

to consider instead (room for dancing)

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to the Sara(h)s.

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"Marley at Joe Goode Annex," photo by Abby Crain

To consider instead.

This starts from an impossibility -- the impossibility of language-ing a practice of dancing.

I ask you to consider this as a movement of words, ideas, practice, storytelling, and poetics that moves alongside, through and in relation to the recurring occasion of a specific dance practice. These words have been gathered with an intent to attend to the unruly, ineffable and opaque nature of dancing and language-ing dancing, through a handling of words that attends to their weights and haptics, an evasion of disciplinarity in my choice of compositional form, and an attempt to dismantle the power-hoarding inherent in normative anatomical language through tactics of heretics and misuse.¹ This is an action aimed at making horizontal the movement between dancing and language, an action in which the language is allowed to follow “dance-based ways of knowing.”

¹ See “misuse” in: Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 208.

Introduction

In this essay, I will engage in three seemingly disparate but overlapping strains of thought and practice.

One will be the process of writing about my own current practice of dancing, which has been in development over the course of my years in the field, and that is, by definition, specifically not a language based experience. To this end, my formal strategy of writing about this practice will be grounded in a rhythmic and structural coherence that mirrors the dancing itself. The writing therefore may be unfamiliar or disconcerting, as it will at times be based on a relationship to words and word-ing that is as attentive to the texture, form, resonance, rhythm and sensation of words as it is to meaning and grammar. The language will lean towards looping, doodling spirals, that gain and lose momentum and are punctuated by moments of pause, precision, clarity, and shifts of focus. It will hit some notes hard, and others it will only graze with its fingertips.

Two will be describing a specific instantiation of this practice, the container of a rehearsal between myself and dance artist Sara Shelton Mann² which has developed in various iterations between the years of 2016 and 2021. While I have been studying and dancing with Sara on and off since 1998, this moment marks the longest consistent period of time in which we have worked together in the choreographer/dancer relationship. As such, what has emerged in this span of time is of particular interest to me as its fabric and texture has emerged with a specific clarity of form. Within the description of the rehearsal as a critical practice in itself (and not just a precursor to 'actual' dance), I will attempt to

² Sara Shelton Mann is a San Francisco Bay Area based artist best known for her pioneering work with her company, CONTRABAND in the 1980's and 90's who worked collective utopian practices in a grunge and punk rock aesthetic that resulted in sprawling, multidisciplinary works made with dancers who sang, musicians who danced, and lighting designers who did all of the above. In more recent years she is perhaps best known for her galvanizing and transformative teaching practice, to which dancers from all over the world flock, and a series of crystalline solos and duets that she made with different performers from approximately 2014-2019.

describe my own dance practice as it emerges within the specificity of this relationship and its energetic and aesthetic field.

Three will be to contextualize this essay about dancing in relation to a troubling of science and anatomy. I consider science and anatomy here in relation to my dance practice, because anatomical study, in my experience, has often happened in and alongside a study of dancing and movement, particularly in the kind of “somatic dance” practices to which I have been drawn, and is positioned as a sort of science-based version of the dancing that is being done. I propose that the arrival of a skeleton of dubious origin in these dance classes is often attributable to implicit assumptions about the universality of the body as material in dance practice coupled with an invisibilized belief that through cadaver-based study, one would get closer to one’s assumed goal of being “better at dancing.” After over twenty years of anatomical study in and alongside training and teaching within the field of “somatic dance” practice, it feels both impossible for me to consider dancing without taking into account anatomical study, and incredibly crucial that I push back against its problematic and assumed eminence. I will thus approach the work of this essay as a thinking and doing that happens when refusing the implied universality and absolutist knowledge positioning of anatomical study and moves in the spaces where anatomical authority is not looking, feeling, or hearing.

Many of the ways in which this will unfold within this body of writing will be through my use, misuse,³ and handling of language. This will at times work against a compositional style that aims for clarity, coherence, and appropriate use of words. I will propose instead, through the formal gesture of my writing, an evasion⁴ of a written strategy that aims

3 Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019) 208. Ahmed defines “misuse” as what happens to “queer use” when “use becomes proper.” “To queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to recover a potential from materials that have been left behind.”

4 Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” *The Poetry Foundation* (online) (Chicago, IL: Oct 13, 2009). This methodology is inspired by the concept of “open text,” a strategy of writing that leaves space for the reader to engage with material in ways that allow a proliferation of meaning and resonance. Hejinian writes:

“Closure is a fiction.”

“I can only begin posteriorly, by perceiving the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment I stand under enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete.”

“The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening.”

to contain, proscribe, and discipline the by definition unruly, elusive, divine-leaning, inefficient, and often illegible movement that is potential-ed within the fleshy, spirit-ed and care-ful comings together that comprise dancing. This is not an ode to the messy, the failed, or the careless, but a movement towards a different kind of deftness, care, attention, regard, rigor and irreverence with which to tangle with the heart-ful practices of writing and moving. The writing aims to trade a dance exegesis for devotional world-ing.

And so, when we refuse the call to order--the teacher picking up the book, the conductor raising his baton, the speaker asking for silence, the torturer tightening his noose -- we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth.⁵

note: Already in this introduction, there is a slipping between form and movement. While three lines of thought are proposed, a fourth paragraph emerges at the end of this that includes some further thinking that is not quite place-able within the three major sections, and doesn't quite merit a fourth designation. A four count emerges against a three count.⁶

⁵ Jack Halberstam, "Introduction," in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons, Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2013), 9.

⁶ Thank you to my thinking partner Thomas F. DeFrantz for pointing this out.

ONE

Approach to the Work (in which I discuss methodology, language, and what this is/is not)

This is not research.

Dance, as a field of scholarship, study and practice is, in my opinion, too busy with the ineffable and its adjacent emphases on perception, haptics, intuition, non verbal learning and oral culture, to be an easy fit within academic practice. Moreover, as both an impermanent and iterative endeavor that trades in the experiential, the time based, and the relational, tending to forego both the production of material objects and the accumulation of easily quantifiable evidence, dance is resistant to discursive enclosure. Accordingly, when dance moves through academic and other institutional contexts, there seems to be a marked lack of appropriate language-ing for the work that is afoot.

It is no wonder then, as Adrian Piper points out in a 2017 lecture entitled, “What exactly, is the idea of Artistic Research,” that when art [in this case dance] finds itself in the academy, it has become a common occurrence for the artist to discuss their practice and study as “research.” Piper critiques this appropriation of the word “research” as a move to accrue epistemological respectability for art practice through tying it to a word that evokes the rigor and respect associated with scientific methodology and tropes of mastery. This is often done, Piper proposes, without the artists having a sufficiently coherent methodology to merit this association.⁷

⁷ Adrian Piper, “What exactly, is the idea of Artistic research?” lecture from *Loitering With Intent*, Lausanne, Switzerland, December 2017.

This is a book.

This is a book about dancing that is not interested in reading like a book.

This is a book about dancing that is interested in feeling like dancing as it is being written.

This is a book that has attempted to put process over product but still get made.

This is a book that was written as a foray into word and thought that allows their intellectual and discursive form to be formally relational to a way of thinking that happens in the context of a particular dance practice.

This book is a dance.

This is a book that is talking about a dance that has no choreography.

This is a book that is talking about a dance that barely has a form, or barely happens, but a dance that feels like life or death.

This book contains dances that are actually poems, and poems that are actually plays.

This is a book about dance in the face of research.

This is a book about dance in the face of death.

This is a book about life-living and form spinning that turns away from prescriptions for movement that have come to us via the scalpel, the microscope and embalming fluid.

This book is not a conventional body of research because I have seen what research does.

This book is not a culmination.

this book does not have answers

What I would like to propose here through the declaration, “This is not research,” is that such a tying of art practice to scientific methodology and its means of knowledge production, is a gesture that I resist for two reasons. The first is that an attempt to develop a stable and consistent methodology through which to address a movement practice whose very coming-into-being is predicated on both a bodying that is always already teetering on the edge of falling apart and a devotion to staying with the unknown, seems an unhelpful mismatch that has little to offer. Secondly and more importantly, the collusion of the word research with scientific practice⁸ that makes it appealing to artists in the instances to which Piper refers, is an association I refuse in accordance with an ethical interest in re-tooling the dance practices with which I am working towards a more liberatory unfolding. This stance reflects a distrust of disciplinarity in general and scientific methodology in particular as modes of thought and knowledge production that are inextricably bound up with mechanisms of colonialism and mastery.

Disciplinary thinking is practical: it enables us to frame ourselves as masters of particular discourses, histories, and bodies of knowledge. It safeguards us against the oppositional frames, or methods of understanding that might unhinge us from our own masterful frames. -- Julietta Singh ⁹

Disciplines actually get in the way of answers and theorems precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results. -- Jack Halberstam¹⁰

Disciplinary thinking, inside and outside the academy, is empire. -- Katherine McKittrick ¹¹

8 Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Harper describes the etymology of *research*: “act of searching closely,” from French *recherche* (1530s, Modern French *recherche*), back-formation from Old French *rechercher* (v.). Meaning “scientific inquiry” is first attested 1630s. Italics mine.

9 Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2107), 17.

10 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC :Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

11 Katherine McKittrick, “Curiosities, Wonder, and Black Methodologies,” (Lecture, Dean’s Forum Inclusion + Equity Lectures, University of Virginia School of Architecture, Charlottesville, VA, 2020).

"tactics of misuse"

photo-A. Crain



The journey to find a word.

(or an attention to affinity, or the love of beginning-ing/ the banana joke/ language, process and predilection.)

Language, for me, has a deep connection to family. On my paternal side, my grandmother was a lover of words, spending every morning engrossed with a crossword puzzle for several hours. This meant that every morning we spent at her house, after being greeted by the song, "Here she is, Miss(ter) America," or "Good morning to you, good morning to you! We're all in our places with bright shining faces," my brother and I would be asked something along the lines of "What is the name of a female sheep?" or another similarly obscure word based question. She was known to recite word puzzles such as, "Marezee dotes and dozee dotes,"¹² sing "The Rainbow Connection" or hymns frequently, and engage us in lengthy discussions about her pet peeves of grammatical error. Family gatherings either consisted of circles of retellings of familiar story after familiar story, as we sprawled on couches and floors and scratched each other's heads, or of sitting around the piano, trying to sing along with my grandmother's impossibly high pitched, warbling voice.

From my maternal grandmother's side, I have inherited an inability to find words, somehow linked with a propensity for losing things, that can lead to stuttering, awkward pauses in speech, where I find myself linguistically stranded, struggling to find the right word. When this phenomena overtakes me, I can be found with my mouth open and eyes staring, internally vetting a stream of incorrect nouns before I finally can settle on the right one. Before, for example, coming up with the word key, my brain needs to filter through a stream of key-adjacent words such as "computer, toothbrush, lipstick, shoes," before finally, if I am lucky, landing on the correct one, or if not, saying some kind of mixed word like "tink" (think and tick, as in "Pay attention to what you tink/ makes you tick") This phenomenon also presents itself when I am entering the state just before sleep. My children tease me mercilessly about times I used to fall asleep reading to them at bedtime, often composing sentences like, "then as she slid down the ice cream she woke up right beside a kitten," and other incomprehensible mutterings. My hold on language, in moments of stress, overstimulation,

¹² "Mares eat oats and does eat oats."

or being pulled into sleep, reduces itself to a series of graspings for form, weight, texture and rhythm of words. I am often subject to malapropisms, missed wordings and nonsense speak. I have noticed this most often when I am engaged in a dual process of listening and writing, and it is magnified when I am also engaged in a body based process such as thinking about dancing. On such occasions, I often find myself often writing a completely different word than I am hearing: femur bone becomes trash can, bunion becomes Boston, etc. If I tune into the sensation of this, I can make out an experience in which it feels like I am too deep in one part of my consciousness to make it to the verbal part of my brain quickly enough to discern the difference between the texture and weight of a word and its meaning.¹³

The conjunction of these lineages then, has thus led me to an experience of and relationship with language that is often tied more to a process of wandering, singing, soothing or circling than it is to a linear progression of thought. While, at distinct points, this resolves in nodes of precision and direction, it would be fair to say that the ability of these moments to emerge with power and attunement is in direct relation, or indebtedness to, the meandering and multi-sensorial nature of the digressive field from which it emerges.¹⁴ Perhaps, these moments of word clarity can, following the work of Erin Manning, be considered as “occasions,”¹⁵ or moments of “coming into form” which are textured by the specificities of a moment within an unfolding of process through time, instantiations of experience that are both complete in the finitude of their moment-ing, and incomplete as they exist as a part of a linear progression through time.^{16,17}

13 Claudia La Rocco, in a writing practice group in 2019 told me, upon hearing about this phenomena, to “use all the wrong words” in my writing practice. As I now practice this, this sideways relation to word choice has become less a point of stress and more a point of interest.

14 In a conversation with thinking partner Thomas F. DeFrantz on Feb 13, 2021, Tommy began to talk about my process with both words and movement in relation to the idea of “fog.”

15 Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 21-37. Manning’s use of the word “occasion” is a citation from the work of Alfred North Whitehead.

16 Erin Manning, *Useless*, 37. Manning quotes Alfred North Whitehead: “In short, the practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time.”

17 This feels to me like a score that I have practiced with Sara Shelton Mann, which she calls either “Field/Point” or “Wave/Point.” The practice consists of an alternating practice of moving within/riding upon the wave of a field and demarcating precise instances of punctuation/focus in time/space.

Sara Shelton Mann said recently in a rehearsal process “People write like they dance.”¹⁸ This statement made me itch and rebel and question, but despite my push back, as the form of this essay has been developing, these words have been echoing in my mind. In fact, these words in many ways drive this project.

I share all this to shed light on my formal choices in the composition of this essay as an attempt to stitch word practice with dance practice. Mirroring both my preponderance towards the construction of multiple beginnings as a way to generate and develop material, as well as my ongoing obsession with practicing generous amounts of non-progressive, non-linear movement that tends to circle back in on itself, I aim to allow the form of this essay to emerge circuitously, and to begin, begin again, and begin again.¹⁹ I am allowing the writing to spend time looking for the right words and to be curious about that process. To write about the practice of dancing bears the risk of flattening a complex multi-sensorial process in a discouragingly reductionist manner. My aspiration here is to approach another kind of coherence.

To think: to encircle an unthought.

Circularity--a dangerous word. Circularity of Heraclitus, yes: to go in one direction is truly to go in the other.

-- Maurice Merleau-Ponty,²⁰

18 Notes from rehearsal for *7 Excavations* with Sara Shelton Mann, Studio 124, San Francisco, CA, January, 2021.

19 I am reminded here of my son's current obsession with the reiterative and maddening joke “Knock Knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Knock Knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who?” etc.

20 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 1.

TWO

What is Being Questioned in the Work (in which I critique science and anatomy)

The problem of anatomy.

Anatomy is defined by the Oxford Online dictionary in 2021 as “The branch of science concerned with the bodily structure of humans, animals, and other living organisms, especially *as revealed by dissection and the separation of parts.*” (italics mine)

We can thus consider anatomy as a science of the body based on processes of dissection and separation. While I do not intend in this essay to fully explore this expansive subject, I do want to spend some time with a few of the central strains of thought about anatomy which are informing my thinking and practice.

To begin, I would like to consider the problematics inherent in the “discipline” of science. I would credit my scepticism of science to my familial inheritance as the daughter of a biologist. My father, through his patient and detailed descriptions of scientific method and sharing of his personal journeys to get his research proposals approved and funded, allowed me early on to understand the creative nature of scientific thought as well as the subjective and culturally dependent means through which some kinds of research get funded and others do not. Through conversations with him, it became apparent to me that the “research” that gets positioned at the front end of science is, more often than not, dependent upon whether the proposed project is aligned with the values of the culture in which it is embedded; some kinds of “knowledge” are seen as more relevant than others. The ways in which this leaves scientific study vulnerable to ideological manipulation and political calculation, for me, renders the “truth” of what science is “discovering” inherently

suspect.

Secondly, I would like to consider the scientific machinations that play out specifically in the field of anatomical study. Through the veil of anatomical study, science is purported as a means through which to understand the body,²¹ a formulation that emerged in the 17th century when the “dissecting industry” colluded with mechanical philosophy which,

[C]alculates, classifies, makes distinctions, and degrades the body only in order to rationalize its faculties, aiming not just at intensifying its subjection but at maximizing its social utility....Far from renouncing the body, mechanical theorists seek to conceptualize it in ways that make its operations intelligible and controllable.²²

The ramifications of this project of “understanding” the body, as has been discussed by Italian Marxist feminist Sylvia Federici in particular, seem to me problematic as aids to dance practice, in that they reenact capitalist and patriarchal agendas that attempt to control and curtail the unruliness²³ of the body, in order to coerce it into labor power, and rid it of its “magic.”

[T]o pose the body as mechanical matter, void of any intrinsic teleology--the ‘occult’ virtues attributed to it by natural magic and the popular superstitions of the time--was to make intelligible the possibility of subordinating it to a work process that increasingly relied on uniform and predictable forms of behavior.²⁴

21 Richard Seltzer, *Mortal Lessons, Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1974, 1996), 16. “In the recesses of the body, I search for the philosopher’s stone. I know it is there, hidden in the deepest, dampest cul du sac. It awaits discovery. To find it would be like the harnessing of Fire. It would illuminate the world....perhaps if one were to cut out a heart, and paste it to the page, it would speak with more elegance than all the words of Balzac...still I fear that is what it may require to reveal the truth that lies hidden in the body.”

22 Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004, revised 2014), 139. “The anatomy ‘theater’ discloses to the public eye a disenchanting, desecrated body.”

23 Laymon Kiese, “The Making of ‘Unruly Bodies,’” *Spens, 3 minute read*. April 3, 2018. “I could make the argument that all bodies are unruly.”

24 Federici, *Witch*, 139.

In the European contexts Federici discusses, this has been especially clear as it has been embedded in attempts to control body and land based ways of knowing (often associated with the feminine).²⁵ This was especially evidenced by the witch hunts that moved through Europe in the 16th-18th century, but is currently visible as it is enacted via contemporary biopolitics.²⁶ When considering this history, the integration of anatomy into the “somatic dance” practices which I am considering here, many of which claim to advance anti-hierarchical values such as liberation and “freedom,” seems at best an uneasy if not an unethical partnering.²⁷

Thirdly, anatomical science often functions in the context of somatic dance practices as an implicit universal that promotes a “natural embodiment” which tends to extend along unconsciously racist, heteronormative, ablest and gender normative lines.^{28,29} For example, when I teach the work of Open Source Forms /Skinner Releasing,³⁰ I have been taught to say “As we unlock holding, every part of ourselves can extend into their natural directional patterns,” a sentence which I have often struggled with, as this phrase to me begs the question of how the “natural directional

25 Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 166. “The power to (re)name, then, comes to signal a mode of masterful relation in which the one who names is also the one who can bestow, classify, possess.” (I would propose that the naming practices of anatomy, to which I turn my intention in some of the poetic work in this essay, are an intrinsic part of this project of containment and mastery. (AC)

26 Federici, *Witch*, 141.

27 For an extensive discussion of this see Doran George, “A Conceit of the Natural Body: The Universal-Individual in Somatic Dance Training,” (phd. diss. University of California Los Angeles, 2014), 4.

28 The collusion of somatic study with eugenics is extensive, but beyond the scope of this paper.

29 For a more extensive discussion of this see Doran George, *The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training*, ed. Susan Foster (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

30 Open Source Forms is what I call “the maverick stepchild of Skinner Releasing.” It is a form of dance pedagogy taught by Stephanie Skura that aims to take the promise and the principles of Skinner Releasing, and allow them to transform through the practice of its students and teachers. Skinner Releasing is a somatic and creative movement practice that moves between poetic and fantastical non-anatomical images for moving, different states of consciousness, and hands-on partner practices. Its aim is to “release” dancers into multidirectional, formally divergent, and dynamically varied dancing. According to Skura, it was “dreamed into being” on Vashon Island outside of Seattle in the 1970’s by Joan Skinner, who had left a New York dance career that included working with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham after series of injuries and personal tragedy led her to Alexander Technique and a rethinking of dance practice. She then transited from New York City to the University of Washington in Seattle, where she continued to develop her work. On April 10, 2021, as I write this footnote, Joan Skinner, whom I never met but whose work has deeply shaped me, and whose words I both study and repeat over and over has left this world just one month ago. Her memorial is tomorrow morning at 10 am on Zoom.

The following piece is a writing experiment based on using anatomical language differently.

A writing practice to disintegrate anatomy #1

To listen corpuscularly

to feel molecular transmission

to move between cellular flow

to osmose lovingly

to splinter

to train

to tend

To refuse to acquiesce

to walk while feeling your toes

to rotate your phalanges

to navigate tenderly

We are shifting softwise

falling between membranes

Light travelling

Vibratory

To envaginate dystopically

To lead awry

To jump

patterns” were formulated, and which directional patterns could be thought to apply to all students of releasing, given the complex and diverse set of factors that go into bodying as it happens within culture.^{31,32,33}

Fourthly, I propose that anatomical study is an uneasy partner for dance practice due to its tethering in the methodologies and material structures through which it has been developed, many of which have been deeply woven into the machinations of racist settler colonial capitalism, as have been discussed by Hortense Spillers³⁴ and Sara Ahmed³⁵ among others.

It is in the context of these lines of thought and the weightedness of their history that I have chosen in this project to turn away from anatomically based dance practice and to look towards “what else.”

What has been turned away from is the idea that one must study anatomy in order to understand the body, and that one must study anatomy to know how to dance. What has been turned away from is the idea that one needs to understand prior to action, and that one cannot move forward in the presence of mystery and the unknown. What has been turned away from is the idea that there is a “correct” way to move, and that science can find it. What has been turned away from is the idea that one must contain dance practice and study within codified methodologies that are reinforced through science.³⁶ What has been turned away from is the implied finitude and atomization of the body enacted through

31 It is my best guess that the basis of these patterns can be found in Joan’s study of the Alexander Technique: “*The skull releases forward and up; the shoulders release and drop away from the ears; the arms stream long and away from the shoulders; the ribs soften inwards and towards the back, the back expands in all directions.*” I am currently experimenting with saying, “into your own particular directional patterns” instead.

32 My distrust of anatomical determinism can be traced back to a nineties style feminist post-structuralist repudiation of biological determinism.

33 This lean towards biological determinism is further inscribed in more explicitly anatomically engaged somatic dance forms such as Axis Syllabus, which inverts a Lamarckian “form follows function” (Ahmed, *What’s the Use*. 71) into a “function follows form” set of prescriptions for “correct, safe, and efficient” movement that are dictated by perceived directives gleaned from a careful study of anatomical structures.

34 Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Ithaca, NY, 1987), 68.

35 Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use*, Chapter 2, “The Biology of Use and Disuse.” 68-102.

36 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13. My thinking here is inspired by Sharpe’s critique of disciplinarity and its call for new methods of thought in Black study. Sharpe writes: “The methods most readily

With scapular acuity we traverse the room

Sidewise

Tripedal

The prosody of a gallup or of a laugh or of a song

I sing to your knees

Upping dopamine

Upping oxytocin

Upping abalone

Upping iridescence

Upping onyx

Tending insight and direction mapping

To gall bladder the apparent countryside with bile

With lime

With resin

Vehement filtration device

To resound

To palpate

To resonate

To detonate

To lunge

To thumb

To thud.

Auricular caverning

Tending trilobites

Tending ganglion

tending breath

calcium like

longing to salinate, to salivate

to dissolve

We long to flush.

To view membraneously

To magic flickeringly

To projectile an evening

To supinate caressingly

To bowl the feet

For soup

For support

For integrity

For fluid

For sad

For magnesium

Ligamentously crescendoing,

We swim skyward with feeling,

We recoil into trajectory,

We spend our unspent-ness.

Moving in a closed chain

*anatomical language and science.*³⁷

I approach this turning away not with the idea that in so doing I can effectively distance myself from the weight, shape and impact of anatomical study,³⁸ nor with the idea that by simply turning away I can erase its troubling history and discursive valence, but instead with a hope that through this turning away, I can both propose an active and vital troubling of anatomy as it moves alongside dance practice, and move to work outside its frame as a means through which to move towards a "what else."³⁹

My arrival at this turning away has emerged over time and through relation to a number of thinkers, experiences, and practices. These are not new ideas. These are ideas that are part of an assembling of study, practice, and thought by a congregation of brilliant scholars whose work I have been studying throughout the course of my journey with this project. As a student of Black feminist philosophical thought, processual theory, phenomenology, poststructuralist feminist theory, queer theory, and posthumanist/dehumanist thought, I want to be clear that many of those whose work I am studying are thinking from and through histories and lineages which are not my own. As a white, cisgendered, able bodied femme, I aim to engage with this thinking from a place of humility and study, and to think with these theories with a mindfulness and attentiveness to the specific histories from which they emerge and in which they move.

available to us sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what we know.... We must become undisciplined."

37 Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 67. My thinking here is inspired by Singh's, proposition of education as "a transformative act of becoming profoundly vulnerable to....other things *that we have not yet accounted for.*" (*Italics mine*)

38 As previously noted, I am deeply entwined in anatomical study through lineage and practice. Julietta Singh writes, "Complicity becomes not something negative to be resisted and disavowed but something to be affirmed in order to assume responsibility." Singh further proposes, "narratively inhabiting the gaps and fissures in our own subjective constructions in an effort to refuse the violence of splitting ourselves off from the less agreeable aspects of our being.... by elaborating, upturning, and reshaping those narratives that have cast us as particular kinds of subjects, dynamic narration moves us beyond dialectical formulations towards a politics of entanglement that from which other world relations can begin to flourish. Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, 120.

39 The question "What else?" was posed to me in session after session with my thinking partner on this project, Thomas F. DeFrantz.

Elliptically
Eccentrically
With feeling.

A canon of form making, or a possible gleaning.

To fissure lengthwise
 to cleave
 to zip
To locate tentacularly

*We are falling with our legs crumpling
under porch under table under tollhouse*

*Our grass is soft feeling
Our air is heavy like honey or sweat
 Or sweetness.*

*I want to propose that sentiments are viscous, vaporous,
discretionary, and directional.*

*I want to propose that salivary is vapor now
Dangerous and transmittable
 We leave it elsewhere, to thud unopened on the
dirt.
 Its value discarded wantonly.*

What does 'what else' look like?

Ok Abby, I am beginning to wonder, you say you want to move towards a 'what else'. What does 'what else' look like?

That's hard to say, but I will start by telling you what what else can feel like.

What else can often feel like a gift, a getting closer to something, a relief, a chance to be seen, a way to understand self through a practice of bodying. I think here of the rehearsal process for the project, *Everyone*, with Miguel Gutierrez in 2006. Miguel was proposing a score in which we were to feel ecstatically in love with one another, cult-happy, mindless, and desiringly ecstatic about everyone and everything. Deeply depressed, toxically embroiled in a dysfunctional marriage, and buried in the responsibilities of caring for a young child whilst trying to follow a dance career I seemed to be ruining, I found Miguel's proposal next to impossible. Each of my attempts at the score would result in humiliating fakery or the blinking back of tears. Finally, in a burst of insight, Miguel gave me a way out. He turned to me and said, "Okay, in this section, I want you to stand aside, look miserable, and allow yourself to descend into whatever the deep hole is that you are descending into. It's okay." This was perhaps one of the biggest acts of kindness I have ever received.

But Abby, this has nothing to do with anatomy.

Good point, but what I am sharing here is in relation to what comes into view when one turns away, or in this case when one is encouraged to turn away, from what is expected, assumed, or proscribed. As Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, proposes, "Depending on which way one turns, a different world might come into view."⁴⁰ Ahmed writes about the ways in which what appears in one's field of vision is contingent upon what one is turning towards. What one is turning towards will affect what one sees or encounters, or what "come(s) into view."

Conversely, when one turns away, this has a reciprocal effect. When turning away, what "comes into view," what is near

40 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.

To wonder about treasuring.

To release into action. To move into arborway, under rafter.

To stumble one's head. To allow one's knees to buckle and
ankle and reject the imperative .

To ribbon like lissome.

To give over the pen to cloudy

To synaptic chaos

To rock unsteadily

With placenta

With plasma

With snot

With glands secreting atypically.

Like pathway.

at hand, what is in the foreground, and what is in the background, shifts. Following this thinking, when one turns away, what is being excluded from view has effect. The shape of the thing that comes into view as a result of a turning away is relational to that which was turned away from. However what comes into view can also make an opening for a “what else.” The story with Miguel is an example of this, a turning away that led to a *what else*.⁴¹

Let me give another example. Recently in a co-working session with colleague Raha Behnam, I found myself repeatedly, elatedly, falling to the floor in an unabashedly clumsy way. I had been obsessed with another quote from Sara Ahmed, from *What's the Use*, in which Ahmed writes about breaking. Given recent heartbreak, the death of a friend, and the beginning of the absence of ease and cat-power in my age-transforming self, the quote had been haunting me.

Ahmed writes,

A break can be how something is revealed.

[B]roken but defiant: we can shatter when things shatter. But this shattering can be fierce as well as fragile: how things can hold more.... how they can hold an idea of who we are, of who we can become.⁴²

As I noticed myself falling, I realized I was learning something. In allowing clumsy, in allowing falling, I realized I had been carefully attempting to hide impending awkwardness and stiffness of my joints -- engaging in a sort of fake wanna-be dancing botox in pursuit of an ageless dancing. As I fell, thudded, and threw myself against the floor, I felt a sense of relief. My physical self began to teach itself how to negotiate its new formation; how to be less afraid of itself. Through the practice of allowing my pursuit of everlasting grace to break, through turning away from what felt like a mandate to defy change and vulnerability, the possibility of something else came into view.

Can you give an example that is a little more related to what you have brought up around anatomy? Your examples are still a bit oblique to me.

41 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.

42 Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 226.

I can try, but first let me give some context.

Alongside this thinking about turning away and turning towards, I am thinking here about what happens when one stays in the field with something — in this case, in the way that anatomy often stays in the room, even as one turns away from it or attempts to move it out of view. “What else” is not always cut and dry. In *Pragmatics of the Useless*, Erin Manning writes about the pull or “force of form” on that which is being moved towards or away from as “prehension.” Citing the work of Alfred North Whitehead, Manning describes the phenomenon of “prehension” as that which is “pulled into experience through the grasping-towards through which experience makes itself felt.”⁴³ In other words, Manning describes prehension as the force of a longing or yearning that lures a relational field into what Manning calls an event and what Whitehead calls an occasion. The magnetic force of what is being yearned for directly impacts the texture of an occasion and the force and form of its becoming.

Manning goes on to describe a reciprocal phenomenon that Whitehead terms “negative prehension.” Negative prehension is defined by Whitehead as those aspects in the relational field which are excluded from an occasion in order for that occasion to reach its actualization and desired consistency. In other words, negative prehension refers to the parts of the relational field from which an event gathers itself that are not included, or have been excluded in the pull of the prehension. However, “elimination is still participation.” Manning proposes that that which is moved to the background through negative prehension, persists; it “lurk[s] on the edges of appearance, and affect[s] the texture of the experience.”⁴⁴ The event itself cannot help but to be infused with what it has not actualized in its becoming.

I mention this here in relation to a set of imaginary anatomical practices that I would like to describe to you. These practices engage fantastical, non-prescriptive prompts for movement, such as allowing the fingers and toes to transform into “sinuous antennae,” picturing oneself as part of the fecund floor of a rainforest, or moving with “Limbs of Fury.”⁴⁵

43 Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 17.

44 Erin Manning, *Useless*, 17.

45 These images come to me through the pedagogy of Open Source Forms (see footnote 33) which I was certified to teach in 2015. The imagery work in OSF emerges from the lineage of Mabel Ellsworth Todd and Andre Bernard, in which the use of imagery in movement pedagogy is touted as a means through which to better educate a moving body. While some of the image work in OSF

Thinking with negative prehension suggests that, despite the fact that these imaginary anatomies give rise to a proliferation of openings towards a “more than” of bodying that allows feelers, cat whiskers, hearing through the ears of the pelvis, and working with phantom limbs, what is being moved away from (prescriptive anatomy) is simultaneously lurking in the background. I may be moving with the idea of softening the stems of my eyes all the way to my feet, but this is somehow perhaps informed by the fact that I have a relationship to body parts which are familiar to me as “eyes,” and “feet.” The force and impact of this score is not just about what it opens up for movement, but how this opening is related to the way that the image un-tethers me from what I “know” about my eyes and feet.

What Manning’s thinking brings into view for me here is a profound reckoning with the persistent relationality between what is being turned away from and what is moved toward.⁴⁶

But let’s move to the dance studio. This circling of words is exhausting. Let’s see what is unfolding through this turning away from anatomy and its prescriptions. Let’s move into “what else,” and for now, let’s make this a hard turn.

does follow a discourse of “efficiency” and “alignment” that I would position in relation to the problematic and implicit universals embedded in many somatic dance practices (see footnote 31,32), I would add that OSF also promisingly includes image-based practice thick with leanings into non-purposive imaginaries. To me these emerge as hopeful openings towards a “*what else*.” These have transformed within my own practice to images such as “allow the stems of your eyes to soften as they move through the center of your body and through each leg all the way to the soles of your feet. Then, if you like, play with the image of soft eyes also opening on the soles of your feet. Then if you like, allow the toes to become eyelashes, curling and uncurling.”

46 I find this helpful as a means through which to consider the ethical contradictions and complications at hand.

THREE

For What the Work Makes Space (in which I attempt to write about the unwritable)

Getting to the studio.

to plan for dancing. to prepare for dancing but also to travel to the studio. to show up. to arrive at the door, to ring the doorbell and strain to hear the click of the gate unlocking, to walk up the steps and through the door, to be hit with the force of the air of a room that has all the windows covered with thick, black curtains, not only that but to think about all the other times one has come through this door and been hit with this air. to think about a friend who used to come to these rehearsals but is no longer on this planet. to arrive in the room, to say hi or make eye contact, or to not say hi if people are already in their flow. to arrive in oneself, but also to arrive in a group. to tune in, to find place, to prepare the body, to roll on balls. to hold, to massage, to hydrate, to caffeine-ate, to put on a song. to turn inwards, not only that but to then turn outwards. to get into motion, to accompany, to switch foreground with background, to prepare oneself, to coax. to plug in, to put on headphones, to remember. to baby or care for, to tend, to make a joke, to look sideways, to feel out, to drop in. to see what's moving, to move into movement, to seek a glistening, to relax, to gain speed, to move in and out of the floor, to feel the room, to feel oneself in the room, to feel others in current past and future time in the room, to feel skin, to shift weight, to circle, to gain speed, to start to play. TO FIND FLOW, to hate this word, to gain bravery, to courage. to remember how to move. to practice moving, to be in conversation but also to be in dancing together, to smile (even), to make eye contact, to make a joke. to sing. to give feedback. to get excited about an idea together, not only that but to play with an idea. to move into relation. to watch and be watched, to study through moving, to breathe, to dance.

(after To Be in a Time of War, by Etel Adnan.)

The studio can be any number of places: a beach, a tennis court, a spot on a dog walk where the ground is suddenly flatish and no one is around, a living room, a zoom room or a bedroom, an empty dance hall, a gym, a dance studio. Getting there involves some degree of planning, put into movement by a yearning-toward, a prehension that moves into a pre-acceleration⁴⁷: finding a location, agreeing on times, finding companions, colleagues, teammates, playmates.

Getting there involves some degree of planning, put into movement by a yearning-toward, a prehension that moves into a pre-acceleration: assembling the right clothes, clothes that will move, feel good, fit the weather, fit the color scheme, clothes that will provide anchoring in time, space, relation, and lineage.⁴⁸

Getting there involves a yearning-toward, a yearning toward the promise of making visible that which one feels, sees, hears, tastes, when engaged in the fleshy assemble-ing of dancing, a yearning towards what one might call the "technology"⁴⁹ of dancing, a technology that bears the promise of making visible, a technology that bears the promise

49 See Erin Manning, *Always More Than One* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 5. Pre-acceleration is defined as pre-movement as it has an effect on actualization. "A welling into movement."

48 The dance t-shirt figures heavily here -- a tangible link to past experience, a way of continuing a flow from one experience to another, a marker of lineage. A dance t-shirt has a particular lifespan for me. At first it is too stiff, chunky; somehow this reminds me of the moment right after pregnancy when I accumulated boxy t-shirts to give form and structure to my amorphous and re-structuring body. This too stiff phase is followed by a period of being a t-shirt at the end of the rotation, the thing worn right before laundry day, when I want something clean so as not to stink or look revolting, when I don't have other options. In this phase of life, the dance t-shirt is thrown often, purposefully too often, into the laundry. It is best to air dry it, because the dryer will speed up the wearing in process too quickly, reducing the garment to a shapeless mush. After two or three years of this, the t-shirt gets good. It starts to develop the right amount of softness versus structure and the event it commemorates starts to accumulate some degree of nostalgia. At this point, the t-shirt is not just comfortable, it begins to provide a link towards past experience that grounds me. This can help move me forward into the day.

I think here of this quote from Maya Angelou shared by Emilio Rojas in an artist talk: "When you enter a room, bring all the people you ever loved into the room with you." Emilio Rojas, "Artist Talk" (*Love Cafe*, Philadelphia, PA: University of the Arts, February 2021). The t-shirt in some way often for me becomes an object that pulls these lineages into the room.

51 This use of the word technology is inspired by some writing by musician Kim Gordon, on the technology of the music club. "The club is the mediator through which the music is communicated. The band literally plugs into the technology of the club in order to magnify the sound, turning a possibility into actuality, making heard what is heard by the musicians themselves available

of making space for, of making felt, or of making heard this thing that we are moving towards -- making felt the object of this yearning. A technology that in this case is no more or no less than the technology of a body moving within the space/time of a dance, within the space/time of the rehearsing of a dance, or of its practicing. What is longed for here I would say is the desire to be deep in the flow of the attempt to make visible the unseen through a practice of bodying: a yearning toward dancing.

To begin already in motion.

How does this begin? How does this get into motion? Or was it already in motion? I am talking here about dancing. I am talking here about writing about dancing. I am talking here about writing about dancing as the writing about dancing moves alongside the dancing itself. I am talking about what happens when dancing and writing move together as they do in this essay. I am talking about writing, about this co-mingling of words and movement, or through this co-mingling of words and movement, knowing that you, who are reading this, are in the room with me, not unlike an audience. How does this begin?

I am not talking about any kind of dancing, I am talking about a particular practice of dancing, a practice of dancing that feels central to me in thinking about what moves me towards the form, and keeps me there, or at least keeps me coming back.

But I must be specific, because I am really not writing about any experience of any dancing in any rehearsal, for any performance. I am writing about experiences that I have had within the context of certain rehearsals of certain practices, at certain points in my life, with certain people, in certain spaces. In this case I am writing, primarily but not exclusively, about experiences of dancing with the iconoclastic visionary, Sara Shelton Mann, during the period between 2016 and

to the audience." Kim Gordon, "I'm Really scared When I Kill in My Dreams," *Artforum*, January 1983. I was made aware of this writing through a talk by Kodwo Eshun, "Off The Page 2011: Kodwo Eshun discusses selected paragraphs of music criticism," *Wire Magazine*, January 2012.

2021, in and around the San Francisco Bay Area of California. It is my intention to be as specific as possible as I write this, specific in order to resist the habit of whiteness to assert itself as universal, the same habit of whiteness that I am resisting in my turning away from anatomical science and its claims to universal knowledge. I am writing an experience of dancing that is particular and subjective,⁵⁰ with an aim to attempt to move words alongside a specific and contingent process of bodying and world-ing; to engage in a dance-adjacent process of body-ing and world-ing with, through a process of movement between language and dancing.

The thing.

Okay, so what are you talking about ?

I am talking about the occasion of a rehearsal process that may or may not be leading towards a performance, but is nonetheless a rehearsal, insofar as it is a practicing of a practice, a seeking together of a thing, a sharing of time spent in moving toward the experience of a particular state. The state in this case, may reach its actualization only contingently, only in relation to another person, or persons, and indeed only in relation to the real or imagined possibility of being watched. The state in this case, may be summoned through a practice of bodying, of bodying through dancing, that engenders the potential of making visible a feeling or a wave of feelings, or a diagonal or poly-directional force, or a series of weights, textures, or energies that are moving through a room. This is a state that I have sometimes heard called the “third thing,”⁵¹ or the “something else,” or the “more than.” This is a state reached through a practice of moving that is predicated on making seen the unseen,⁵² but perhaps in the final analysis, what is made seen in this state

50 I would like to note that while this project of this part of this essay is reminiscent of phenomenological projects and their lean towards perceptual foregrounding in descriptive practice, as well as its distrust of scientific absolutism, it moves away from phenomenology's intent to use perceptually gathered knowledge within a search for the “fundamental nature” of things.

“‘It is only through an analysis of the visible in dance,’ wrote Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, ‘that one might begin to fathom and describe the essential nature of that experience.’”

Mark Franko, “What is Alive and Dead in Dance Phenomenology?” *Dance Research Journal* 43/2(Winter 2011),1.

I instead offer this account in the spirit of a Sara Ahmed quote: “Use leaves traces in places.” I approach this thinking/moving/writing as an action that will leave traces which have a potential to function as an “invitation” for further thinking/moving. Ahmed, *Use*, 41.

51 Jesse Hewit and Sara Shelton Mann, in conversation, 2017.

52 Quote from Darell Jones in a work session, 2021.

is to me only a side note when considered in relation to the experience of devotion to the practice itself.

Abby, I am not sure I understand what you are talking about. What do you mean by dancing? What sort of dancing do you mean?

I am glad you asked. I am talking about a kind of dancing that might also be described as a state reached or brought into being through dancing, but that goes beyond dancing. A kind of dancing that starts to move into something else -- a state that could be described as ecstatic-like but also not ecstatic-like, like a dance that is already falling apart, or a dance that exceeds form, or a dance that may have a form but the form isn't the thing -- a dance that is unrepeatable but also moment specific -- a dance that has structure but not shapes. This is a state I have visited often when in the midst of a rehearsal or performance of the work of Sara Shelton Mann. In fact I would say it is a primary through-line in our work together, but during the course of our twenty year process, we have only spoken about it openly once or twice.

While my work with Sara Shelton Mann has irrevocably formed and marked my experience of this state, and indeed what I think "it" is, I think this state was something I sought after early on in my dancing life, years before I came to California and met Sara.

I think I was trying to find it in the first dance I ever made, a solo to accompany the Joan Baez spoken word piece, "Song in the Blood." In the last section of the dance, during which Baez repeats a circular text about blood that keeps on flowing and a world that keeps on turning, I did chaîné turns in a circle for four minutes as the music crescendoed toward its finish, much to the consternation of my mother and the utter confusion of my fellow students at my central Massachusetts high school, who at that point pretty much decided I was from Mars. I found the experience dizzying and euphoric. In retrospect, the thing I felt when doing that dance feels akin to the state I am talking about. I was fourteen.

Abby, this sounds interesting but I still can't discern what exactly you are doing. Is it possible to be more specific?

Thank you for your patience. Let me try to take apart what I am saying, step by step.



photo by Alex Escalante: *Difficult Bodies*, Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People, 2005.

a state reached, or brought into being through dancing

State here to me means a combination of a consciousness, a feeling state, and a specific physical level of activation. The fact that this is brought into being through dancing is one of its defining factors, because a similar state could possibly be evoked through singing, or having sex, or a really long swim in a big lake while it is starting to rain, but dancing for me awakens a very specific kind of consciousness, embodiment and perceptual attunement that is, for me, dance dependant.

that goes beyond dancing

This is a hard one. I don't have the words for it at all, and to be honest, I feel a real resistance to trying to find the words because what I am talking about feels so delicate and private. It is something I am usually very quiet about, almost like I am afraid that if I talk about it, it will go away. Maybe if I describe the state itself it will be helpful. The consciousness of this state feels incredibly awake and multi-directionally aware but also very calm and lucid. The physical feeling of it feels ready for anything, responsive, playful and almost superhuman. The visual image I have of my mind-state looks like looking through super clear jello. I tend to move my head a lot and to dance in circles, so it feels a lot like becoming a whirlwind, or becoming a tumbling wave, or going on a circular, wandering journey. It often involves going in and out of the floor, shifting in relationship to gravity and building a certain level of momentum. I often lift my leg, but that is more of a habit that I have taken on because I am usually dancing for Sara Shelton Mann, and she likes to see a high leg, but the high leg is not necessarily central to the form. What this looks like to an audience is hard to say. I find it difficult to reduce it to an easy description. Maybe it looks like just a bunch of moving hair, or maybe it looks like a whirlpool, or a whirlwind, or a force.

and starts to move into something else

If I wasn't a New England raised daughter of a hard sworn atheist biologist father, I might call the something else a connection to what Sara Shelton Mann often refers to as the Divine. But I am not going to say that. Maybe the state I am talking about is the state neuroscientists call "flow," but that feels so reductionist it is almost painful.⁵³ I feel it

⁵³ I am struggling here to find an adjective. I want to say ecstatic, but it's not ecstatic, as I discuss in the next paragraph. I want to say delicious but delicious isn't really it. Maybe I could describe this sensation as divinely orgasmic, but that's not really it either and also a little embarrassing and unbelievable, like the people who claim orgasm in childbirth. Sara Shelton Mann said in a recent conversation, "the thing about this is that it is a matter of life and death." I think that is an important clue. It reminds me of a

sometimes, in the midst of this practice, as a tingling full body deluge of sensation that overtakes me. This is often accompanied by a sense of being exactly where I am supposed to be, that occurs simultaneous to a feeling of moving into the unknown: a sort of sensate, in process, moving into a riddle. I have this experience more often when in a situation that is more like a performance than a rehearsal, which, I guess, going back to what this is, makes me lean it more towards the rehearsing of a practice with an eye towards performance. Please indulge my circuitous opacity here, this shit is by its nature hard to define. I think what I am after here can most accurately be understood if you read around these words and between these lines -- if you blur your eyes.

ecstatic like but also not ecstatic like

So ecstatic to me is again referential to some kind of connection with another energetic force in the universe, that thing my upbringing won't let me name. About six years ago, when I was working with Sara Shelton Mann on a piece she was making with Guillermo Gomez Peña I got obsessed with the phenomena of Tarantism, in which women in villages in postwar Southern Italy would get bitten by a Tarantula, or would pretend to get bitten by a Tarantula, and then enact an ecstatic dance of exorcism in order to be healed from the bite.⁵⁴ These dances are beautiful and fascinating. I made a dance in response/"in the style of" these dances in which I ran, shuddered, gyrated, rolled in a sheet, turned my sheet into a puppet of a baby, flirted grotesquely with the audience, and hurled myself repeatedly into the air. There is one photo of me doing this dance in which I appear to be suspended over the sheet, and another in which I can hardly recognize my demonic smile. There is something in both those Italian dances and the dance I made in response to them that feels related to the state I am attempting to describe but also different. There is a frenzy to the Tarantism dances that I actually don't think is necessarily part of the practice I am endeavoring to describe. Even though frenzy is present

moment once when I was with my maternal grandmother (another Sarah, but different from Sara Shelton Mann and Sara Ahmed, this time a Sarah with an H) as she was passing. After days of sitting with her as she moved between consciousnesses, in which our time together consisted mostly of me sitting next to her holding her hand as she dream-transitioned, wondering at the ability of deeply ingrained patterns of hand tapping and finger rubbing that encompassed the strength of our grandmother/grandchild bond to persist in their perfect form even as all other connections in time/space/reality disintegrated, she at one point raised up in her bed. I found out later that this kind of surge is often an occurrence right before one passes. She opened her eyes, seeing something I couldn't see. What I saw/felt in her face/self was, for lack of a better word, absolute ecstasy, peace and super-aliveness. This aliveness almost seemed to come to her exactly because she was teetering on the edge of the unknown or the "what else."

⁵⁴ See Michaela Schäuble, "Ecstasy, Choreography and Re-Enactment: Aesthetic and Political Dimensions of Filming States of Trance and Spirit Possession in Postwar Southern Italy" *Visual Anthropology* (Volume 32, 2019), 33-35.

as a possibility or potentiality in the “going beyond dancing,” a possibility that is at times moved into, I feel like the state I am after with Sara sits a little bit before the state of frenzy -- a beyond dancing that perches in the moment of almost-frenzy -- “ecstatic but not ecstatic like”.

The dances of Meg Stuart come to mind here, which to me approach this “more than dancing” or “third thing,” but seem to veer more towards destruction.⁵⁵ Destruction is not really what the “third thing” I am talking about feels like it is after. Yes there is a devotion, a submersion into flow, and a play with limits, but ultimately this “thing” I am describing feels to me less about ecstatic destruction and more about life and vitality -- though perhaps life as it becomes more alive in proximity to death.

The section in Ralph Lemon’s piece, *How Do You Stay In the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* which later became *4Walls*, also comes to mind. According to writing by Lemon’s dramaturg Katherine Profeta, Lemon began this work in the aftermath of the loss of his romantic partner, Asako Takami, in what Profeta describes as an attempt to locate the “deskilled, chemical body, without conceptual structure,” in order to “feel the body in unruly life, as of yet still in motion.” Lemon says, “The body, and energy, and what happens on a chemical level, not a conceptual level, is all I want to think about now . . .” The project set out to “break down” the body and move beyond structure, through prompts such as moving faster than one can think and working rigorously but without style. The work traffics in ecstasy, for sure in my opinion, but in the pursuit of ecstasy, seems to move beyond it into a sort of transcendent undoing. Profeta describes it as “an effort to fling the body headlong into pure presence.”⁵⁶ Lemon seems to be moving towards a “what else” that emerges beyond both the ecstasy and the breaking down. Lemon asks, “How do we dance beyond what we know?”⁵⁷

When approaching this state with Sara Shelton Mann, I find myself engaged in a re-iterative attempt to balance on the

55 Sabine Huschka, “Aesthetic Strategies of Trance-Gression: The Politics of Bodily Scenes of Ecstasy.” *Dance Studies Association*, 2019, 7. doi:10.1017/S0149767719000202.

56 *4Walls*, Ralph Lemon, (Troy, NY: <https://empac.rpi.edu/program/curatorial/residencies/2011/4walls>).

57 Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press. 2015), 160.



"There is one photo of the dance in which I appear to be suspended over the sheet, and another in which I can hardly recognize my demonic smile."

Photos by Robbie Sweeny, courtesy of
FRESH Festival 2015. Abby Crain pictured in
the work of Sara Shelton Mann.



edge of structure, or move into structure just before it topples into beyond/breaking down, or flirtation with breaking down in a way that is more interested in the flirtation itself than where that might lead. I might say that this moving towards the “third thing” that I have experienced with Sara is like a dance that tries to ride on the crest of a wave.

*like a dance that is already falling apart*⁵⁸

I think the dancing with Sara Shelton Mann moves into falling apart, even as it attempts to ride the edge, because in the attempt to ride the edge there is always already a falling off, always already losing structure. The catching of structure in these dances happens so close to the edge that slipping out of structure is an inevitability. These dances are almost always dances I can’t quite do, almost always dances that are about to fall apart, or are falling apart and then are recuperated; dances that are both making and unmaking themselves in their unfolding. For example, if I throw my leg back and then let my torso follow it, I aim to do it with just enough force that when I get out of it I can just barely catch it or I fall on my face, which I often do, or it dissolves into something else. These dances are a process akin to building a house of cards -- fragile, completely impossible, and then unexpectedly, surprisingly sturdy.

or the dance that exceeds form, or the dance that may have a form but the form isn’t the thing

I am thinking here a lot about the dance that I probably performed most in my life, a twelve minute section of continuous intricately choreographed movement in a piece by Miguel Gutierrez, *Difficult Bodies*. I toured and performed this dance with Miguel Gutierrez and the Powerful People between 2004 and 2009. It contained the longest, most intricate sequence of choreography that I would ever do either before or after, a sequence that I think I was possibly able to correctly execute in its entirety only once in the five years we performed it. To be honest, I don’t think the choreography itself was the thing that made this section feel extraordinary, it was what that choreography did. What it did was to compose the movement of the section in an unstoppable ride, a torrent of form, which carried us to an ecstatic more-than state, each and everytime time we performed it. Exhilaration comes to mind as a word that evokes both the intense pleasure and the extreme terror of that work. It was work that, like the work with Sara Shelton Mann, feels to me like it flirted dangerously with frenzy but attempted to do so without losing itself completely. I loved it. I don’t think I will ever get over that dance.

58 This phrase comes to me via conversation with Darell Jones, who has danced with Lemon for years, in reference to his experience of working on *4Walls* and his own subsequent research outside of it.

the dance that is unrepeatable but is moment specific

By this I mean that when fully in this state, every moment is distinct, finely wrought, and multiply considered, such that it is extremely specific moment to moment, but that all the decisions and experiences comprising it come together differently and contingently during each iteration of the work, such that it will never actually be repeated. I am talking more specifically here now again about the dances I do when working with Sara Shelton Mann, dances in which the scoring is meticulously capacious but also quite complex. To give an example I will describe a recent dance. This dance happened in the parking lot of the building where Sara Shelton Mann lives, between a row of cars and a cluster of palm trees. It was scored to move in the after image of one dancer who was leaving the space, and the pre-image of the next dancer coming in. I was working with *"the foot stomps into the ground which reverberate through the spine in an undulation, moving between a wave or flow of energy/movement and locating ultra specific points within this wave, working with empty leg/full leg, and following traces of the movement and the pre-movement of the dancer before and the dancer after."* These are all highly developed specific practices that Sara has developed over her forty years of teaching; the form is very specific. I always have to know exactly which of these scores I am engaged in or the whole thing doesn't work, but the timing and order with which I move between the scores is a complete moment to moment assembly of impulses, energies, and flashes of insight. The fact that there are four different strands of dance/thought/bodying⁵⁹ that I am engaged with in this dance is notable. Sara often talks about a strategy whereby once one gets four things going in one's awareness, one is able to tap into another sort of conscious state, into intuition.

the dance that has form but not shapes

This means that in this dance the body can go into a very clear position, but the intention of going into that position is not to make that specific shape, but to move the energy or the field in a particular way, or to point to or assemble around a specific point in space. There is a form through space/time that is created, but it is not based on making say, a square, or a circle, or putting one leg in the air, as much as it is on the process of moving towards what is being made.

Interim

⁵⁹ Again the four against the three emerges.

(from a writing practice with Sara Shelton Mann called “interim space”)

Behind the exit sign

Between the exit sign and the abyss

The abyss as intuition, as provocation, as divergence, as spellbound, as temptress

Temptressing:

watch until beholding

Chapter One:

I arrive

I excruciate

Factor this outwards

Sing.

Chapter Two:

the Beckoning

You turn it up. I am smitten.

In response I ankle my tether. In response I piston my bulwark; I finger my fasten;

I shingle.

Clawing tubercle I append myself to anchors of living. Trading foothold for wrist cuff for ankle for dendrite for buoy for satellite

for blueprint for yolk sac for spark

of life.

Fearing addiction to shiny,

I dig into sand.

I dodge into riptide. Unnerved I waver.

The beckon.

In response I open for pant peg. For belt loop for buckle for zipper for snap for velcro for underwire for laceup for the tiny stupid buttons that hold the collar to the shirt.

As if it could go anywhere.

Chapter Three:

the Return

I am looking for home.

Your ill fitting suit.

I hold still, leaning for the grapple, the circle, the clutch, the crevice, the stench, the sting
the timelapse of wanting.

If only the breath they speak about was only ever actually one time a cushion that didn't give way
upon contact.

If only a cloud were sturdy

If only apparitions could calcify

could corral

could close hold and candy coat and adorn.

could finger bell.

Trading darning for unhinge

You freefall

You depart.

To continue not to know.

I don't know if this was at all helpful in terms of visualizing the dances themselves, but maybe that is because in some way, the actual form of the dance doesn't matter so much as the approach to it, the way of being in it, if you will. I guess you could call it a kind of processual choreography. The following quote from Erin Manning seems important here:

An occasion is less an object or a body than a mode of relation expressing itself momentarily as this or that — an edging into object, a swerving into body.⁶⁰

I would consider the "occasion" here to be the choreography or the scoring of the work, and the dancing to be this "edging into object, this swerving into body." I would consider this swerving into body, the glimmer and the velvet of it, to be contingent on a turning away that has led into a turning towards. We arrive again at the circle.

Circularity--a dangerous word. Circularity of Heraclitus, yes: to go in one direction is truly to go in the other.

--Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁶¹

This kind of dancing feels to me very related to falling in love. You have to be all in.

⁶⁰ Erin Manning, *Always More Than One*, 23.

⁶¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 1.

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