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Movement Research: Exploring Liminality of Dance

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Movement Research: Exploring Liminality of Dance

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I cannot possibly count all the wonderful people who have helped contribute to this in such a small space, but to those who have made space to dance in such a time as this- my sincere gratitude. Every single person who sent in a video has an important role in this project becoming what it is, and it would not be the same without all of your beautiful submissions. To everyone at Movement Research thank you for allowing me to play and explore dance in an environment as wonderfully dynamic as New York City with you. A heartfelt thank you to George and Marjorie Chandler, of the Chandler Senior Experience Grant, who helped me achieve my dreams. Amongst the many givers to my project's completion would be my wonderful friends who have bounced ideas for me and kept me sane mentally- Amanda Chin and Rebecca Tibbets. Sincere thank you to Jordan Deiss, my video editor, and Clare Conteh-Morgan, the collaborative artist on all drawings in this project. Also, to my parents for the late nights with the light still shining from the crack under the door, the snacks you brought me, the soft kisses on the head, as well as for bringing me into this world- my eternal love and boundless appreciation. To my two main inspirations and reasons for this project, two people I care for very much in this world, my twin sister and my project advisor Margaret Paek- words cannot quantify all that you have done for me and will continue to do- thank you for the sacrifices you have made, the doors you have opened, the dreams you helped set sail. So much love to you both. Finally thank you, reader- for taking time to explore the connections between life, movement, and the dancer in all of us.

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Illustrations-

Figure 1- “LU Grand Central Station” [page 13]

This is the convergence of three main walkways on campus from an aerial view- coming from Warch campus center past Memorial Hall, coming from the Library past the Art building, and coming from Hiatt and Briggs up to the Wellness Center. All three walkways meet within the space delineated with a square shape- this is where the dance routine would take place.

Figure 2- “Crosswalk Duet” [Page 15]

This is the crosswalk from an aerial view- this crosswalk is the one crossing College Avenue from the far end of campus by Brokaw Hall, and crossing over to the other side of the street by the Music-Drama center. The entire crosswalk as well as the sidewalk on either side constitutes the space in which the dance routine would take place.

Figure 3- “Railroad Crossing Lookout from Esch-Hurvis” [Page 18]

Pictured here is a specific vantage point for audience members to frame the dance they would be watching from some distance. The audience members are situated within the Esch-Hurvis room in the Warch Campus Center, and they are looking out of the floor to ceiling windows on the south side of the room. From this framed viewpoint the railroad track to the left is seen in the Fox River below, as well as the bridge for crossing traffic to the lower right. Lined up along the far- left sidewalk of the traffic bridge is where the dance would take place. From the cement bridge and guardrail, viewers would be able to see the top half of dancers from this distance, and car traffic would be behind them.

All artwork done digitally by Clare Conteh-Morgan. May 2020.

Project Statement-

In the sphere of fine arts, dance is often measured against canonized European agents, but this project endeavors to gain greater awareness for this field beyond traditional valuation. Moreover, this project aims to crack the portrayal of the “dance world” to show dance as permeating our everyday space, and not something we can quantify as different or separate. In a capitalist society where bodies are constantly bombarded with aesthetic, political, and cultural values, dance can reflect or subvert those projections. How can we value dance in new ways that resist corporal commodification? Moreover, can the promotion of dance beyond an association with only spectacle and pleasure lead to more accessible ways to perform and enjoy dance? By including observers within the dance itself, how can we improve our working definitions of what it means to dance, to be a dancer, and to view dance? This project explores these questions through the practice of dance creation as research, and the approach to dance as inherently liminal- dance in the quotidian, dance as formation of identity through expression, and dance as accessible to all.

Inspiration and Becoming in Dance

As a little girl I was put into ballet classes, and I found out pretty early on just how hierarchically defined bodies are in the world of canonized dance- my dance teacher rejected me from the class for being the improper body type for classical ballet. The socially accepted classical ballerina must conform to a certain height, weight, and bone structure, otherwise her value to contribute in that field is limited. This event of exclusivity, of feeling shut out of a mode of self-expression my body was not deemed suitable for, influenced my further relationship with dance in the formation of my identity and how I expressed myself. I felt like dance was only for specific people who had certain body types, and to become a dancer was an exclusive and elitist experience. I was deemed unfit to participate in that world, and for a long time I strongly avoided it because I felt embarrassed for trying to fit in where I could never belong. My body was not a medium to express my emotions or my thoughts, instead it felt foreign and alien to me. But many years later, through my introduction to contact improvisation techniques with Professor Paek, I remembered the joy of movement expression, and I did not feel like I was trying to fit myself into an unforgiving space. This post-modern dance form with a pedagogical style based in

acceptance of students at any level of comfortability in their bodies allowed me to blossom into embodied practice of increased self-awareness, and self-acceptance, in dance. I felt re-defined, and like I had gained a whole new side to my own identity that flourished within embodied mindfulness of my body moving in space. I wanted to share this experience and show how anyone can attain such renewal of self-definition, no matter their past experiences with dance.

To begin to explore how to express dance as essentially liminal, I had to break away from canonized classical and modern Western European dance techniques to see dance outside of values that limited and confined it to strict body types.

I applied for the Chandler senior experience grant and went with Professor Paek to New York City to participate and learn from the Fall Festival dance event held by Movement Research¹. Contact Improvisation was one of my main forms of research while in New York City because of its embedded inclusive philosophy and how it subverts expectations of strict choreography and sequence with randomness and play in execution.

Sally Banes gives a clear definition of the meaning behind post-modern dance styles such as contact improvisation, that are the focal point of choosing this specific medium to work with in this project.

“Whether prevailing structure in a mathematical system for using space, time, or the body; or arbitrary assemblage; or fragmentation, juxtaposition, the deliberate avoidance of structure by improvisation, there is always the possibility in post-modern dance, that the underlying form will be bared” (Banes, 16)².

Here Banes states the importance of seeming randomness, or arbitrary movement, within post-modern dance through which its structure can be made visible to the viewer. Post-modern dance resisted classical and modern dance ideologies, which had strict rules regarding use of the body (Banes, xv). In tandem with my project’s explorations of liminality outside tradition, post-modernism welcomes change and invention to explore more pedestrian movement through politics, audience engagement, and non-Western influence (Banes, xix).

¹ For more information on Movement Research, one of the world’s leading laboratories for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms, please visit their site <https://movementresearch.org/>.

² All quotes taken from *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post- Modern Dance*, pg. 41-42. Banes.

In ballet and other classical or modern dance forms there lies a need to maintain conventional power, and in order to do so the performer must reiterate the convention (Butler, 161).

Therefore, we find a re-actualization of symbolic systems such as what Butler focuses upon in gender expression, in dance performance as well. Social norms are dependent upon their repetition to exist, and hold influence over culture throughout time (Butler, 161). A commodified body in performance is labelled with the corporal and aesthetic values of society such as gender expression; whether that means softer and more fluid movement to be seen as feminine, or more sharp and muscular expression to project masculinity. The performance is of itself the display of cultural values to ensure their perpetuation (Schechner,42).

I found no strict gender politics within the many performances I observed in Movement Research's Fall Festival³. In fact, in many points there was a clear inverse of gender roles- I would see a female-presenting dancer lift a male-presenting dancer, showing a movement often solely associated with male dancers from its requirement of muscular endurance and strength. There were many male-presenting dancers who explored softer and more fluid shapes with their bodies, creating soft arcs in their backs and turning out their upper thighs. Even duets between two male dancers or two female dancers were challenging gender roles as there was no clear "leader" in either set who played a more dominant or masculine role over their dance partner.

Within many of the classes I took during the Fall Festival, ableness was explored as another aspect of idealized dance that could be subverted. I participated in a class called "Accessibility in Dance"⁴ in which we learned about ways to decolonize the self. Many of the dancers in this class were movement impaired, either from physical handicaps or mental conditions that left them paralyzed to some degree. The leader of this class encouraged us to find new ways to define ourselves and our bodies as having value in their ability that was not centered in Western corporal definitions of wholeness that compared becoming a dancer to having a healthy and

³ Movement Research's Fall Festival: ComeUnion, New York City, 2019
<https://movementresearch.org/series/festival-fall-comeunion>

⁴ The class has a highly impactful beginning- everyone had to take a single sock and make it respond however they were able to the verbal suggestions shouted out by every member of the ensemble, ex. "run", "fly". The ability of this class to be open to personal interpretation truly opened my eyes to how codified dance structures typically are to able-bodied values.

“normally” functioning body. With help from our instructor⁵, my co-explorers and I attempted to re-imagine our ability to become dancers without the quantifier of able-ness.

During our time in New York Professor Paek and I also went to Barnard University to see a conversation and performance event entitled “Propel”⁶. This experience altered my perception of what it means to perform within the mode of improvisational contact, and how to make the structure of a dance visible. The event consisted of an open dialogue with the audience about setting up the space and determining roles and responsibilities, which allowed inclusionary practice of the viewers. The improvisational score that followed then led into small group discussion about how to create, break, and surpass liminal boundaries in dance. This entire experience was highly influential to my perspective of allowing viewer agency through non-traditional performance methods.

From my experiences in the Fall Festival I was able to push my own preconceived boundaries of what constitutes a dancer corporally, by seeing how people with many kinds of handicaps on their full range of motion were able to dance with purpose and intention. Movement Research, performances like “Propel”, and the Fall Festival taught me how to begin to decolonize my identity as a dancer, by subverting my own ideas of how dance should be expressed from classically constrictive viewpoints.

⁵ Because I did not ask specific permission to mention names of members of the class or of our instructor, I will leave this vague because it is not necessary to convey the point I am making here.

⁶ Barnard University: Uila Marx- “Propel”. 2019. *Queering Consent Culture Through Contact Improvisation: A Study on Collective Care*.

What I Wanted it to Be-

Before coming into contact improvisation, I associated dance with solely the creation of spectacle, or performance. I thought a dance meant having three essential parts of the equation-

1. The dancer
2. The stage
3. The audience/ observer

But while working with members of Movement Research, I realized performance in traditional theatre spaces is not an essential part of what constitutes dance. After returning from New York full of new ideas from all the performances, workshops, interviews, and contact jams, it was time to construct my own culmination of my studies and what I wanted to share. One thing that had interested me significantly both in the Fall Festival and in my personal studies was the influence of environment on creating subversive dance.

While participating in the weeklong event of post-modern dance techniques, Professor Paek had set up interviews⁷ for me with dancers to discuss definitions of dance and dancer as liminal concepts. Many of the dancers I interviewed discussed the varying degrees to which they identified themselves as “dancers”. To some, being a dancer meant being a paid performer who follows choreography, someone whose full-time job is to move and be seen by an audience on a proper stage. They then identified themselves more as “movers”, people who moved through space with intention, but not the same as what they saw as professionals in their field. Other people I interviewed stressed the importance of intention. In their view not all movement is dance, because the movement should hold some purpose or intention in its execution. But they saw their stage as anywhere they imagined purposeful movement into existence, and not being limited at all by needing a specific setting such a stage in order to exist as dance.

With such a liminal concept of dance as being free of a binding environment in which to perform, it also changes the role of the audience from solely an observer in an auditorium or theatre seat. To define dance in the full extent of its capability, beyond the boundary of the stage, the audience must be incorporated into the dance itself. Dance is an expression of the self, a form

⁷ Permission was given by everyone interviewed to have their responses paraphrased in lieu of direct quotes due to the conversational manner of the interviews.

of communication that infers there is someone else to receive the message being embodied. But many dancers I interviewed stressed the importance of inviting various social environments to become a space for dance. A dancer is not limited to their ability to perform, and an audience member is not limited to only observation. My workshops in the Fall Festival involved high levels of participant observation in which I was both watching my mentors and moving my body in immediate response to whatever advice they were giving. And within the performance “Pulse” as an audience member I was asked to participate in numerous ways- from dialogue with the choreographer, to small group discussion of audience members and performers, to actually dancing at the end in a group contact jam.

From this experience of incorporating audience participation, I wanted to invert the traditional idea people would have of a dance performance, and I stressed to Professor Paek that having a dance show in a space like the Stansbury theatre⁸ where people would sit and watch a performance, seemed to contradict what my overall project was trying to convey. In order to include the audience in my performance I had to make them aware of the liminality of space. Dance can be anywhere there is movement with intention, and by bringing awareness to that through my created pieces I hoped to include my audience as liminal participant-observers. Finally, I wanted to give the audience agency through increased awareness, of how they can choose what they want to view and experience in the performance I construct.

*Valuing Dance*⁹, by Susan Foster, explains that in the cycle of commodities and gifts in motion, dance acts as an exchange between the performer and viewer (Foster, 28). Because dance is an ephemeral event, its worth is seen not in permanence but the input of emotional or intellectual effort to a concept or way of life (Foster, 14). Just like Butler, Foster mentions the symbolic encoding within dance that perpetuates classical ideas of aestheticism and pleasure (Foster, 12). Moreover, Foster registers the “cultural capital” of dance in its materiality and act of consumption-

⁸ Stansbury theatre is a full theatrical stage situated on Lawrence campus, complete with auditorium seating. It embodies traditional performance within its very construction of elevated stage, orchestra pit, and separated audience seating.

⁹ All quotes from Foster are taken from *Valuing Dance*. Foster.

“To operate effectively, values such as the beautiful, the classical and the natural elaborate facets or sometimes essences of dancing that are deemed desirable. [L]ike the beautiful, the classical secures a particular constellation of attributes as being based in a very long history, as the pinnacle of aesthetic achievement for a given people and as reflective of their highest ideals...as well as politically to validate particular operations of culture or of the state” (Foster. 143).

To create a liminal environment, I had to explore how the dance placed within that space would be consumed, meaning the experience of subjecthood dancers would embody from the audience perception (Foster, 58). Creating a performance in a space with a traditional stage would ensure consumption of my piece by the audience following canonized formats of classical dance viewing. To make viewers both aware of the liminality of space for performance, as well as to push them to deviate from comparing and constricting my dance pieces within traditional western European standards, I chose to alter the way values in this dance would be approached.

Standing in Space: The Six Viewpoints Theory & Practice by Mary Overlie¹⁰ gave me the format I needed to address subverted expectations and juxtaposition used in the consumption of the pieces I choreographed. Overlie focuses her work in questioning what is present in traditional forms of dance, and exploring beneath and beyond traditional formats (Overlie, viii). She breaks art interrogation down into 3 movements- Classicists, Modernists, and Postmodernists, to see how each formulates interaction with performance, before demonstrating the value in the postmodernist approach to dance.

“The traditional hierarchies of story/emotion in acting and movement/music in dancing are structures dictating the use and value of the rest of the stage’s materials. The Six Viewpoints employs this double-helix structure to require the artist to function as a trained observer, equal partner and free agent in conversation with all materials and discarding traditional creator/originator definition of the artist” (Overlie, xii).

Overlie’s six viewpoints theory, or SSTEMS, creates a reactive dialogue that allows a non-hierarchical perspective of dance (Overlie, 12). To increase audience awareness, therefore exposing liminality within the manner of consumption of the dance, my performance outline

¹⁰ All quotes from Overlie are taken from *Standing in Space*. Overlie.

follows Overlie's Deconstruction Laboratory¹¹ (Overlie, 75). This is an experiment in investigating performance by separating the components of its structure, which utilizes the SSTEMS guide explained below.

S- Space. Many traditional dance forms create an inherited self-involvement that closes off awareness from the space a dancer is in, and focuses solely upon the individual (Overlie, 8). This creates movements lacking any deep relationship to the setting they are in. To deviate from individualism my performances make visible the link between the performer and man-made or natural structures. This expresses liminality of space.

S- Shape. Much like space, a focus between the performer and their environment is key to create fluidity of connection and deviate from hierarchical awareness associated with certain shape expression. Allowing shapes of the bodies themselves in performance to unfold naturally from awareness of presence expresses liminality of shape.

T-Time. Overlie mentions here how (similar to Foster) time is valued in economical terms of efficiency- the quicker something conveys its purpose or essence the higher its value as accessible. For many viewers, pedestrian-paced performances are uncomfortable because of how they bring awareness of time (Overlie, 24). A slower paced choreography can play with the juxtaposition of economical desires to rush, and this increased awareness of time in dance.

E-Emotion. There must be an active self-awareness of the performer, of their presence, to connect with the viewer (Overlie, 32). To play with state of being in any given setting, even unexpected settings for a dance performance, a performer must always invite being seen (Overlie, 34). When a performer invites viewers to become aware of their presence, they are indirectly including them in the performance, thus creating liminality of emotion.

¹¹ For a more detailed explanation of the Deconstruction lab please see page 75 of *Standing in Space*, in which Overlie suggests such techniques as "rolling on the floor to remove assumed artistic ownership or pedestrian command" (Overlie, 75-76).

M-Movement. To create a movement vocabulary free of codified technique, post-modern techniques such as juxtaposition, subverting expectation, and improvisation can remove form constraints (Overlie, 38). Movement that creates awareness in a viewer of their own subverted expectations expresses liminality of movement.

S-Story. The narrative of a story is compiled by the input of information a viewer receives. Within improvisational dance, what is so unique to its narrative structure is that the act of creation is visible in live time to the audience members. As a dance is ongoing it can challenge a viewer's preconceived notions of how to consume dance by attempting to add to or change the constructed narrative. This adaptation results in liminality of story.

Three Performance Outline¹²:

I planned out a series of small dances to be conducted on Lawrence University's campus¹³ over the span of one week, which would both challenge people's conceptions of where dance can live as well as change their expected role as audience members. My goal was to make dances in areas where students walking to and from class, and professors, staff, and faculty travelling across campus would become indirect participants simply by entering the space in which the dance was happening. Although I planned out a series of dances, I will highlight only the three main ones below, as these were the ones set to be performed on campus. These dances would be "pop-up" in nature, meaning they would occur without announcement and therefore possibly many of the people who came across them would be unaware of the performances, even as they would become a part of them. The lack of official advertising about these dances insures that people will not have pre-determined expectations of how to view and react to these pieces, but rather their raw interactions as participant-observers.

¹² This performance Outline is setting-specific to Lawrence University and its surrounding structures within the city of Appleton, Wisconsin. To access a complete view of the campus for better comprehension of constructed dance spaces, please visit <https://www.lawrence.edu/info/directories/maps>. Accessed May 2020.

¹³ Please see endnotes, Page 30 for explanation on the use of Lawrence campus, as well as applicability elsewhere.

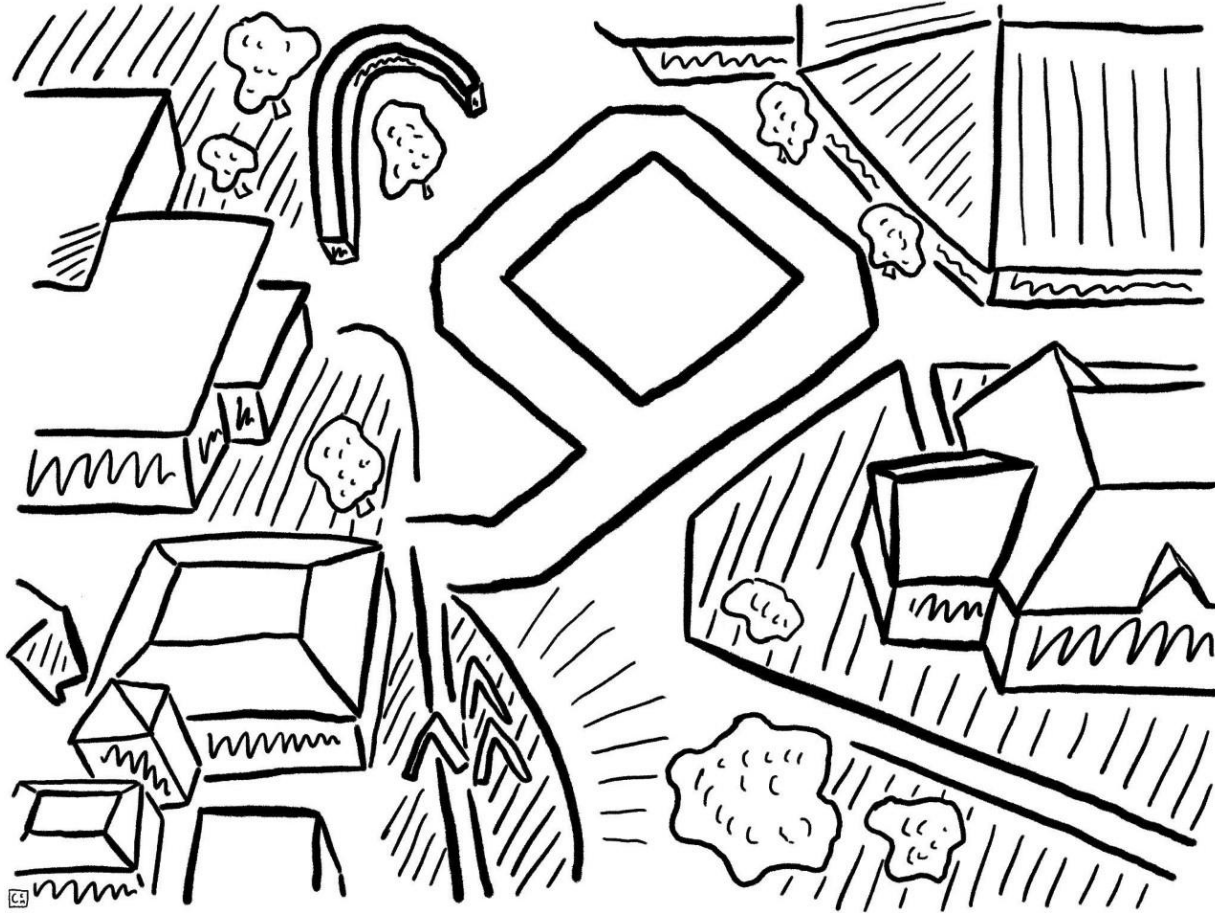


Fig.1- “LU Grand Central Station”¹⁴

Within this drawing you can see the outline of different buildings on campus that converge along the three main walkways of our campus to create as I dubbed it, a kind of grand central station, in which many people going many places converge. The movement vocabulary of many people as they walk through this area involves quick and fast paced movement as well as looking down, especially at their cellphones. Therefore, I thought the dance should be called Grand Central-Station because the movement vocabulary of this space reminds me strongly of the movement of people in the actual train station within New York City¹⁵.

¹⁴ For more in depth description of exact location of this event within the space of Lawrence University, please see page 3 ‘Illustrations’ to understand the focus within the square shape delineated above in Figure one. All artwork done digitally by Clare Conteh-Morgan. May 2020.

¹⁵ For reference, imagine giant crowds of people surrounding you on all sides in all manner of shape and size, speaking all kinds of languages and carrying all sorts of things- the movement is chaotic and scattered, yet homogenous in that you always somehow find yourself at the train stop you needed to get to. People move in and out of the space in symbiotic movements, rushing to get to their next destination.

One thing that was very important to planning this piece was timing- in order to ensure the setting would have a large amount of people walking through the space it had to be at a time when many students are in transit. It was decided after observation that the best time would be between 11:30 and 12:30am for this piece, because that is when a high density of students are going to class or lunch. Setting this time for the piece helped to create an environment in which many people would become unsuspecting participants in the dance by walking through the space.

The choreography for this piece involved playing upon the social choreography of the set environment- people traditionally see this space as a means to get from one place to another, an in-between space, a place of liminality. To play with that need to rush and hurry from point A to Point B, this dance involves three dancers who would be performing the “rush juxtaposition” choreography. Each dancer was going to be very focused and intent on needing to get where they wanted to go- head down and shoulders hunched, with aggressive and sharp movements to move quickly. But all three dancers would be travelling in a circle that encompassed roughly the square area of this convergence of walkways in the “LU Grand Central Station”. The irony is of these dancers showing mimicked movement choreography of fellow students, while also defeating that purpose of needing to rush by, in essence “going nowhere” as they travelled in the circle. Along with the three dancers performing “rush juxtaposition” choreography in a circle, there would be two people walking around the edge of the performance and either filming the performance, or the visual reaction of people as they entered the space.

The entire duration of this piece was designed to be 10 to 15 minutes of the revolving concentric circles. At first, all three dancers would start paced out quite far apart and making very large loops around the perimeter of the area demarcated for the dance. But over the course of the dance all performers would slowly condense their rotations very gradually, until finally in the last three minutes of the performance the dancers would be almost touching in their very close-knit circle.

The goal of this piece was to capture confusion and maybe even awkwardness in the expressions of people as they walked by. By filming the performance there is a clear example of the setting and how the dance is fitting into that space. By adding a second person filming audience members, their physical reactions to being made aware of the liminality of this space can be seen. When an audience member feels uncertain or even uncomfortable while viewing this dance sequence it could be because it challenges their notions of what traditionally constitutes dance. If

the person sees dance as being mainly on a stage, with audience members only playing a stagnant observer role, the dance at “LU Grand Central Station” counters these notions.

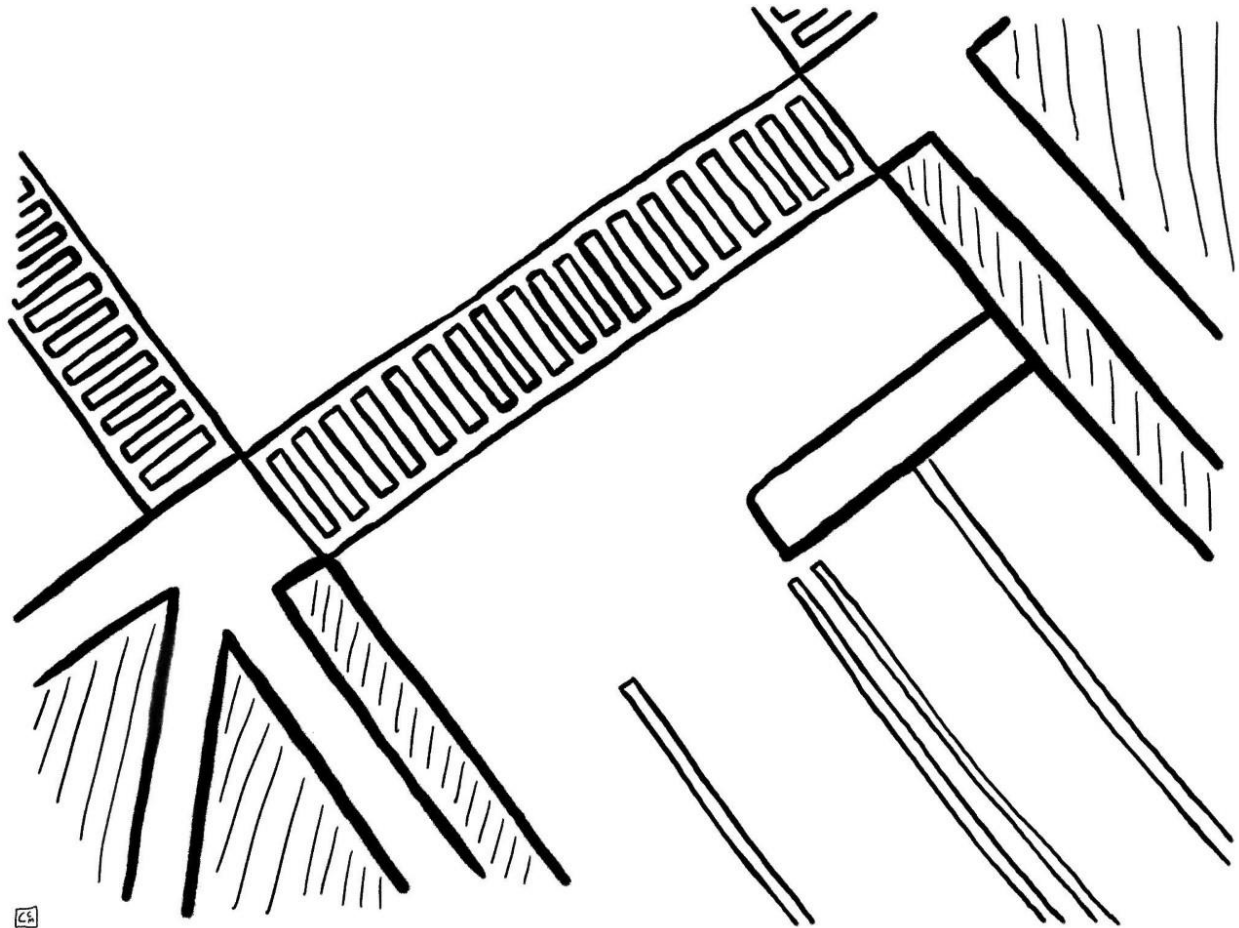


Fig. 2- “Crosswalk Duet”¹⁶

In hopes to also involve the community outside of the Lawrence diaspora within my project, I attempted to construct a dance choreography that involved leaving campus in its performance. The crosswalk from the far end of campus that traverses College Avenue to the other side of the city block involves social choreography that is not just centered in campus. The “Pedestrian etiquette” typically is a universal choreography¹⁷. Its sole purpose is transport from one side to

¹⁶ Please reference page 3, ‘Illustrations’ for the full-scale description of this setting from an aerial view. All artwork done digitally by Clare Conteh-Morgan. May 2020.

¹⁷ Here I do not mean to say all people cross the street the same way, but rather that using crosswalks for reaching one’s destination is a global occurrence.

another, and any deviation from that rule seems to negate the purpose, and the validity, of this movement. Therefore, it was obvious that the dance I would be constructing would involve some juxtaposition with the central idea of the purpose of a crosswalk.

As Overlie mentions in the Six Viewpoints, pedestrian performances have a unique way to subvert expectation in their use of time (Overlie, 26). This crosswalk performance would involve three repetitions of a 15 second choreography. 15 seconds was chosen because it is both the time allotted to pedestrians crossing on this space, as well as because this crosswalk meter comes with a timer that counts down the seconds, thus allowing the dancers the ability to visually self-time their movements. From such a short amount of time to create this dance, the focus in the 'tiny moment' became a focal point of this piece. Instead of a longer or more dramatic performance, this dance desires its viewer to appreciate its response to the environment by allowing only a singular short phrase of dance.

Pedestrian choreography may involve fast and jerky ambulatory movement with no pause or interruption, especially because of the overarching association of crossing a road with the need to rush for safety. The choreography for this piece involved a duet of two dancers, as well as a musical element. The two dancers would start on either side of the crosswalk, and they would enter the crosswalk at a normal walking pace until they met in the middle. Then the dancer who came from the left side would kneel down for their dance partner to lean on their shoulder while extending their left leg back and up behind them for a brief moment. Then the pair would return to standing, turning around each other as they did so, until the partner who came from the left was facing back the way they came, and vice versa. Then each dancer would return to the sidewalk of the side they had entered the crosswalk at a normal walking pace.

This performance is brief- a short moment in time that any people who are distracted while waiting for the light to change in their vehicles will miss entirely. But the purpose of the dance itself is not to be showy or draw excessive attention. The overarching goal of this experiment was to hopefully have maybe two or three people waiting in their cars, as well as some pedestrians, notice this small moment.

Along with the dance, which would be repeated two more times, each for the 15 second duration and without any change in the routine, there is a music element. To the far-right side of the crosswalk at the end of the sidewalk a musician would be playing a simple melody on violin

throughout the entire 15 second periods. This would both allow the dancers to have some kind of rhythm and style to respond to melodically outside of the ambient noise of motor-vehicles, as well as give another aspect of the dance to appreciate. It was decided to add an element of music to this piece that could be mobile and easily started given the short amount of time of the entire performance.

This dance challenges the idea of where dance can take place, by creating intentional movement within a space that only allows strict social choreography – the crosswalk. It also invites the viewer to appreciate dance as something that can be momentary and fleeting- a mere fifteen second choreography that is simple in execution.

With the two dancers and the violinist, there would be a fourth person capturing the entire event from the sidewalk on the far-left side of the crosswalk. This person would be filming both the entire sequence of choreography as well as the audio of the violin being played in real time. A fifth person would be filming audience reaction-if there are any pedestrians nearby they may ask permission to have filmed their reactions as they enter the space of the performance, especially if they decide to move across the crosswalk at the same time as the performance is happening.

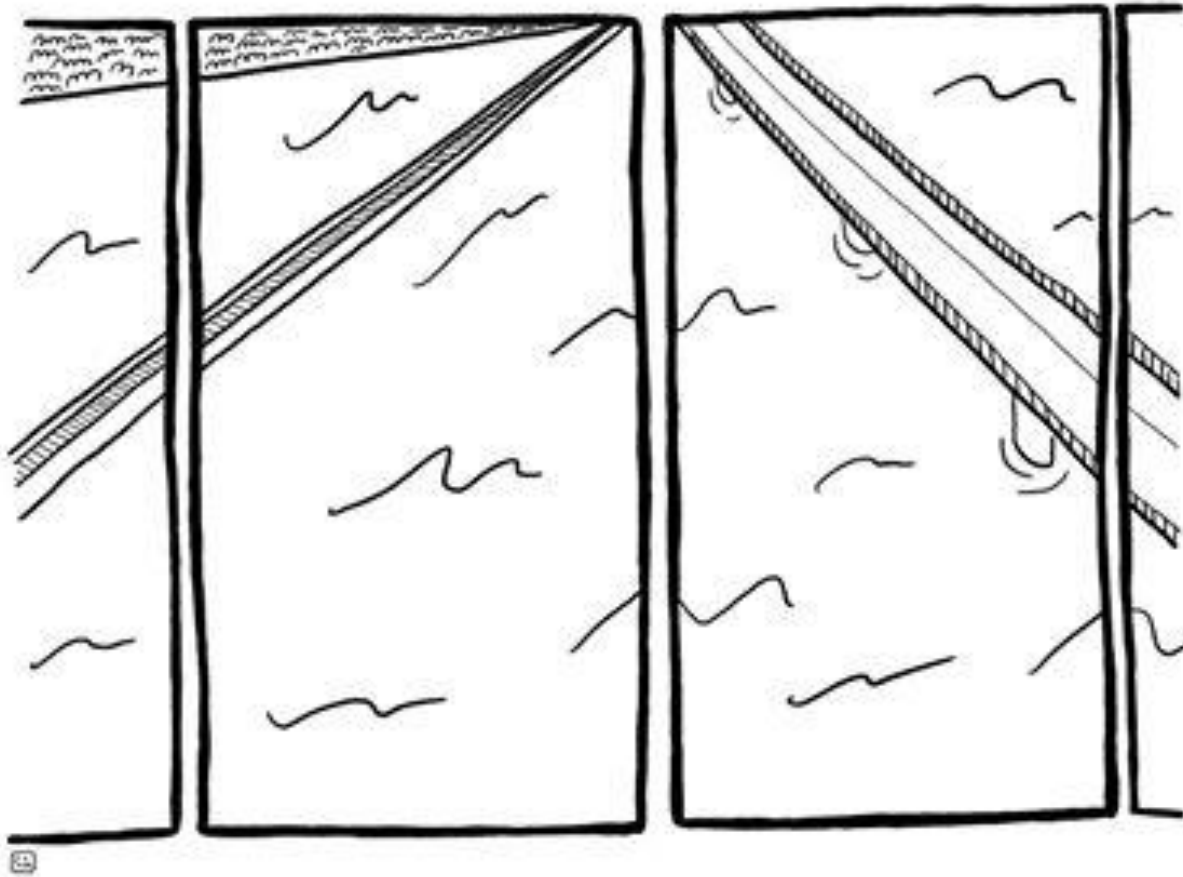


Fig. 3 “Railroad Crossing Lookout from Esch-Hurvis”¹⁸

This third piece involves less direct audience interaction in the sense that unlike the other two pieces, people will not become unaware members of the dance by entering the dance space. The subversion within this piece lies in the use of framing of the dance itself.

People would be invited to enter Esch-Hurvis through the use of advertisement of a dance show happening in that space. Esch-Hurvis is a very large empty room with hardwood floors and natural lighting that would make it seem highly likely that people would think it was a proper place to see a dance performance. But upon entering the space any audience member would find it to be empty, other than a guide who would be both filming the dance from Esch-Hurvis as well

¹⁸ Because this dance involves two separate settings- one in which the audience may observe, while the actual framed dance itself is within a different environment, it is recommended to go to page 3, ‘Illustrations’ to aide in fully comprehending this piece’s framework. All artwork done digitally by Clare Conteh-Morgan. May 2020.

as helping audience members find the dance. The guide would suggest to audience members to look out the floor to ceiling windows on the right side of the room.

When they look out they will see the railroad crossing to the left, the river below, and the crossing bridge to the right that is full of the traffic of moving motor-vehicles. On this bridge there would be three dancers wearing bright colors to help with visibility against the busy background of the cars behind them. These dancers would all be situated on the sidewalk on the farthest left side of the bridge, closest to the viewers.

The choreography for this piece is fairly simple- the complexity lies not within the dancer's movements themselves but rather the notion that they are working together in space, and the impression created for the audience contained in Esch-Hurvis. To have relative stillness within such a high movement environment and creating cohesion through costuming is both shocking and eye catching because of how it plays with audience expectations. Dancers would adjust themselves slightly as needed to maintain comfort, but their choreography would play with stillness as a concept of dance.

There will be a fifth person already on the traffic bridge who will film the entire piece from a distance of 3 feet further back on the sidewalk from the dancers. The dancers will enter the dance space by walking single file down onto the bridge into the view of the observers in Esch-Hurvis. Once the dancer first in line has arrived at a specific spot marked out, they all will stop walking and stand still, with their left profile in the frame of the viewer. At this point the videographer will start a timer for 3 minutes, and let the dancers know by signal their time has started. The dancers will then start to slowly turn towards the viewers at their own varying speeds, until at the end of the three minutes they are fully facing their audience. The videographer will then signal the end of the three minutes and start a new timer for 2 minutes. During this two-minute session all dancers will stand in silence, until the videographer signals the end of the sequence. Then the videographer will start a new sequence for one minute by signal. The person last in line will raise both arms above their head from their sides, and then slowly bring them down in front of their face, as their arms start to fall the person second in line will start to raise their arms, and this will continue as a cannon with the final dancer raising their hands when the second dancer's hands start to fall. After this sequence is over all three dancers will pivot to face back the way they

came, so that their profiles are again facing the viewers. Finally, all three dancers will leave the space, following the dancer who was third in line initially in single file formation.

The purpose of this dance is to bring awareness to the space and framing more than the intricacy of the choreography.¹⁹ Audience members would come into a socially acceptable dance space, only to have their preconceived notions challenged by the dance being outside of the space entirely. The social choreography of an audience member typically involves them entering a shared space in which a dancer is performing- this piece asks them to create a connection with the dancer through a new format of distance. Because of the unusual framing, the audience might end up noticing other movements - like trees swaying, birds flocking, or cars going in certain directions as part of the dance. Another way to give more agency to the audience is to let them search for the dance, therefore (consciously or not) deciding what is dance in this environment. Not only does this challenge audience member's ideas of which spaces are most suitable for dance, it also gives the viewer a new frame, through both the windowpane and distance, to add to their view of this piece.

Overall this piece is not just the three dancers in stillness- it is the trees obstructing view and the distracting glare of light reflected off car windshields and the sheer amount of color, sound, and movement around them. This piece forces the viewer to take in the environment surrounding the dancer and see the ability of dance to be redefined outside of a stage. Overlie mentions inherited dance self-involvement, which closes a dancer off from their environment, thus limiting audience awareness as well. By encouraging the audience member to notice the framing, as well as the influence of setting on the overall performance, they can be inspired to explore beyond traditional individualism in dance. If a dancer is aware and connected to their environment through embodied mindfulness, the audience can experience liminal connection to space in performance as well.

¹⁹ Also, because it is directly next to a busy road and I did not want to make it too distracting for any drivers passing by and create accidents.

The goal of doing these dances in a “pop-up” style around campus meant that they would seem unplanned and unexpected to any viewers. Although the third dance would seem an outlier in that audience members would expect to see dance, it is not in the way they anticipated. I wanted viewer reaction to be genuine in the moment, so having no advertisement and asking all musicians, dancers, and videographers not to share this information would guarantee the feeling of surprise. All of the places picked for dance pieces were chosen for their liminality expression of the juxtaposition of social choreography of movement on or around campus with the ability of dance to exist in that space. Also all of these spaces act as bridges between locations, which is a physical embodiment of liminality.

Dance in Virtual Space-

Since the move to distance learning, this project has necessarily been revised and constructed to a format more appropriate to this circumstance. As a cumulative effort that no longer utilizes a series of on-campus dance pieces, I have explored some of the same concepts and research through a different arrangement. Below is the revised project description made in awareness of the current pandemic within our country²⁰.

THE HAND DANCE

There are actually many ways to explore the liminality of movement within the confinements of social distancing- virtual expression and using the connections we share through technology, is one of them. The question of medium was one I had to contend with heavily- dance as an act of exchange as Foster mentions happens differently when it is virtual. Foster claims dance can happen in any environment, because part of its ability to bring connection is through adaptability (Foster, 24). But a virtual medium had to ensure the pivotal part of dance, that it creates a sense of commonality.

²⁰ Please see endnotes for further explanation, Page 30.

“Each art creates a symbolic version of human feeling, a primary illusion, [which] transforms the daily stuff of experience into an abstracted version of that experience, enabling one to feel and reflect on the matter of life itself” (Foster,40).

To ensure all participants, both dancers and viewers, experienced this kind of illusion in which they could be inspired to self-reflect, I decided to explore dancer connection through videography.

“Videography re-inscribes dancing in another medium that, although not a mere reflection of performance, can, by its assimilation of the active looking that editing shots allows, introduce an awareness of how history is written” (Martin, 35).

Visual art’s primary illusion is virtual space, and within it dance can utilize the role of gesture in daily life, “quotidian gestures as signs or symbols of all manner of thoughts and desires, intentions, and expectations” (Foster, 41). From this exploration of gesture, transferred through the medium of video, a sense of shared experience could be achieved.

“Not all daily movement qualifies as gesture because many habitual ways of moving lack the vitality of intentional movement. Gesture is intentional and controlled so it can function as a language system through which extensive communication can occur” (Foster,41).

Once gesture is explored within the space of daily movement, it becomes a symbolic form that can be incorporated into dance becoming virtual gesture; “dancing as a transformation of quotidian sensations of international movement into a different realm of experience and communication” (Foster, 41-42). But what kind of gesture could be easily accessible to people internationally to bring awareness of the embodied experience of liminality in dance?

Maura Keefe wrote a splendid example of how dance is a part of everyday life that inspired my work.²¹ She wrote out the play by play of a baseball game, but described the field as a stage, the players as dancers, and viewed all of their movements as solos, duets, and ensemble work. She claimed a dance structure such as this, rooted in the subversion of expectation, can help to show how citizens of the United States are already trained to receive movement culture (Keefe, 235-236). From this emphasis in physical culture reception across mediums, I knew I wanted to explore a social choreography people already knew by creating awareness of its liminality to be experienced as dance through gesture.

²¹ *Structured Improvisation as National Pastime*. Maura Keefe. Page 234-236.

A type of gesture I found to be easily accessible to people internationally that brings awareness of the embodied experience of liminality in dance is hand washing. There is intention as well as strong emotion within the movement expression of hand washing, specifically. Handwashing,²² has become a standardized staple of personal hygiene. Typically, it is approached with the intention of safety- removing anything dangerous from one's self in terms of microscopic bacteria to ensure one may proceed with further actions with ease of mind against infection.

I wanted to make a gesture of intentional movement in hand washing that does not negate the purpose of this movement for sanitation or try to cover any association it may have with self-protection or even fear. Instead of trying to cover these approaches to hand washing, I desired to add to them, by allowing this gesture to become multifaceted emotional embodiment. This means the action of hand washing as a gesture can hold more than one emotion- humans can use it as a means of self-protection and also explore play in movement.

I wanted to alter the experience of handwashing by opening a possibility to participants to shift their perspective in approaching this gesture. By giving them the prompt²³ to have fun and play with incorporating dance into this common-day movement, I gave participants a way to explore altered intention. And from altering their approach to handwashing, many participants, and hopefully viewers, can shift their experience of this movement.

“In today's world of Internet access and social media, enormous numbers of photographs and videos of dances circulate rapidly online to promote awareness and knowledge of dance. Within this digital world, distribution and advertising blur as each is implied in the gesture of clicking on the attribution of “Like” or “Share with a friend” (Foster, 62).

Here Foster shares how the specific medium of videography can influence perception of dance through standardizing, spectacularizing, and establishing desirability- all actions that help to affirm the judgement of the viewer (Foster, 63). I cannot give my audience a specific vision, because every viewer will take away from this performance their own personalized reading. But

²² To go into the origin of this gesture's social choreography is a different topic, but within the medical field its main beginnings grew thanks to figures like Florence Nightingale, whose clear push for the importance of hand hygiene was used as the beginning of this gesture's spread to United States embodied movement culture in the early 20th century.

²³ Please see endnotes, Page 30 for further explanation of the details of advertising my project idea to gain participants.

hopefully I can share a mutual experience, a sense of commonality in altered intention to approaching handwashing.

This Hand Dance aims to decolonize the space for the viewer, by allowing the medium of videography to not incorporate traditional hierarchical values of dance in aesthetic terms. The idea of traditional performance as essential to dance is challenged here, because many people may not see a bathroom sink as a proper stage for dance. Much like the three proposed dances I had planned, this Hand Dance still allows for exploration of space and shape in liminal zones. This dance also hopes to promote dance beyond the association in spectacle through its focus in the everyday movement as having potential for intentional movement.

Finally, the Hand Dance hopes to break barriers and express liminality by including the audience in the overall experience- by allowing them to subvert their traditional consumption of dance viewers can increase their awareness of the presence of dancers, thus changing their projected values and allowing for their own participation.

This physical video of the Hand Dance is only one documentation of the project, it attempts to capture the many moments in which the project was truly realized. The actual project, the dance, was performed by the contributors as they made their own videos. The act of so many people across so many countries, states, cultures- people that may not usually consider themselves dancers, dancing their hand washing-This was the project. The invitation I shared with these participants allowed them to bring dance into their daily lives.

Although the Hand Dance aims to approach many of the concepts explored in the dances constructed for a campus performance, it is a different medium, and therefore has a different approach. Rather than in person response this dance involves the cyber connections created through technological sharing and videography. Spectacle, dance in the quotidian, and including the audience are all themes in this work, but they are embodied in new ways. An audience member participates in a video online in a different way than they may embody connection to a piece like “Grand Central Station”.

But perhaps the medium of video is not as limiting in comparison with the dances I had originally planned- maybe this is an even more direct way of creating audience/participants.

Instead of people suddenly walking into dance in “LU Grand Central Station”, or watching a dance in a crosswalk, this project gives anyone who had the curiosity and bravery to try the ability to be a dancer for 30 seconds. And through the way their contributions are edited and put together, hopefully it will help them see, even more clearly than the original choreographic ideas, that they can be dancers.²⁴

This new medium limits the Hand Dance in how it can connect to and participate with its viewers in different ways, as the piece still explores the value in reclaiming gesture with altered intention, and it still pushes back against traditional views of dance by expressing liminality of movement expression. This piece does not promote a traditional disconnect between performer and audience member, in which the presence of the viewer is ignored. Instead it focuses upon giving the viewer agency, agency to break the fourth wall of performance style and delve into inclusionary practice.

²⁴ Wonderful quote from Professor Paek after watching the completed video compilation. May 2020.

Conclusion-

What is art for?, by Ellen Dissanayake brought to light exactly what I wanted to explore in my Hand Dance. Dissanayake noticed how Western ideals hold art to be something superfluous, unnecessary, and mainly for pleasure (Dissanayake, 38). From idealized aestheticism Western art, and therefore dance, becomes a luxury, with value in escapism (Dissanayake, 43). If art is pursued for its ability to bring pleasure and distraction, it severs the viewer from the world around them, creating individualistic art value. But Dissanayake argues the real value of art is not escapism, but connection to the world around us, to act as a vehicle for group meaning (Dissanayake, 44). Art based in cultural values must constantly reaffirm itself- but art is an innate behavior to human nature and brings with it a manifestation of belonging (Dissanayake, 48).

Instead of escapist, individualistic dance, I wanted to create something that would connect everyone to each other and the world we live in now. Instead of self-involved dance apart from the viewer and the environment, I wanted to demonstrate how natural it is for humans to express ourselves through dance as an essential and innate part of our desire to connect to each other through embodied expression.

Exploring dance as liminal, outside of the classical or modern sphere, is nothing new and seeing its connection and value in everyday life has and will continue to be explored by countless scholars in the dance field. What I have aimed to do with this project is not institute a new claim of how to theorize dance, but rather how to approach it and bring these concepts into practice within my own sphere of influence.

To destabilize the conventional way to approach dance, this project involves both embodied practice through gesture as well as participation of the viewer, to create a change in approaching the social identity of what constitutes dance. Dance involves an ever-changing relationship between agency and history to see how it is valued in our society in different eras (Martin, 67²⁵). Much like Martin, this project invests in how the audience enables the performance through a shared experience (Martin, 28).

²⁵ All quotes taken from *Critical Moves*. Page. 67. Martin.

“[Q]uotidian and “great” events are disjoined from each other within any given historical moment- in a manner that minimizes those forces of participation that grant all ideas their reception... the most intimate interactions are subject to constraints of global economy or widely circulating formations of pleasure that result from the commingling of the worlds peoples. Concomitantly, the exquisite range of diversity from which we draw our differences refers to each putatively local instance of human expression to its whole societal field” (Martin, 45).

As Martin states, there is too much global diversity in expression of self and portrayal of life to be able to claim that this project meant the same thing to everyone who participated. The use of gesture, the use of handwashing particularly, is a globally embodied movement, but it represents a variety of things to many different cultures.

Throughout the process of creating this project I have been constantly redefining dance and what it means to be a dancer for myself. In this ongoing journey I have shared my perspective of dance and becoming a dancer as liminal concepts, accessible beyond traditional values, to show how I have grown from the origin of my movement background in feeling excluded from the world of dance. My personal story of growth in self-awareness and my identity in dance may not relate to all potential dancers, but my expression of dance as open and available to all who wish to express themselves as present and aware of their connection in their body, in space, and with others- is for everyone.

For people who believe there is a “dance world” that is separate from our everyday life, the institution of modern dance may seem to be a “esoteric art form for the intelligentsia, more remote from the masses than ballet” (Banes, xvi). This project offers a new way to approach dance, one that is not solely accessible to people within the field of dance, but actually created for the people who separate from the identity of dance and dancer. I aimed to bring this perspective to my generation, to anyone who does not consider themselves a dancer, to open their possibilities of how to move in the world.

Though scholars have been researching liminality in dance, -in the general culture of Lawrence University, Appleton, the Midwest, and perhaps even American culture at large, dance is still seen mostly as spectacle and as an elite, inaccessible art form. This project provided me the opportunity to open my sphere of influence to a diverse range of people who got a chance to consider themselves (perhaps for the first time) as dancers. Also, the viewing audience who

didn't participate directly might look at this quotidian action in a slightly different way next time they wash their hands. This project brought my phenomenological research into practice for a wider population, outside of only dance scholars. All the research I did at Lawrence, in the Fall Festival, and through reflection on my own movement background lead to contextualizing the real value of this Hand Dance. This project invited participants to give themselves permission to shift their perception of dance to include gesture, and by doing so it allowed them to become dancers in their own right. In essence, I cannot give you my actual project, because the dances, the moments of all of these dancers, were part of the natural ephemerality of dance itself. Instead this paper and videos act as documentation of the project, attempting to capture some of those moments.

In an article entitled *How Dance Connects People During Coronavirus*, the author writes, “ in this new era of COVID-19, when we are in a period of mourning, grieving the loss of the life we used to know and preparing ourselves for the grief that is still to come, I’m not surprised how dance has been not only my instinctual remedy, but the solution for hundreds of thousands of people around the world, lifting our spirits and connecting us with every single step” (Mallozzi, 2020, Web.) During this time of unprecedented fear across our nation, as well as across the globe, dance can offer a way to heal, a way to share, and a way to connect. In this global moment of shutting down and closing off our bodies in fear, perhaps a new approach to dance that is not exclusive or isolating can help us remember how to become human again²⁶.

²⁶ Please see endnotes, Page 30 for better understanding of the ongoing sentiments surrounding hand washing when this video was created- May 2020.

Video Content-

Submitted with this project are two video clips.

One is the video prompt I made as the creator and initiator of the project for prospective participants to learn the guidelines and be able to contribute.

The second video is the compiled work of the Hand Dance, with videos from every participant edited together.

This video was edited and made possible through the skills of Jordan Deiss. May 2020.

Every participant signed an agreement form to allow their submissions to be shared through this project form and uploaded.

In this video you will find a compilation of over 50 videos from friends, family, and even strangers from places like South Korea all the way to Mexico, and all over the United States- who came together in the spirit of dance to send in videos exploring an increased awareness of intention in their “hand dances”.

Endnotes-

(13)- This project outline was made specific to the campus layout of Lawrence University because of convenience as well as ability to interact with large groups of people more efficiently, but its value is not limited to only readers who understand this campus. The rough guidelines I give in my offered dances could be taken and reconfigured in new spaces. In short, to appreciate the overall work of this project one does not have to know the campus of Lawrence University by physically having been within that space.

(20)- This honors project was written during the time of the Corona Virus pandemic, meaning all plans for on campus performances were cancelled due to campus being shut down completely. The plans and dances that had been outlined above for the three performances were not abandoned or left unexplored, instead they acted as inspiration for a new virtual dance that could come into existence under the stress of these circumstances.

(23)- Through direct communication, as well as sharing on social media sites, I advertised about and asked for contributions to my honors project video compilation. Participants were asked to sign a waiver agreeing to the use of their video, and then asked to submit a video 30 seconds long of them responding to the prompt I gave, which is attached to this project in video format. I left the prompt very open-ended to personal interpretation, which led to a wonderfully diverse number of inspirations within the participants' embodied responses.

(26)- Handwashing at this time was a medicalized health action attributed to self-protection, and it had become a part of a complex social choreography of fear. The need to wash hands in order to prevent some unseen and uncontrollable virus seemed to be one of the few ways people could maintain health in this period of social anxiety. Giving context to the circumstances surrounding this project is important to understanding the value of the gestures it conveys.

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All artwork within this project done digitally by Clare Conteh-Morgan. May 2020.

Figure one. "LU Grand Central Station"

Figure two. "Crosswalk Duet"

Figure Three. "Railroad Crossing Lookout from Esch-Hurvis"

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