.

I have been straddling this other position, a position I refer to as in-between, all my life. I felt this even more strongly when I was dancing. As a multi-cultural being, I never felt like I belonged to either of the traditional classical dance genres: Kandyen Dance, a Sinhalese dance tradition, and Bharatanatyam, which is rooted in Tamil traditions - though I have the utmost respect for both forms and I am truly grateful for all the lessons. In addition, during my ten years of training, neither did I feel like I belonged in the world of Ballet, a product of Eurocentrism, nor Hip-Hop, a cultural and arts movement founded by African Americans, Latin Americans, and Caribbean Americans. All forms, I felt, were asking me to be contained within a certain ideology of technique/form, but my body was responding otherwise. Dance made me directly confront this space, this feeling, and this situation I was in. Perhaps because dance required the body and mind to work together, I was repeatedly confronted with a desire for a something else, a something more, a something relational, where these so-called binaries could meet, clash, blur and/or disrupt, so I began to explore my own way of moving, much to the dismay of my teachers.

This desire for multiplicity helped me understand that this position of in-between is not a comfortable place to live in. It is a place of contradictions, confusion, tension, and uncertainty, yet simultaneously invigorating. After all, it is who I am, a multi-ethnic and linguistic being. Living in these in-between margins, shifting through multiple intersecting identities, is like going through a multi-vectored maze - a physical and/or visual representation of my mind, where to be confused and obfuscated is legitimate because I am activating elements that are intersecting with one another constantly. This position places me in the nexus of multiplicity, a confluence of multiple dialogues taking place in tandem, leading me to seek a practice that could potentially generate such a dialogue through movement in real-time.

This academic inquiry, however, is not only a critical reflection of my own experience and understanding of my position as an in-betweener, but also an invitation to make possible an other way of thinking in institutionalized dance practice through the notion of in-between. Despite the many interventions of the past decades which have irrevocably changed the field of art, dance and its institutions remain contested. Students in dance institutions are introduced to a variety of dance forms and practices in an effort to decolonize thinking/curriculum and produce versatile dancers. While compartmentalizing certain forms as "World Dance" or "non-western" is problematic, their intention is for dancers to be adaptable. While this is a step towards inclusivity, it does not address, nor does it respond to the social and political conditions through which decoloniality needs to take place.<sup>1</sup> In

addition, it does not mean students are asked to directly confront these other forms or practices with time. But as a dancer and educator, I view dance as a lens through which we can imagine a world where difference is a strategy and tactic for coming together, honoring multiplicity as an indispensable movement towards participation and belonging.

In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, Gloria Anzaldúa states that imagination “has the capacity to extend us beyond the confines of our skin, situation, and condition”.<sup>2</sup> Chandra Mohanty, too, recommends that imagination can create “political coalitions woven together by the threads of opposition to forms of domination”.<sup>3</sup> To imagine then requires an alternate approach into contemporary thinking, one that values and encourages a horizontal dialogue as opposed to the vertical and hierarchical modernity centered in Europe and imposed as a universal design to the rest of the world. Latin American philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel has named this type of modern period as Transmodern, a period that calls for a multiplicity of decolonial critical responses from subaltern cultures, social groups that have been excluded and displaced from knowledge production.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I am drawn to explore how a critical practice of in-between thinking uncovers a space to generate a ‘transmodern world’ through dance and articulates knowledge in relation to personal and social change. I am particularly interested in conversations that approach decoloniality in practice as it allows us, those who may experience themselves as othered by the societies they live in, to claim visibility and share voices that are often absent in both academic and conservatory discourses. This is especially pertinent in the “paracolonial” world we live in as dance is considered an indicator of society.<sup>5</sup> How dance can decolonize Eurocentric and Third World knowledge productions and the traditional dichotomy between western and eastern studies is a fundamental challenge in my research.

Before I go further, it is important that I share some thoughts that ground my thinking about practice and decoloniality, which is often confused with decolonization. In the particular mode of practice I am uncovering, I refer to practice as a way of finding knowledge about the self and the world through dance. While codified forms such as Ballet, Modern, Kandyani, Bharathanatyam, etc. are important for their own agenda and cultural preservation, it is equally important to have a practice that encourages dancers to engage in the radical questioning of the politics of their being, allowing them to question the nature of self in relationship to a multitude of forces. As Randy Martin brilliantly points out in *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, politics is complex and shifting, like the complexity and movement of dance and choreography.<sup>6</sup> Exploring a dance practice as an improvisatory tool that deliberately encourages dancers to bring attention to their social, physical, mental, and personal forces simultaneously would enable them to become critical movers.

Regarding decoloniality, I am referring to a mode of thinking, knowing, and doing that questions and displaces Western and colonial knowledge productions. This is distinct from Decolonization which is considered as the end of the period of territorial domination of lands by European powers, a historical event, a removal of colonialism physically, but not epistemically.<sup>7</sup> Decoloniality, therefore, finds holes in the comfortable; it makes me question and call for alternative ways to approach a subject or object rather than conforming as I have always been told to do. Decoloniality is hard work. It cannot be prototyped or measured as it is an on-going process, a constant flux. Therefore, results of any strategy or tactic cannot be a universal offering. This research, an invitation, is merely a point of departure.

## **Defining In-Between: Theories and Theorists**

To clarify what I mean by "in-between" in the field of dance praxis, it is necessary to demonstrate an inclusive analysis that looks across theoretical perspectives focusing on in-between, understanding that with each angle explored, a critical definition may reveal itself.

In-between as a space and concept was first thought of in the Latin American discourse of critical and cultural theory through the work of Silviano Santiago, a professor of French and Brazilian literature, a film critic, novelist, poet and an innovative cultural critic. In the introduction to *The Space In-Between*, Wander Melo Miranda and Anna Gazzola shows that for Santiago, "In-between space" is an alternative place that encourages mixing identities and modes of belonging that does not simply overturn the binary positions at play but rather questions their hierarchy and offers another way of thinking.<sup>8</sup> This acknowledgment and naming of such a space and thought process makes possible a mode of experiencing in which the complexity of being is legitimate even when the conditions through which we operate are not equivalent, a thinking capable of negotiating one's whole self as a complex and multi-influenced being. It is not a space of necessity, however, but a space actively created out of desire and occupied by choice. It seems to offer the option of avoiding commitment to a specific social construct which would necessarily exclude other options, thus proposing an openness. This thinking deeply resonated with me.

In fields of architecture and anthropology, in-between is referred to as "threshold spaces" and is said to have come from the term "liminality", a word developed by anthropologist Victor Turner as a means of describing the middle stage of a passage.<sup>9</sup> The term liminality comes from limen, meaning threshold. According to Turner, liminality is a state between the unknown and the known, placing the individual in a state of residual process before becoming or embracing their new position.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, liminality is when the individual is neither in their previous position of identity nor their new position but in a state in which transformation takes place, like a waiting area between one point in time and space and the next. My understanding of this passage of becoming, then, is not sufficiently liberatory because it emphasizes not only aimlessness but also a period in which there is no self-control. This does not feel convincing; it does not reflect the nature of refusal of those positioning themselves in the liminal space nor does it provide a choice of destination. Refusal is an important form of self-control, a mode of consent and ownership. It is the choice that I make every day when I am confronted with the questions "Who are you, and where are you from?" Yet for Turner, liminality is "a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" and is based on relations of equality and solidarity, opposing normative social structures.<sup>11</sup> This false universalized perspective of liminality, then, is a space for going through a transformation in life, whether marginalized or not.

Cultural, Feminist and Queer Theorist Gloria Anzaldua complicates Turner's neither/nor position by locating herself between and among multiple cultures: Mexican, Indian and White. Naming this a "Borderland" identity, Anzaldua suggests that this in-between state is a form of agency for the marginalized through its inherent inclusivity rather than excluding one identity or the other, paralleling Santiago's thinking of the In-between.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the in-between space is an active position of

ambiguity, a co-existence of multiple identities, territories, views, and entities, conveying an open but uncertain temporal and spatial restlessness. Thus, Borderland identity has access to a multiplicity of perspectives that can be called upon, delegitimizing dominant binary structures. Walter Dignolo, too, agrees and suggests that this Borderland identity is "Border thinking" in action.<sup>13</sup> As the son of immigrants from Argentina in the United States, Dignolo theorizes border thinking from his experience of dwelling in the borders, a conceptualization of the experience of living in-between.<sup>14</sup> However, he recognizes that there are those who do not inhabit the borders and it is not necessary to do so, but that border thinking is a form of subaltern knowledge generated from the outside of modern/colonial systems, the margins.<sup>15</sup> As a result, border thinking is equivalent to thinking and doing decoloniality.

To attempt decoloniality, I would imagine multiple and heterogeneous narratives, exposing the paradoxes of coloniality. This requires understanding the multiple intersections at play, from race to sexuality to class, in addition to the confluence of dominant and non-dominant knowledge. As an individual that is of a subaltern culture, but simultaneously a product of colonial systems of education, I have witnessed and learned the fruits of what is possible when both eastern and western-based knowledge is used constructively and responsibly. This does not mean that both systems of knowledge can be used equally or evenly, but that depending on the context of the situation, one should be able to tap into the knowledge that resonates in the moment. I am, therefore, not only thinking from the margins, but also as someone who has been both in and out of colonial systems her whole life. Therefore, I am interested in what happens when dominant and non-dominant forms of knowledge meet, clash, blur etc. I do not believe that one form of knowledge can ever take precedence, and I am aware that multiple knowledge productions exist in my being. For that reason, in-between thinking and terminology feels more applicable to exploring relationality within practice because it is more than just the physical. In-between thinking helps me identify the intersecting frictions between conscious, unconscious, physical, social, and political relations to the self,<sup>16</sup> that makes possible a shifting between spaces of friction, where language and politics of being are agitated and questioned. In this day and age, where Euro-centri culture continues to maintain its position of dominance, the space of in-between is an invaluable position from which to shift perspectives by continuously reorienting one's narrative in relation to multiple intersecting liminalities. In-between, then, feels an appropriate language of choice for me as a means of understanding this space as opposed to terms that revolve around liminality or the border.

Drawing on these theories in addition to my lived experiences, I have come to recognize in-between as a space, a state and a process of multiplicity, a practice of its own that deliberately responds to and negotiates social and political conditions in real time. By applying this thinking to dance, I explore the potentiality of a mode of practice that not only changes the perspectives of how one thinks through movement but also the lens through which these dialogues of movement are made. This uncovers an in-between space, a space for the not-yet-said, not-yet-imagined, not-yet recognized, not-yet respected, not-yet generated and not-yet realized.

## The Pedagogical Practice

While the aforementioned theories and lived experiences have been helpful in identifying and implementing a set of pedagogical practices that contribute to an in-between practice, Danielle Goldman's, *I want to be Ready: Improvisation as Practice of Freedom* and Julietta Singh's *Unthinking Mastery* helped me to be comfortable in thinking about how the practice of in-between can be understood. Danielle Goldman describes dance improvisation as a continued confrontation with constraint(s); she claims that the practice of improvisation is a "mode of making oneself ready for a range of ... situations".<sup>17</sup> She shows that there are always constraints placed upon one's honest and metaphorical ability to move that shifts one's understanding of the "freedom" that "spontaneity" suggests.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, to move through improvisation must be understood in relation to one's social and historical position in the world which she refers to as a set of tight spaces.<sup>19</sup> This naming of "tight space" illuminated what I was feeling when I was exploring the concept of in-between through improvisation as not a freeing practice, but instead a practice of discomfort that makes it possible to work through certain problematic systems of knowledge production that exist within me. Cultivating with one's own discomfort, narrative and path was discussed in depth by Julietta Singh in *Unthinking Mastery*. Discomfort brings to light the complexity and the historical nature of our being and therefore is important in our quest for owning our narrative.<sup>20</sup> Nurturing such discomfort unconsciously and inevitably brings into light our emotions as it pushes us to dig deeper. Alison Jagger argues that emotion is also an important component of knowledge production and therefore, emotion can be a strategy to support sufficient liberatory practices.<sup>21</sup> In this context, given the importance of emotions as well as personal history and contested narratives, I have attempted to uncover practices of in-between in dance that may provide multiple pathways to cultivate discomfort and bring emotions into play.

In addition, Keith Hennessy's *Questioning Contact Improvisation*, a document containing 15 years' worth of asking questions about Contact Improvisation in relationship to racism, heterosexism, and white supremacy, helped me frame my research as an improvisatory practice where the situated self becomes a site of research for resistance to the foundational structures of white supremacy and heteronormativity.<sup>22</sup> By exploring the stories of the self and one's intellectual capacity from within, one can engage opportunities to heal and challenge colonial systems. Study through the situated self, the internal knowledge and site, offers us more than enough to question knowledge productions. Therefore, I have gained new knowledge by reading about and considering improvisation in relation to this practice and understanding how to articulate the real effects of its process.

The following in-between practices of decolonial pedagogy that I offer emerged from the research I have done on myself as a mover, alongside my practice mentor, Shayla-Vie Jenkins, and five undergraduate students from the University of the Arts School of Dance, and my work as an educator and artist in Sri Lanka. This thinking is not limited to solely the practices of in-between I will outline here and does not claim to be the only researched practice of in-between in dance. These methods are my entryway into the thinking of the in-between in or through the body, placing the self in-between deliberately. Our focus is to learn from ourselves and from each other. Furthermore, it would be unrealistic of me to foresee these practices steering clear of coloniality entirely, but I hope these practices provide a starting point, a way to imagine decoloniality in practice through an in-between thinking (perspective) in dance training.



## Introspective Blurring

It is evident in the field of critical pedagogy that Paulo Freire's philosophy of "dialogical engagement", a pedagogy that focuses on acquiring knowledge through verbal dialogue, is key if we are to activate a student's ability to think critically.<sup>23</sup> However, movement practice involves thinking while doing, working within a specific context, and gaining knowledge that is by and large embedded in the doing, and therefore simply relying on dialogue is not going to activate liberatory possibilities. In addition, dialogical engagement continues to play into dominant western thinking because of its premise that the mode of verbal dialogue is the most effective mode of gaining knowledge. But what about the stories of the body? How about ritualistic performances by indigenous groups that have spoken for the people without speaking? As a child, I valued the knowledge I gained from bodily experiences. In fact, I learned best through doing/moving/actioning. Furthermore, in some cultures, meditation, and introspection without the need to speak, uncovers knowledge and awareness. These practices engage the body as a powerful source of knowledge. Therefore, to uncover the multiplicity of our being, it is crucial to think of an engagement that can connect the whole self. For this reason, the first practice of in-between I have researched and explored attempts to dive into the inner workings of a self by placing the body intentionally in a place of in-between. I define this as Introspective Blurring, a practice that goes within to blur boundaries/binaries. Below are two methods of such a practice:

**I. *Figuration/Abstraction*** – Humans use symbols, images, and gestures to express cultural/social ideologies and structures. They can be extremely powerful as they convey complex messages and ideologies in a recognizable form. In addition, each of us have our own experiences and memories that we associate with these ideologies. This practice calls for the individual to question these symbols, images, gestures and/or memories through movement, disturbance, and decontextualization in the body, thereby deliberately placing your body and mind in the in-between.

For instance, what happens if I reflect on the intended use/meaning of the image/gesture/symbol while simultaneously recalling my memories/experiences of the said image/gesture/symbol through movement? One of the gestures commonly used in many South Asian communities is the palms coming together as a form of greeting. This gesture brings many experiences/memories to the surface when I think of it, so what happens if I explore these associations simultaneously with the gesture's intended meaning/use? What if I allow the movements of these gestures to travel to another part of my body or to be done simultaneously with another image? What does it mean to change or dislocate its context, abstracting it as it travels along my body? By dislocating/dispersing the context in the body, is it possible to uncover what has been invisible? By transposing my understanding of these images, gestures, symbols, and memories through movement, blurring their meanings, directly and indirectly, how does one shift the conversations of their terms? As a young child, I was told many times to worship the elders by touching their feet and bringing my palms together. This was not only a sign of respect for the elders, but also a mode of blessing. However, I remember always feeling uncomfortable doing so. My body tensed up as I reached the ground to worship certain members of my extended family. I was not always close to them, and I began to question what it meant to receive a blessing through this gesture. In what ways does one's identity impact the performance of a given gesture? In what ways does

it matter who is performing a given gesture? What does the gesture mean when one refuses to take part in it? What do these gestures mean when they are neither here nor there? These were questions that fueled my interest in questioning such symbols and customs.

II. ***Expanding/Layering*** – Linguaging and finding terms to describe a group and their belonging has long been a colonial tool. Linguistic constructs of race, the way colonialism interacts and classes race as "black", "brown", and "white skinned" came about through the operations of naming/labeling. Therefore, this practice calls for revisiting these names and recontextualizing language through an in-between process. I am curious to learn how we can get past singular terminology and binaries. How would one describe oneself in the most expansive way possible? How can we go beyond singular meaning and find multiplicity in language to describe ourselves? What other linguistic terms can I use to describe my socially constructed identities instead of those commonly known? And what happens if I attempt to understand these different words and their ideologies simultaneously in my body, layering on word by word? What does it mean to overlap, layer and/or isolate them through movement? For instance, I am considered a "Sinhalese" and a "Tamil". I write down several words, feelings, and terms to describe what it means to me to be a Tamil or a Sinhalese without naming it Sinhala or Tamil, (e.g. such as the term lion - the Sanskrit meaning of Sinhala); birthright, inheritance, language, ritual, etc. After this, I start to explore movements that arise through associative thinking around each of these words, adding on word by word, layering their meanings and understandings through my body. This layering and expanding allows me to then not only blur the terms, but also question their meaning and their relevance to see what these words uncover in that moment.

As a young child, I could not understand the separation of Sinhala and Tamil when the color of our skins was similar, and it was difficult to tell one apart unless the clothing specified so. I used to remember writing all kinds of words down whenever someone asked me what my race was. These words would run wild with imagination. Words that seemed like they did not connect to the race at all, but they did to me. These words made a lot of sense to me and I enjoyed coming up with different words to describe myself. So, when I was researching in-between practices, language and how linguistic terms are thought of and used became instantly a main source of exploration. I am interested in seeing how we can be expansive and move beyond singular terminology. How can this shape/change/challenge/blur how we move or think to move? In a way, describing myself in as many words as possible and through imagination was my way of refusing to conform to labels. It gave me a way to own my narrative.

### Connectivity-Practice

The ideas of technique, form and style in the dance world have long been tools of coloniality. Patterns and modes of thinking about what dancers should achieve and replicate through a form, focusing on aesthetic effect, do not necessarily offer ways to diversify, nor do they always offer a space for individual voices. In addition, there are legacies/knowledges that continue to be dominant in colonial education systems that do not honor diverse points of views. For instance, certain institutions

in the global north and south continue to privilege a dominant mode of thinking, while placing non-dominant forms as electives. For example, in many institutions in North America and Europe, American or European perspectives with regards to practice are favored while placing practices of the African Diaspora or Indian or Global-south as electives. How do we move beyond Modern and Ballet as dominant modes of movement?

To question and dismantle colonial productions of form, I explore a practice that I refer to as "Connectivity-practice", a process of disrupting ideologies by calling the principles of different techniques/forms/practices/habits into contact with one another as a way to rethink and shift the locus to a broader position and bring into movement potentially conflicting practices and points of view in creative ways. I use connectivity as a prefix to refer to a practice as something that connects across, beyond, and something that is transcending. Through Connectivity-practice, the dancer situates his/her/their self in an in-between space where two or three forms/practices/techniques are no longer fixed and are brought into question with one another. I say form/practice/technique because it does not only have to be a genre of dance, like ballet, but also practices such as meditation, Yoga, the process of cooking, walking your dog etc. What happens if I pick three different and alternate forms of practice to place on my body simultaneously? How does the converging of these practices move me as an individual? How do these juxtapositions challenge the colonial productions of technique or practice? What does the practice do? How does the practice change the conversations at the margins of each practice brought into contact with one another?

### Straddling

Through my experience in dance, to ensure a common understanding, specific language for describing, visualizing, and interpreting human movement has been used reductively to not only create replication in the movement of dancers, but also understanding. For instance, terms such as "open", "close", "free", "bound", "strong", "weak" etc. have been used to help dancers understand how to move in a particular way. However, such language often presents a false perspective that is one-way in meaning. Depending on the context and location, words hold different meanings to different individuals. The practice of straddling urges dancers to reflect on binaries (open and close, free and bound etc.) to uncover their own understanding of these terms and explore them simultaneously. For example, what happens when I straddle between open and close simultaneously through movement based on my own interpretation and not that of the teacher? What does this do to me as a mover? What does the practice uncover? Straddling contradictions and so-called juxtapositions questions what is legitimate, enabling a multiplicity of interpretations. Therefore, the practice of straddling asks not only the teacher to confront their own awareness, but also the students to navigate and transform their own realities.

### Site-Disorientation

Sites are contested places. Whether it be a religious place or a public place such as a park, sites have constructed meanings, and codes of conduct. Sites also hold personal memories and emotional negotiations. What would happen if I were to bring these

memories and personal triggers into contact with on-site movement practice? How would my body move? The practice of site-disorientation calls for visualizing/going to a site of one's choice, bringing forces such as memory, identity, symbols, gestures that connect you to the site into play simultaneously through movement. This practice deliberately calls for the individual to go into a state of disorientation momentarily to eventually be reoriented towards an alternate direction. As Sara Ahmed aptly states in *Queer Phenomenology*, the politics of disorientation puts possibilities of being we may not connect with or are wary of within our reach, potentially changing the terms of our existence.<sup>24</sup> How does my relationship to identity and other social forces unfold in the present while I am in a particular site? By allowing the site/space to uncover forces of my being, how am I embodying the complexities and multiplicities of my being? What am I turning towards? What am I facing through the disorientation? Where is it taking me? Does the site's presence and terms change for me?

### **Who is this practice for?**

As I grow in my understanding of the world, the more I am confronted with the need for laying out an offering as opposed to mandating or forcing change. A goal of my decolonial thinking then is to understand who this research benefits. I ask myself what I am moving towards and who I am moving with through this practice. José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification helps me respond to these questions. Muñoz suggests that the idea of disidentification is the ability to choose what one associates with and does not associate with.<sup>25</sup> He states, "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject".<sup>26</sup> While I agree with Muñoz when he says that disidentification is a survival strategy, I make a case against his statement that such a space is "employed by a minority spectator".<sup>27</sup> The term "minority" has been used for half a century now and like many social science concepts, has moved into popular discourses. It is useful as a linguistic term in social science and is potentially the most accurate word when approaching certain research through a statistical lens. The term minority, however, centers us around the majority, as if a particular ethnic group is the default. Therefore, the principles of exclusion based on the traditional category of "minority" are problematic. Gloria Anzaldúa helped me reframe this complexity. She suggests that our goal should not be to use differences to exclude or separate us from one another, which does not mean overlooking differences, but instead we can learn to define who we are by what we include, thus providing a safe space for one to enter should they choose to.<sup>28</sup> For instance, instead of saying this practice is for only minorities, which excludes anyone who is the majority, it would be best to say that this practice provides an option for those who wish to seek alternatives.

The importance of the spaces and practices of in-between that I have discussed throughout this essay is the promise and potential for them to communicate an optimistic way of being in the world across differences. I imagine these practices moving towards a state/place/space where differences co-exist, resisting white domination, disidentifying from dominant/colonial thought. Therefore, these practices are an invitation to those who imagine themselves as artists who resist Eurocentric domination through movement to make possible a co-existence of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

A practice of in-between is not a product of one individual and their output. As critical theorists and artists of color have demonstrated through scholarship and performance-making, in-between is a way of thinking and a way of doing that brings to light the multiplicity of our being. This research calls for a physical practice within pedagogical spaces that asks both the facilitator/teacher/lecturer and the student/dancer/mover to work and explore alongside each other by questioning social constructs and terms through movement. It is a starting point towards a pedagogy that calls for not only inclusivity of non-dominant forms of knowledge but also one that actively seeks to bring individual social and political identities into play, demonstrating the validity of experiences, languages, and perspectives of thought through movement. This research seeks to contribute to decolonial pedagogies in dance by offering methods for engaging and cultivating the multiplicity that resides within individuals. My hope is that these practices continue to grow, evolve, and adapt as needed by those engaging with this research.

## **End Notes**

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2. Page 7 - Malaka MP Photography
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**Thank you**

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The Self In-Between : A Decolonial Improvisatory Practice  
2021

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