

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HERE BE MONSTERS: EMBODIED PRACTICES OF CONNECTION
AND TRANSFORMATION IN CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

Zoe Cushman Walders, Master of Fine Arts, 2026

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Performance Studies

Abstract: Here Be Monsters: Embodied Practices of Connection and
Transformation in Choreographic Process encompasses the 30-minute
dance *this far, all rivers* as well as this paper. This research is a
choreographic investigation that weaves together voice and water studies
to inform movement and improvisational practice. This paper explicates
the artistic process and articulates the methodologies that gird the work,
with the aim of deepening the embodied sensorium, strengthening
connection, and channeling empathy as an active necessity in
choreography and performance. The work of Nina Sun Eidsheim, Bonnie
Bainbridge Cohen, Cecilia Chen, and Susan Foster is foundational to this
research. Integrating theory and practice, this work privileges embodied
experience, collaborative relationships, and the transformative
capabilities of choreographic process and performance.

HERE BE MONSTERS: EMBODIED PRACTICES OF CONNECTION AND
TRANSFORMATION IN CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2026

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Acknowledgements

Thank you, Kendra Portier, chair of my thesis committee, for your brilliance, generosity, and support in all facets of this work, and for recognizing and cultivating both my reverence and irreverence.

Thank you to the rest of my committee: Maura Keefe for your profoundly insightful feedback in the rehearsal and writing space and your steadfast belief in me; Adriane Fang for your deep care and analytical eye; and Sam Crawford for your unending kindness and generosity with your expertise. This project and my work in graduate school would not have been possible without each of you.

I express my heartfelt appreciation to the design team and their teams for all of their work: Kiefer Cure, Yannick Godts, MJ Loyet, and Emil Mendoza.

Thank you to Daniel Miramontes for so generously navigating this work with me in ever-shifting ways and for our collaborations that continue to inspire my artistic research. Thank you to Rebecca Steinberg, not only for your friendship, but for being the perfect thought partner to help me make sense of these vast ideas. And of course, *this far, all rivers* was made in collaboration with performers: Emilia Bruno and Jalen Rose. This piece would not be possible without your thoughtful, incredible artistry and friendship.

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Introduction

Here Be Monsters is a love letter to dance, creative process, and my collaborators. It is also an investigation into the integration of vocalization, water studies, choreography, and performance as a means of attuning to internal activation and sensation, and emphasizing the relational aspects of collaborative choreographic practice. In this work, I intentionally sought choreography and performance challenges that would bring vulnerability to the forefront of the dance and my dancing. Doing so allowed me to re-examine my choreographic and performance practice, expanding how I make work and understand the value system that drives it. Thus, this research began with fundamental questions: Who am I dancing for? Who am I making dances for? While the answers to these questions continuously shift and evolve, at its core, I move and make for the people in the studio: myself and my collaborators. What initially felt like a self-centered enterprise revealed itself to be the vitality of deepened relationships grounded in empathetic connection. I found solace in this, in the belief that the humanity, relationships, and community built in this particular way, embodied and choreographic, is in turn extended to the audience.

In this paper, I articulate the artistic process and performance of *this far, all rivers*. I begin with two key concepts—hyperphysicality and empathy—drawing from dance scholar Susan Foster’s seminal text *Choreographing Empathy* to excavate my relationship to these terms and elucidate their role in my choreography and process. I then examine how vocalization is situated inside of movement practices and can be utilized to deepen embodied exploration. Introduced to water studies through architect Cecilia Chen, I integrate theories of the relationality and substantiality of water to reimagine the possibilities of choreographic practice. To pursue and contextualize these inquiries, I analyze how I use two choreographic tools central to my past and present work: improvisation and gesture.

Throughout this paper, I refer often to my collaborators: Emilia Bruno, Jalen Rose, and Daniel Miramontes. For formality's sake, in the rest of the writing I will refer to each of them by their last name, but here I take a moment to honor to our closeness as colleagues and friends and the intimacy of our collaboration by using their first names. Daniel was a collaborator throughout the process, but did not perform in this version of the work. Jalen and Emilia were collaborators in both process and performance. All three of them were essential to the research, crafting, and performance of *this far, all rivers*.

A quote from Susan Foster discussing Tanya Lukin Linklater's dance *Woman and Water*¹ situates how I view my collaborators in this process. "It is not simply that other bodies, differently trained, might alter the look and impact of the dances, but instead that the dances could not occur without prior investments that these performers have made in learning to dance."² and I argue for *this far, all rivers*, learning *the* dance. Many dancers could step in to learn the movements of this piece, but only Jalen, Emilia, and Daniel were present for the gradual building, scaffolding, and attuning that took place during the collaborative choreography of the work that was the primary research and emphasis. Our attention, touch, communication, and choice-making were all influenced by the process and built the vocabulary of the work. Crafting images of not only ourselves in real time, but imagined selves with fluid interpretations and interactions, learning about and listening deeply to our own and each other's voices, and creating and understanding a language of gestures together gathered us into the place (environmental, emotional, and collective) that *this far, all rivers* inhabits.

¹*Woman and Water* by Tanya Lukin Linklater premiered in 2006 at Visualeyez produced by Latitude 53 Contemporary Visual Culture.

²Susan Leigh Foster. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. London; Routledge, 2011, 216.



But First, an Epilogue: Hyperphysicality

I talk more about employing non-linear time in this research in a later chapter, but for now I will start with an ending that is actually where I began...before I even knew that I started. Prior to the onset of this research, I questioned my use of the term hyperphysicality to understand the dances I make and love. While physically challenging and athletic are accurate facets of how I define hyperphysicality, that definition felt incomplete and like an oversimplification, particularly when thinking about my choreographic goals. The words totality and rigor often come up in tandem and felt connected to my attempt to suss through hyperphysicality, but just added to the list of vague, incomplete definitions. Totality of what? Does rigor just mean I value hard work? There was something subterranean in my use of the word hyperphysicality that I knew was representative of my values as an artist, and throughout this process, I began to slowly unearth what that might be.

In this research, I have been looking for a through line between dance and the two areas of study I wanted to weave in: vocalization and water. Through rehearsing, performing, reading, and writing, I have found the connections to be more like a web than a singular line. This web interlaced ideas to approach choreography and performance with primary consideration for full embodiment, kinesthetic and empathetic listening, and sincerity. It was a web of methodologies for deepening and constantly reimagining embodiment. Finding this web and articulating my craving for this particular kind of embodiment began with questioning my relationship to and definition of hyperphysicality.

Pulling from choreographer Abby Zbikowski and dance scholars Susan Foster and Ariel Nereson, I frame and reframe the way I employ the term hyperphysicality in regards to my choreographic process and product, how I connect it to a particular understanding of empathy, and how these evolving definitions influenced the trajectory of *this far, all rivers*.

Reclaiming to Redefine

Choreographer Abby Zbikowski's body of work is one I consistently return to when considering hyperphysicality. Reviews by *The New York Times*, *The Irish Times*, and *The Guardian* describe Zbikowski's work as "highly physical and sweat-inducing,"³ "endurance-based dances,"⁴ and "a study in the nature of work, effort, motivation and community."⁵ It is clear that in Zbikowski's work, the exploration of and reverence for the body's physical capacity and limits is primary. Sneakers slamming and squeaking, heavy breathing, and guttural gasps are often part of the sound score while dancers move continuously through muscular and explosive movement. Zbikowski questions the way full-bodied, athletic moving has often been put purely in entertainment categories. When talking about her work *Abandoned Playground*,⁶ Zbikowski asks, "Can we almost reclaim hyperphysical dance and say that it can do all these things, and not say that it just has to operate in one way?"⁷ Rather than simply bombastic dances, what are the philosophical, intellectual, narrative, and emotional investigations of hyperphysicality? Zbikowski questions what comes after dancers find and cross thresholds of capacity to continue moving after a perceived apex. When I watch Zbikowski's work, I see dancers consistently finding edges of physical capacity in a way that forces them to be honest and authentic. Their

³ Gia Kourlas, Brian Seibert, and Siobhan Burke. "Best Dance Performances of 2022." *The New York Times*, December 2, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/arts/dance/best-dance-performances.html>.

⁴Michael Seaver. "Hyperphysical: Impressively Tight-Knit Ensemble Takes on Abby Zbikowski's Punishing but Fascinating Dance." *The Irish Times*, September 14, 2024.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/review/2024/09/14/hyperphysical-impressively-tight-knit-ensemble-takes-on-abby-zbikowskis-punishing-but-fascinating-dance/>.

⁵Arifa Akbar, Brian Logan, and Lyndsey Winship. "The Best Theatre, Comedy and Dance of 2024." *The Guardian*, December 17, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2024/dec/17/the-best-theatre-comedy-and-dance-of-2024#dance>.

⁶Abandoned Playground premiered in 2017 at the Abrons Arts Center in New York, NY.

⁷Jacob's Pillow, dir. *Post-Show Talk: Abby Z and the New Utility*. 2019. 15:48.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ked2g9JafGQ>.

falling is always actual falling with their full weight, palms and knees slamming to the floor. The movement is too hard and happens too continuously, and often quickly, to put on unnecessary affect. There is a revealing that happens as the body tires, renews, and pushes through.

My choreography looks and feels very different to Zbikowski's, but I feel connected to the capacity and the experience of the body as the primary impetus of research. The embodied experience is connected and extrapolated to an array of theories and interrelated ideas, but the dance is both catalyst and method. I'm drawn to Zbikowski's commitment and success in "[r]eclaiming the brutal rigor that goes into the practice and performance of hyperphysical dance forms by shifting the mindset of the labor away from product and repositioning the choreographic work as a vehicle for transformation."⁸ In this quote, Zbikowski refers to process, product, and purpose. Her physically demanding dances are made through rigorous and intense practice; the labor is two-fold. But it is not labor only for labor's sake or to place a moral value on hard work, but that this intensity of exertion necessarily changes the body and relationship to the movement and other bodies in the space.

I frame my understanding of hyperphysicality through a continuation of Zbikowski's question, "Can we almost reclaim hyperphysical dance and say that it can do all these things, and not say that it just has to operate in one way?" How do I ask hyperphysicality to operate in my work? My interest in hyperphysicality is partially in the intensity of physical effort, but more so in the capacity of the sensation, attention, and energy of dancing to flood and transform the body, the space, and the performance. While I value and love dancing that is physically challenging, sweaty, and exhausting, hyperphysical to me is as much about intentionally heightening awareness of self, others, and environment. I don't want the apex of thresholds to come only

⁸This is a quote from Abby Zbikowski's artist statement on her website: <http://www.abbyznewutility.org/>.

from physical exhaustion and exertion, but from the totality of an intensely embodied experience—sensorial, relational, and physical. One way in which I ask hyperphysicality to operate inside my work is to create an intensity of individual experience that is responsive to and empowered by relationships to others in the space. I want to call attention to and intentionally revel in shared space. While not exclusive to athletic movement, pairing this level of attention with the heavy breathing, sweating, and exerting together of physically demanding choreography creates an intimacy—a closeness and rapport—that I value deeply in both process and performance.

My definition of hyperphysicality is integrally connected to how intensely the body is in relationship to itself and to the other bodies in the space. Dance obviously and characteristically facilitates a multitude of ways of physically and energetically being together: unison movement, group rhythm, sensing and sharing weight, and on and on.

Empathy: A Sensorial Practice

In order to analyze and situate this relational aspect of my consideration of hyperphysicality, I return to Susan Foster's text and ideas of choreographing empathy. Foster defines *choreographing empathy* as "the construction and cultivation of a specific physicality whose kinesthetic experience guides our perception of and connection to what another is feeling."⁹ One of Foster's main arguments is that this empathetic response is not merely a product of the nature of dance, but intentionally constructed by dancers and choreographers. Dance scholar Ariel Nereson begins her synthesis of empathy by specifying that "[e]mpathy is much contested across the humanities, arts and social sciences, but can briefly be defined as an often other-oriented human capacity with the potential to both reinforce and transgress

⁹Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*.

boundaries.”¹⁰ Empathy is much contested for many reasons: its complexity, its dismissal as over emotionality, how it has been used as rationalization of “exclusion and othering,”¹¹ and its unquantifiability making it at best challenging to study and at worst valueless to some. Foster does the work of tracking the evolution of empathy’s definition. Empathy was “neologized in the 1880s...as a process in which one’s entire physicality comes to inhabit the other.”¹² But in the early 20th century, theories began to include “a strong kinesthetic component in which the observer’s sense of their own physicality plays a central role.”¹³ Rather than inhabiting the physicality of another, empathy became a sensing of someone else inside of one’s own physicality and an emotionality tied to that experience. Nereson, drawing from cognitive neuroscience from the 2010s, states “empathy is not itself an emotion but rather a capacity of responding to other people’s emotional states.”¹⁴

While Foster primarily focuses on the way choreographers cultivate kinesthetic responses and emotional relationships with audiences, I would like to highlight the role of empathetic connection between performers. This role both contributes to the audience’s experience and responses, as well as being its own distinct phenomena. Paying attention to and prioritizing the capacity to feel and to sense—to be embodied—emphasizes and drives forward what dance practices already do by expanding the possibilities of imagining and moving for others as impetus for choreographic discovery. By curiously and continuously rooting around inside of embodiment, we increase our awareness of our own physicalities and proprioception, in turn

¹⁰ Ariel Nereson. “Communities of Gesture: Empathy and Embodiment in Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company’s 100 Migrations.” In *The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance, and Cognitive Science*, 1st ed., edited by Rick Kemp and Bruce McConachie. Routledge, 2019: 136-137. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315169927>.

¹¹ Foster, 11.

¹² Foster, 10-11.

¹³ Foster, 11.

¹⁴ Nereson, 137.

augmenting our capacity for sensing and responding to others. As Nereson discusses, empathy itself does not “involve other-oriented action,”¹⁵ but a sense of group or community increases the likelihood that the sensation will move into empathetic response. Nereson gives the example that in Bill T. Jones’ work, *100 Migrations*¹⁶ “Jones and company create groups whose social relationships are...based in [the] shared task”¹⁷ of creating and learning gestures rather than any social or identity markers. Similarly, in her article “Choreographies of Protest,” Foster discusses how the movement practices of protest participants “instilled the potential to feel connected as a community of bodies partaking in a common effort.”¹⁸ In this process, we began by increasing sensing capacities both within ourselves, of the liminal spaces between us, and of each other. Then, crafting the rehearsal space as a deeply embodied group or community centered around the shared tasks of improvisational scores and choreographic prompts, the purpose of process was to not only increase our own kinesthetic, empathic capacity, but to transform it into action in the shape of the choreography that became a model for a responsive, compassionate way of being inside and outside of the work.

With this lens of hyperphysicality referring both to physical challenges of endurance and athleticism as well as these empathetic sensibilities, in this research I search for ways to emphasize and strengthen individual sensorial capacity and awareness to facilitate more profound connection between dancers as a main source of movement invention rather than an intention of choreography derived by other means. In the following chapters, I elucidate how

¹⁵Nereson, 137.

¹⁶*100 Migrations*, choreographed by Bill T. Jones premiered in November 2008 at The University of Virginia.

¹⁷Nereson, 137.

¹⁸Susan Leigh Foster. “Choreographies of Protest.” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 410.

utilizing vocalization and ideas of water in the rehearsal process are methodologies for crafting this hyperphysicality and therefore increasing empathetic capacity. Additionally, while reflecting on and writing about my use of improvisation inside of process and performance, I realized that this hyperphysicality shows up in the agentic and responsive choice-making in these practices as well.

Why an epilogue? It is only after making *this far, all rivers*, and in threading all the research together to write *Here Be Monsters* that I have understood that hyperphysicality was in fact at the heart of the process and performance of this work. Connecting empathy as an important facet of my definition of hyperphysicality was my last step in this process. But in order to accurately frame the ways I integrate voice, water, improvisation, and gesture, my final conclusion needs to be my first statement.

Interlude: a poetic tributary

Water by Philip Larkin¹⁹

*If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.*

*Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;*

*My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,
And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.*

Fording: *to cross at a shallow place.*

Fording is a word in motion, a brave word. Brave, even over shallow water, to cross a live boundary and take up space somewhere new. Fording our way through the work, crossing spaces –both literally on stage and into explorations of intimacy and vulnerability – together. In the original imagining of the work, a pool of water along one edge of the stage divided the space, both a shoreline and a horizon. It was a space to be forded. While throughout the design process this literal water space disappeared, one of the functions of the beginning of the work was to continue to reestablish an imagined shoreline that we built, washed away, remade, and eventually crossed together.

Sousing: *Soaked or drenched with liquid.*

¹⁹Philip Larkin. "Water." In *The Whitsun Weddings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.

I love the word “**sousing**,” the word itself and its meaning. In sousing, there is an idea of wet all the way through, a wet to be wrung, a wet to fill cavernous spaces. There is a satisfying overwhelm, saturation, and full-bodied weight of water to be felt in the volume sousing implies. It reminds me of how much information and sensation the body can hold and represents the density of those that I crave in movement.

“furious devout drench.”: a way of redefining and transforming hyperphysicality

As I mention in the previous chapter, my use of hyperphysicality is not only in the physical endurance or technical challenge realm but in the sensorium and attention/attunement. The prefix *hyper* meaning over, above, and beyond, I crave physicality that is beyond, not only boundaries of capacity, but of imagination, experience, and being in relationship to my body and others. Drenched, in sweat and in the physical and emotional sensations of the body performing the movement both as an individual and a responsive collective. “Furious devout drench” offers a satisfying substitute for the hyperphysicality I am craving in this project that required me to not only redefine hyperphysicality for this work, but to reorientate to it as a source of care and empathy rather than its value lying only in its difficulty.

At the onset of devising *this far, all rivers*, I knew I wanted to focus on crafting the rehearsal process rather than the final product. I envisioned rehearsals being exploratory, rigorous, and intimate. I imagined this intimacy as a closeness developed through vulnerability and care. A kind of transformative and connective experience, created through the ritual of embodied practice and the choreography itself. These pre-process aims—how I defined and set about enacting them—would continue to shift throughout the rehearsal process illuminating a kind of responsiveness, weightedness, and curiosity I equated to water. While directly feeding and

flowing from my research into water studies, I introduce these terms fording, sousing, and furious devout drench here as I thread them through the rest of the work, articulating their role across chapters.

Chapter Two: The Voice as Courageous Physical Practice

*Singing and listening are not limited to the vocal cords or to the organ we call the ear. Rather we use the entire body to sing, and the entire body carries out the function we normally locate in the ear. We are all voice, all ears.*²⁰

-Nina Sun Eidsheim

Singing is a deeply physical practice. It requires thoughtfully and actively connecting to the breath, diaphragm, internal structures of the chest, throat, and face, and even the relationship to the lower body, gravity, and the ground. Singing is a catalyst for sensation and physical engagement, which places dancers in a uniquely skilled position to explore and utilize singing in new ways. I find the most joy in singing when I attune to the mechanisms of my body and experience producing sound as a physical and bodily sensation and challenge, rather than thinking solely about the quality of sound. My primary argument in this section is that singing is an “internal corporeal choreography,”²¹ and housed firmly within the scope of dance. It is a new way for me to consider how to move in more expansive and full-bodied ways initiating from deep, internal places. Combining my background in singing, my previous research on voice in contemporary modern dance, and drawing on the expertise of musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim and performance artist and researcher Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, I explore the voice’s physicality and its potential role in the choreographic process for movement invention and deeper embodiment and connection.

In previous research regarding the voice, I studied the work of three contemporary modern choreographers: Meredith Monk, Faye Driscoll, and Tatyana Tenenbaum, and the way they integrate singing into their choreography. I selected these choreographers because their work consistently includes vocalizing in a variety of ways. Researching and reflecting on the

²⁰Nina Sun Eidsheim. *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice*, 152. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

²¹Eidsheim, 111.

different ways these choreographers incorporate singing not only reflected to me a multitude of ways that singing and dancing already exist together and support the other, but how other artists were specifically thinking about the application of voice in dance. I weave these choreographers throughout this chapter as I learn, in the writing and the dancing, how their works intersect with mine. However, I begin with a thread at the center of connecting singing and dancing, breath.

Breath: An Understanding and a Summoning

My past choreographic work has been described as diaphragmatic, and part of my interest in vocalization is a deeper understanding of the way I relate to the diaphragm inside of movement. I consider diaphragmatic as a term related to my choreography not only as referring to movement quality, but emotionality. Bainbridge Cohen states “[b]reathing is organized in patterns. These patterns...evoke emotional responses.”²² The emotionality of the work I make is influenced by the focus on diaphragmatic breathing and gestures, distinct from any specific emotional narrative.

Based on Bainbridge Cohen’s premise that “[o]ur ability to embody the structural and physiological processes underlying breathing and vocal production gives us another important way to establish our relationship to ourselves and to our environment,”²³ I use singing to draw attention and awareness to breath and to experiment with ways of being in rehearsal and performance. The breath pattern of singing is different from what I am used to from dance. Rather than the usual in through the nose out through the mouth of physical activity, in singing, inhaling with the mouth open is the most efficient way to breathe in as much air as is needed in shorter amounts of time. Additionally, breath in should be silent, any gasping or sound of air

²²Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. *Sensing, Feeling, and Action, The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*, 6. 3rd ed. Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 2012.

²³Bainbridge Cohen, 6.

means there is constriction, tension, or physical contact in the vocal folds that could either cause strain or restrict full airflow. While thinking about the body as a fully three-dimensional container holds true for both singing and dancing, oftentimes singer's breaths are focused on low belly and low back breathing rather than breathing up into the chest and shoulders or imagistic air flow elsewhere in the body. Using breath to access the upper quadrant of the torso, particularly the back space has been both a functional and expressive exercise in my dance training. Toggling between these two ideas of breath not only situates me inside of my body differently, but the internal experience of taking in and releasing air is sensorially and rhythmically different and a compelling consideration to consciously navigate choreographically. Bringing singing into the dance studio allowed me to more completely understand my movement's relationship to the diaphragm and consider more intricately how to use breath, not only as supportive of movement function but also in generating choreography, tone, and relationship.

One way this consideration manifested in this research was understanding the emotionality and our relationship to each other through breath. How are we breathing in each section, individually and as a group? When Bruno starts their solo, Rose and I are intertwined trying to catch our breath. Our overlapping heavy breathing combined with the beginning of Bruno moving alone made this one of the most tender and emotional parts of the work to me. In choreographer Tatyana Tenenbaum's work singing is the vehicle for sharing personal and community histories. "A song is a narrative you hold in your body and summon, with breath, into the flesh and bone of your being and out into waves that move into other flesh and bone."²⁴

²⁴Gey Pin Ang, Massimiliano Balduzzi, Ditte Berkeley, Miramontes Alexander Jones, M. Lamar, Samita Sinha, Tatyana Tenenbaum & Ben Spatz (2019) What Is a Song? *Performance Research*, 24:1, 92, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2019.1601945.

The body moving, by breathing, is a mechanism for summoning the song. Breath, flesh, and bone make up the song as much as the “formal’ elements – rhythm, time, pitch, melody, harmony and even timbre.”²⁵ All of these elements, bodily and formal, work to “excavate spaces of memory, power and transformation.”²⁶ I love this idea of breath being the summoner, at the center of the multitude ways of being that singing evokes. While my work is rarely explicitly narrative, I think Tenenbaum’s idea can be applied to a wider definition of the word. It summons a totality of the singer and the multiplicity of the voices in our memory, our ancestry, and our relationships that live in the body. Singing and breathing with others becomes even more poignant when one considers how much of the self can be summoned by the breath through song. I was searching for a specific kind of emotionality in this work, one that was deeply emotional, but not at all linearly narrative. Accessing breath through a combination of singing and dancing in rehearsals and performance, summoned more of ourselves into the work.

Voice as Play

I’ll begin with Meredith Monk, as my understanding of her work with vocalization helped me to clarify and frame my own. In addition to her well-known skill and contribution to the world of modern dance choreography, for Monk, exploration of the voice is paramount. Earlier in her career Monk discusses having only “a little bit of vocal work”²⁷ in her choreography before realizing that she “could work with [her] voice the same way [she] did with her body.”²⁸ While her subsequent works still include physical movement and attention to the patterns of bodies on stage, the primary source of movement and its investigation is the voice. In

²⁵Gey Pin Ang, et al, 92.

²⁶Tatyana Tenenbaum, “About,” Tatyana Tenenbaum - Voice, Body, Film, 2018, <http://www.tatyanatenenbaum.com/bio/>.

²⁷ECM Records, “Meredith Monk on her revelation about the voice | ECM Records,” YouTube, November 15, 2022, 0:37 to 0:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31e6MP_4YZ8.

²⁸ECM Records, 0:58.

many ways, Monk's work with voice has the inverse emphasis to mine. Her work focuses on how movement practices inform the way she thinks about her voice and singing, while conversely, I ask how the practice of singing can inform and amplify my movement.

Reading about and watching performance artist Juliana Snapper's work was a new way for me to consider the possibilities of situating singing more intentionally within the body and choreography. Snapper's work has shifted from classical opera singing to experimental musical performance in order to emphasize 'explor[ing] the limits of the voice by directly addressing [her] body.'²⁹ Snapper mentions sensing her singing as "[a]ll of this power gushing from your center! I trust it beyond any other means of communication. It is totalizing, erotic, and uncanny. Every part of you is active, your insides are turned inside out."³⁰ Power gushing from the body center is an overlap I know and sensorially understand between singing and dancing. While I trust dancing beyond any other means of communication, the addition of vocalization brings an awareness to internal activation and a transmission of additional energy outward.

One way Snapper emphasizes and experiments with this power and overwhelming sensation is by singing underwater. Her body of work includes a variety of underwater opera projects. Both physically demanding and dangerous, singing underwater brings this apex of power and sensation to a new extreme by attempting to produce sound in a different environmental medium hostile to breath. In different works, Snapper either comes up for air between passages or remains submerged with an oxygen tank. In either circumstance, singing underwater requires extreme breath control, power, and specificity. Snapper wanted the adverse environment to unravel her base of vocal training in order to "push her body towards moments of

²⁹Juliana Snapper via Eidsheim, 39.

³⁰Eidsheim, 39.

surprise,”³¹ When can she no longer push a note through water for fear the pressure change will pop a lung? What sounds remain when there is no air left to propel sound through the thicker substance of water? While there are moments of recognizable operatic singing and theatrical flair and glamour in the underwater operas, Snapper’s intention is to test what she knows about singing and what her voice is capable of through bodily tuning and experimentation. I have chosen to discuss Snapper’s work as a whole rather than a movement analysis of a specific work as the consistencies of vocal and body experimentation and play that show up across Snapper’s body of work, specifically the underwater operas, are more relevant to the scope of this research than the details of any individual piece.

Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim describes a workshop where she and a group of graduate students went through a series of vocal and listening exercises in a pool. Eidsheim recounts that while the singing itself was more challenging to make audible and resonant underwater, small, throat sounds were incredibly powerful. Because the density of the eardrum is closer to that of water than of air, the sounds humans hear underwater bypass the eardrum and resonate directly in the bones of the skull and are felt through the body. Additionally, rather than the stereo hearing of right and left eardrums, when sounds enter through the skull bones, it is perceived as omnidirectional by the listener, with the perception that “[their] own body has created the sound.”³²

Eidsheim goes on to explain how because of this perception, underwater “the singer’s body, the water, and the audience’s bodies connect through vibration to become one mass, a single pulsating speaker.” The water serves as a medium not only to experiment with the voice’s capacity, but to more acutely blur the line between the body and the voice, as well as the singer

³¹Eidsheim, 41.

³²Eidsheim, 46.

and listener. Sung tones became primarily physically felt experiences, while the gestures of the throat became the auditory experience. With the resonant air muted by a new medium, the internal anatomical choreography of singing becomes the primary sound score. The subtle, internal gestures amplified by the water exemplify what makes singing a physical practice. The movement happening before, during, and after what we hear is integral to singing. It is this “internal corporeal choreography,”³³ in Snapper’s work made clear through the medium of water, that I explore as choreographic and performative tools in this research. Regardless of a dancer’s pitch or tone, their vast bodily knowledge and ability to harness this corporeal choreography, makes singing a potential site of expansive physical sensation and possibility. While unraveling her training and seeing under what conditions her vocal control would fall away was Snapper’s main experiment, mine was to see how experimenting with the voice could amplify what we know about our dance training, our bodies, and generating choreography.

Defying Gravity

Juliana Snapper talks about how singing long enough suspended upside down unravels the vocal mechanism. While not quite the same as being suspended upside down for prolonged periods of time, during improvisational explorations for my solo work, I played with various inversions while singing. The experience of aligning and finding freedom from the diaphragm to the throat while upside down was fascinating. I felt my contents pour and settle in a different, more intense way in trying to activate them simultaneously to produce sound. In a handstand, I could produce sound almost as normal, but soon I could feel my organs fall almost in slow motion to compress the sound out of me. While I was never upside down long enough to feel my mechanism “unravel” I did feel that my physicality and my sound were on a limited countdown

³³Eidsheim, 111.

of possibility. This tool for allowing my inner anatomy to both be affected by gravity in a new way and to try to function in the ways I'm familiar with to sing created a host of distinct sensations and internal movement unique to the experience. Specifically, I experienced an abdominal engagement that felt initiated by the space underneath my larynx that I brought into rehearsals as a way to engage performatively with the upper and inner torso. Bainbridge Cohen discusses the idea of initiation saying, "It's the initiation that establishes the pattern of coordination that follows. You can become more and more specific with the site of initiation. As you refine the place of initiation, your movement becomes more articulate and differentiated."³⁴ These vocal exercises offered a new pattern of initiation. I was able to familiarize myself with the sensation of initiating underneath the larynx. This specificity differentiated a movement with this initiation versus one from a more general sense of the upper chest or throat.

Playing with and leveraging the relationship to gravity is a common theme in both my voice lessons and dance training. There were times in voice lessons when I would lean at an angle and brace myself against a chair or the wall to feel a physical push from my upper body to help support consistent sound rather than a standing straight vertical relationship to the ground. In rehearsals we played with the experience of singing while laying down, on all fours, bent over, while partnering, etc. Because we were coming at the exploration from a movement first focus, a lot of the positions came out of improvisational play rather than an expectation of sound. In one improvisation, I was singing a single consistent note and then in the movement found myself bent over, supporting a majority of Bruno's weight on my back. All of a sudden, singing a note shifted to a sensation of hurling sound at the floor. I felt Bruno's weight sending me down towards the floor, while my feet, my core support, and my voice pushed against the floor to

³⁴Bainbridge Cohen, 86.

return energy upward. To add to this multi-directional experience, because I was singing there was an internal resistance of slowly releasing my diaphragm with tension that projected energy towards my head and tail, which at this point in time were directed towards the side walls of the space. That is just one example of how the addition of the voice to our investigations prompted new sensations and understandings of gravity and weight in movement.

Vocal Flocking: Building our Choir

Many dancers have inhibitions trained into us about using voices, preferring physical communication to verbal. And in “Western classical tradition which esteems an open and even tone production,”³⁵ people who feel they cannot sing well, hardly sing at all, especially in public. My three collaborators and I have different levels of experience and comfortability with singing, but for all of us hearing ourselves and being heard was a vulnerable experience. One way we began fording into this new territory of physical practice was an improvisational score we called vocal flocking.

The intention of this score was to have the same collective, shifting focus and following as physical flocking. In dance, flocking is an improvisational exercise in which a group moves together echoing the movements done by the person in front. As the group moves together, orientation in space changes establishing new fronts and new leaders. The original vocal score I proposed in rehearsal was to start with pitch matching, finding the same note or interpretations of the person starting as leader. We would then deviate into improvisational responses. However, quickly I realized that the apprehension of not being able to match the pitch perfectly was

³⁵Tim Kjeldson. “Learning to Let Go: Control and Freedom in the Passagio.” In *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance, and Experience.*, edited by Konstantinos Thomaidis, Ben Macpherson. Routledge, 2015, 39.

inhibiting the vocalization and the embodiment of responding. I opened the score just to sounding in response to each other. Despite releasing a “leader” from the concept of our score, we kept this idea called vocal flocking to continue to think about our voices in physical and spatial relationship to each other and consistently shifting the dynamic of initiating versus responding. When we first began, the vocalizations were primarily just vowel sounds and humming, but we expanded into versions with limited lyrics, shared words, and other vocal sounds like audible breathing, sighs, and speaking. In order to continue to blur the lines of vocalizing and dancing, we added different layers of physical flocking onto the vocal score. For all of us, this kind of open and continuous vocalizing while moving was new. Despite finding our voices, balancing both tasks, and our individual levels of self-consciousness surrounding singing, we were building an environment and a connection.

After one vocal flocking, Miramontes reflected how he loved the feeling of being in a choir. This added layer of listening, reaching out, and being heard thickened the space between us and brought us into a new way of relating, not only in our physical improvisation, but as a group. It also emboldened us to feel that as part of a group, this choir, our voices were adding to a collective rather than being heard and perceived in isolation. As we continued to explore, we were not only vocalizing, but paying close attention to each other’s voices: the sighs, cadences, breathlessness, grains, and pitches. Breath became both sound effect and negative space for others to generously fill. Listening deeply, less to what was said than how it was said provided prompts for developing movement. For example, we created movements based on hearing and naming the bounce between a low and a high pitch or the crackle of a rasp as the end of a word dies out. One movement motif from this kind of listening that became signature of the vocabulary in the dance was a wide loping, almost run with the arms carving out the space in

front of us with wide sweeps. This movement came from our first rehearsal where we recorded ourselves speaking and pulled textural and spatial qualities from our voices. Aside from choreographic prompting, this deep, intense listening to and noticing of each other crafted our relationship to each other in the space. That much attention is intimate, on top of the intimacy of bodily listening and physical contact.

During another rehearsal, in the improvisation, we happened to find the “naturally occurring resonant frequencies,”³⁶ or room modes, of the studio and the room started ringing with our voices. I was so overwhelmed by being completely surrounded and vibrated by our collective sound. This experience is made clearer to me Bainbridge Cohen’s point that “[o]ur fluids respond immediately to vocalizing and music.”³⁷ This response was heightened in the rehearsal space by producing sound, being surrounded by it echoing back to us, and by the ways our bodies were already activated through movement. In addition to the responsive movement of our internal fluids, there is the choreography of the anatomical mechanisms of sounding and listening: lungs, larynx, nasal passages, tongue, diaphragm, eardrums, skull bones, and on.

In addition to the choreography inside the body during singing, I want to emphasize the choreography of vocalization between bodies. There was the pinging web of sound created by our individual voices from the inside and outside, the sound in real time of each other’s voices, and the acoustic response of the room not only as a container for the sound, but adding its own resonant voice. We were all at once individual, in and out of physical contact, sonically surrounded and inhabited all together. Our bodies were moving “across, beyond, and through”³⁸

³⁶Nyal Mellow. “Room Modes 101.” *Acoustic Frontiers*, March 23, 2015. <https://acousticfrontiers.com/blogs/articles/room-modes-101>.

³⁷Bainbridge Cohen, 69.

³⁸*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “trans,” accessed October, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trans>.

each other. This choreography generated a tone of relating and attuning to each other, foundational to the movement vocabulary and the way it was performed. It also constructed a sonic environment for rehearsals and eventually the work to live, breath, and sound inside of.

While this idea of strengthening embodied relationships inside of the rehearsal and performance space through this interpersonal approach to singing became a central goal of my thesis process, at the time of researching choreographer Faye Driscoll's work, I hadn't yet named it as a focus. I bring Driscoll to the conversation now because the conclusion I came to regarding her work's involvement with the voice involves singing as another means to find connection and to engage more thoroughly with "the alchemy of the people"³⁹ in the room. This feels directly related not only to my larger goal of empathetic hyperphysicality, but a retrospective understanding of a work I made in 2021 entitled *Interlude*.⁴⁰ But I'll begin with Driscoll's work, *Thank You For Coming: Attendance* (2014),⁴¹ the first part of a trilogy. This work searches for a "sense of interconnectedness through physicality."⁴² This physicality incorporates the performers vocalizing in a variety of ways, including singing from the rows of seats behind the audience sitting on the floor around a central platform as well as singing out the names of audience members present. In this work of exaggerated facial expressions, convulsing shape shifting, and group architectural explorations, the singing is perhaps the most pedestrian of movement that the performers engage in.

³⁹ICA Teen Programs, "Artist Interview with Faye Driscoll," YouTube, June 9, 2023, 2:27-2:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgGhS-AWXzA>.

⁴⁰Premiered in 2021 at The Innovation Theater in Rochester, NY as part of the KeyBank Rochester Fringe Festival.

⁴¹Thank You For Coming: Attendance premiered March 2016 at Danspace Project in New York, NY.

⁴²ICA Teen Programs, 4:47-4:49.

The embodied voice is one way Driscoll plays with the “reformulation of proximity.”⁴³ The movement and physical proximity to the audience evoke a somatic, sympathetic response, reaching out literally and figuratively to include the audience in the world of the dance. The audience members are pulled into the performance from their seats through the movement, but also by hearing their names sung out by the performers. The singing itself is “an investigation into relationships and community”⁴⁴ in the room. This is where I began to reflect on my piece *Interlude*. While wildly different from *Attendance* in many ways, including that it was just under two minutes long, I was exploring the relationship between the performers and the audience through voice. It was supposed to be a light-hearted, collective breath halfway through the evening-length performance where the dancers and the audience could be in a different kind of relationship than they had been up to that point. The dancers came back on stage in their warm up clothes, snacking on a cucumber or chatting to each other while I pulled a microphone on stage and started to sing Bo Burnham’s comedy song, *Don’t Wanna Know*.⁴⁵ The opening lines of the song, “How are you feeling? Do you like the show? Are you tired of it? Never mind I don’t wanna know,” narratively would have had the same effect had I just played the recording. But I wanted to sing it, to reformulate the proximity to the audience, and come closer by letting them hear my voice. After the first verse, I left the microphone and let the song go on without me, joining the other dancers in a series of gestures of exhaustion and boredom, but I felt with that beginning, I had left room for the audience to be more involved, to come a little closer not only for the rest of that dance, but the rest of the evening’s performance.

⁴³“Faye Driscoll.” Interdisciplinary Initiative at the Walker, 2016–2020. Accessed May 2024. <https://walkerart.org/interdisciplinary-initiative-at-the-walker-2016-2020/interdisciplinary-project-faye-driscoll-spring-2020/>.

⁴⁴Eidsheim, 157.

⁴⁵Bo Burnham, dir. & writer. *Bo Burnham Inside*. Netflix, 2021. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81289483>.

Defying Gravity Part II: Gushing and Guts

In rehearsal, I asked the dancers to try belting. While there are conversations about vocal register, volume, voice placement, and other factors that go into defining belting, for my purposes, I define it as high-energy singing often associated with loud volumes. We had done so much experimenting with the minutia of sensing internally while singing or paying close attention to the energy our collective voices generated. I wanted to also explore how powerful, loud singing could offer new sensations and ideas about energy in the body.

I chose a song that I knew we all knew, “Defying Gravity” from *Wicked*,⁴⁶ that contained sections of sustained, intense, and loud singing. I also hoped the silliness of choosing a song like “Defying Gravity” would bring some levity to the task of not only really challenging singing, but asking for their voices to be loud. We sang along to the song, but not the words, instead only the sounds, syllables, and sensations of the song. I offered the dancers a few tools to access power and release into the sound. One was to lift their waistbands to around their navel for some physical feedback, to feel like they were pressing their stomach against that waistband as their air and sound left their bodies to counter the urge to deflate. Another suggestion was to think about releasing down and out from their pelvic floor and bending their knees to ground and solidifying their weight into the earth. I hoped with these cues guiding our belting, we could access a familiar sensation of being together in wildness in a new way. While this was an exploration for us to play with being heard, letting our voices and our bodies take up space, and to find overlaps in energetic vocalizing and athletic dancing, it was also a reminder of the power of the gut.

The “gut” comes up often in singing, and it is further proof of the sensorial and physical nature of singing. Coming back to Snapper’s quote describing singing, specifically opera, as “all

⁴⁶Wicked the Musical premiered on Broadway on October 30, 2003 with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and a book by Winnie Holzman.

of this power rushing from my gut.” Monk would often warm up physically prior to sitting down at a piano to vocalize because it allowed her to produce different vocal sounds as she was more deeply connected to her gut after moving.⁴⁷ In an interview, the vocal artist P!nk discussed the strength required to sing while doing the aerial choreography for a particular performance. She talks about strength coming from her core, where her intuition, her clarity, and her gut comes from. If she is strong in her core, she feels tethered. Anatomically, the word gut could be replaced by torso, core, or center, but I think the choice and repetition of gut is intentional and significant. While so often non-dancers separate mind from the body, and feeling from thinking, the gut, at least in the English language, has powerful enough associations to be an exception. People “trust their gut” or “have a gut feeling.” Even those not versed in being deeply inside of and attentive to their bodies, can often situate themselves in the gut. In modern dance, I feel power come from the core and pelvis, but that more often feels like allowing energy to inhabit me to move through the space, rather than having it gush out of me into the space. This gushing from the gut is not only powerful, but stabilizing. There is a grounding from accessing weightedness and deep abdominal muscles working in opposition to the air traveling out of the body. In a similar way to dancing, singing gushing from my guts makes me feel huge and expansive, surpassing my 5’2 frame. Finally, “it takes guts,” means something requires bravery and determination. Returning to the voice as courageous physical practice, to allow a gushing of powerful sound to come out of us together in the studio took the guts we had developed throughout rehearsals.

⁴⁷Deborah Jowitt. *Meredith Monk*, 82. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Singing on Stage

Up until now, I have focused on the fact that experimenting with singing in rehearsals was my priority, but eventually I did end up singing on stage. At the beginning of this process, I was hesitant about including singing in the actual performance. I was concerned that it would raise performative and thematic questions that I wasn't intending based on how it sounded or what I was singing. Additionally, for the same reason all of the improvisational movement prompts and experiments from rehearsal didn't end up in the work, I didn't feel the need for the vocal ones either when they had already fueled the choreography that would be seen.

However, in one rehearsal for the duet between Rose and Bruno, I had them try the sequence of poses that begin their duet while humming softly to each other. It was an experiment in movement quality. It immediately made the space around them and their relationship to each other more intimate. I felt a need for that intimacy and connection to be carried through the rest of the duet which does not stay in the same close, quiet proximity. While experimenting with music choices I found a song, "Come Into My Arms,"⁴⁸ by November Ultra, that when I played over a video of the duet, I saw the same tenderness from the humming come out in the dance and a dynamic relationship between the music and movement. Then, I tried singing this song while Rose and Bruno danced, and I found strong and surprising similarities in how the vocals functioned in relationship to the energetic trajectory of the movement. It was especially visceral to feel moments of lofting and suspension or rushing into moments of delicacy in the vocals, while seeing them in the reflected in the movement. Not only did the singing offer the duet the tone I wanted musically, but singing live while watching them dance added another layer of tenderness and connected me to the duet from the outside. Singing became a way for me to

⁴⁸"Come Into My Arms" was released in 2023 on November Ultra's album *bedroom walls : le salon*.

engage directly with the choreography of the duet by accessing a different physicality. I allowed the song to be improvisational, repeating words or phrases, slightly changing the order or tempo, as a response to the movement and performance choices I witnessed while singing. My singing fueled the movement and vice versa. Even though I sat apart, I felt as closely connected to the group and the work by allowing my voice into the space as my body offered it from just beyond the boundaries of the stage.

This conglomeration of voice practices we developed and explored throughout the process and performance offered a variety of information and multitude of ways of engaging with each other and the choreographic process. Singing brought attention and activation to our bodies in new and surprising ways, required us to have courage through vulnerability, activated the space between us with sound and vibration, and facilitated new connections to each other. Each of these embodied experiences created movement material, sensitive performance and movement quality, and interconnected relationships that defined *this far, all rivers*.

Chapter Three: Water Studies

Returning to *Water* by Philip Larkin, considering this poem helped me to understand the magnitude and expansiveness of water that I wanted to bring to the rehearsal process. I envision water as a medium of connection and attention that builds the liturgy, to borrow from Larkin, of rehearsals and the work. Invoking the vast sensory experiences of water brought specific awareness to internal and external surfaces of our bodies that altered the movement material and tonality of touch. Water's life sustaining and ending power, its metaphorical associations with memory, identity, and history, and its physical properties and movement informed rehearsal practices of listening, compassion, and imagination. Water is large and sacred, personal and transformative. While I am a nonreligious person, Larkin's description of water as liturgy offered an appropriate comparison to the vitality and sanctity I feel both for water and embodied practice.

***Vollmond*: What Does a Water Work Need?**

There was a moment during the design process when I considered having actual water as a design element onstage. At the time, I had been considering "fording" and the way water could fill and animate the spaces between us with dripping, splashing, and small waves. In the incubation phases of this research, Pina Bausch's *Vollmond*⁴⁹ not only prompted my creative decisions regarding the presence or not of physical water in process and performance, but revealed a key element of working with water that I wanted to engage with.

In Bausch's *Vollmond*, the water was an unignorable scenic element as stream of water runs and pools on stage. The dancers get drenched from all directions as they are rained on, splash and wade in the pool, whirl and fling themselves and their soaked clothing, and joyfully

⁴⁹Pina Bausch's *Vollmond* (Full Moon) premiered on May 11, 2006, at the Opernhaus Wuppertal in Wuppertal, Germany.

and vigorously heave buckets of water across the stage and onto each other. One review of *Vollmond* in *Metal Magazine* declares that the water in the dance “is not set dressing, it is the language of the body.”⁵⁰ The dancers are in and of the water, covered and dripping with it, but also reflecting its vitality, sensuality, and play. Its weight and density fuel the tonality of their movement. It is, in fact, inseparable from the body and the dancing.

While in *Vollmond* there are vignettes of love, desire, and conflict, “there are no linear narratives, no single interpretations: what unfolds on stage defies certainty and demands a sensorial reading.”⁵¹ I realized this was a choreographic goal I had been unable to name before, “to demand a sensorial reading.” I argue the water’s effect on the choreography—the wild abandon of splashing, the rain falling down skin, and the soaked clothing clinging to the dancers—fueled that demand. There is a wildness to the dance, situated inside the trope of the unpredictability of the effects of the full moon on the tide, the body, and the emotions. Poet-scholar Rita Wong asks “before the water was piped, it was wild. What would it take for us to reconnect to that wildness?”⁵² Bausch responds, dancing with it.

One of the reasons the water in *Vollmond* was so effective was this freedom and wildness. The water on stage was not enclosed in a container and, in fact, seemed limitless. The dark floor obscured the edges of the pool and water was thrown or poured from all over the stage. I realized if I was going to work with actual water on stage, I wanted this level of intensity and engagement. I didn’t want us to have to be careful, delicate, or cautious. A small contained pool or gentle tosses or pours of water in the middle of the stage safely distanced from the

⁵⁰Paco Neuman. “Pina Bausch: Vollmond: Dance-Theatre and Love Under the Spell of the Full Moon.” *Metal Magazine*, n.d. <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/pina-bausch-vollmond>.

⁵¹Neuman.

⁵²Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong. “Untapping Watershed Mind” In *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, 245.

equipment in the wings would reduce and restrict the movement. I wanted the movement of water, but all of it, not just gentle floating or wading, but crashing, sousing, and roiling. Even in other design elements of scenic and costume, the ideas that centered water, both literally and imagistically did not resonate with me. MJ Loyet, the scenic designer, and I discussed a ceiling draping, strung up in waves, that would respond to the air stirred up by our movement, but in original designs, the light fabric was beautiful, but too light and wispy. The world needed to be grounded and powerful, as well as have movement. While *Vollmond* is a beautiful example of how water affects physicality, my priority was to use water to demand a sensorial reading, to furiously and devoutly drench, and I decided I didn't need water on stage or design representations to do that.

Moving with Water

I have always been drawn to water. Growing up, my parents would have to pry me out of pools, lakes, even rainstorms. I used to pour buckets of water on our tile kitchen floor and slide from the doorway to the crash pad cupboards, letting the water carry me for hours. The constant tactile pressure and information, the freedom of buoyancy, and the imaginative and transformative space of water was my happy, safe, most alive place. I always enjoyed exploring what my body was capable of, and I felt like in the water, limitations fell away. Oceans scared me, ominous and unknown, but still I would sit in the water, a foot or two from shore, and let the waves bowl me over. The non-metronomic pulse of the wave urging my heart beat into a regulated synchronicity.

Water, like dance, brings me most intensely into my body. While I feel the way water situates me deep inside my physicality, I set out to explore water's capacity in dance to bring me back out again to spread further and connect more concretely with the world and people around

me. Water is a tool for choreographic invention and performance quality. It is also a transformative agent, one that I hoped would guide me into new, more deeply embodied ways of being in process and performance.

I use the phrase moving with water as a physical ideation of the concept “thinking with water, [or] considering how water...is a lively collaborator in our ways of knowing and acting,”⁵³ and I argue, how we move. The practice of thinking with water was first introduced to me through a book chapter by architect Cecilia Chen, entitled “Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places.”⁵⁴ After reading this chapter, I found it was the ending to a collection of essays, art, and poetry titled *Thinking with Water*,⁵⁵ from authors of varied disciplinary backgrounds that aim to discuss water as a concrete idea that “challenge[s] ways of knowing, emphasizes relationality, and demonstrates...water’s critical presence in all aspects of our lives.”⁵⁶ This presence frames water as inherently connective. Water in its multifaceted philosophical, spiritual, textural, and relational nature offers an inroad to a responsive approach to choreography and performance, emphasizing empathetic listening, transformation, play, and intimacy. As editor and contributor Chen writes, “[a]s a responsive and promiscuous solvent, water is rarely pure and is always picking up, carrying along, dropping off, and bonding with other elements. In this sense, it materially communicates where it has been, what has occurred elsewhere, and even what is possible.”⁵⁷ This constant relational, cumulative, sloughing, and conflating is a rendering of the movement, choreographic processes, and collaborations that I want to cultivate.

⁵³Description from McGill-Queen’s university press website.

⁵⁴Cecilia Chen. “Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places.” *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013.

⁵⁵Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis. *Thinking with Water*. 1st ed. Montréal, Québec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773589339>.

⁵⁶Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, 5.

⁵⁷Chen, 277.

Additionally, moving with water was also a way to keep the work and my own choreographic process fluid and responsive. A major choreographic challenge I have had in the past is solidifying movement and ideas too early before they have had a chance to breathe, expand, and transform in the ways I am hoping for. During this process, I felt that start to happen when I began to rub up against set movement and sequencing. I realized it was not that I didn't like the material we were generating and working with, just that the idea and larger world of the work was still being developed and the choices I was making were stopping those channels of exploration. Returning to some of these prompts and ways of considering the movement, I was able to continue to be curious and exploratory about the movement vocabulary and structure of the work, while continuing to feel forward momentum.

In the following sections, I discuss examples of moving with water that I bring into the physical/creative/embodied process to generate movement, to explore spatial design/pathways, to experiment with movement quality, to reconsider fundamental compositional elements like sequence and repetition, and to imagine and transform ourselves and our relationships to each other throughout the dance. I love being in and around water, but I didn't want this work to be *about* water or about being in water. *Moving with water* relies less on the imagery of water and more on all of the associative properties of it as a substance I discuss above. While these ideas did inspire movement vocabulary and quality, more importantly *moving with water* serves as a way of embodying my ideas of hyperphysicality and to connect those ideas to empathy.

The Importance of Imagining

Returning to Foster, who asks "Are there techniques of knowledge production that invite us to imagine the other without presuming knowledge of the other?"⁵⁸ Water is an effective

⁵⁸Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 14.

medium for this knowledge production, as it is constantly changing and vast, therefore assumes unknowing, but ongoing re-understanding and reimagining. In this research, water was our invitation to this imagining, serving as metaphor and methodology, generating movement vocabulary and approaches to performance. For example, considering the multitude of ways water related words are associated or representative of emotions, allows me to consider the emotionality of movement in a new way separate from narrative. One is “flooded with emotion, or storms of rage,”⁵⁹ and “– gentle rain, immovable ice, crashing waves – mingle their qualities with our ideas of generosity, emotional paralysis, or overwhelming power.”⁶⁰ It is not just imagery, but linguistic associations embedded in the English language providing a more deeply rooted embodied experience to bring into the space.

The Greek mythology of Lethe River of forgetfulness, sea burials and shipwrecks, and the phrase “stream of consciousness,” are all examples of considering the collective memory of water. Water holds the memories and bodies of others across histories and mythologies, and thoughts and memories move, when unrestricted, like water. “Literary depictions of the watery ‘depths’ of memory can... gesture toward the meaningful integration of personal and collective histories.”⁶¹ These ideas informed how I thought about performativity as well as generating and manipulating movement material. Because this research emphasized the process of making the work, a priority for me in rehearsals was to have multiple improvisations, variations, and modes of reflection, not just to create more movement material, but to continuously explore and change it and ourselves in response.

⁵⁹Vestinavesti via Eidsheim, 107.

⁶⁰Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, 10.

⁶¹Janine MacLeod. “Water and the Material Imagination: Reading the Sea of Memory against the Flows of Capital.” In *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, 41.

In process, one way to find these multiple entry points into the same material was to utilize these collective histories as a tool for imagining. Early on in the rehearsal process, through writing we brainstormed, reflected on and imagined all of the ways we interact with water, the water (inside and out) that moves us, and the ways it shapes us, literally, functionally, and imaginatively. We discussed the literal bodies and the memories water holds and how we can interact with them. Some stories were literal: being knocked down and overwhelmed by strong waves and the freedom and joy of skinny dipping alone in a lake. Some reflections led to more abstract ideas: being reminded of holding the role of caretaker or taking on mystic, magical qualities. From this we loosely imagined all of this information culminating into a version of us that we called a “watery self.” It is almost an alter-ego, but more than that, it is a reflection, a refraction, and a magnification of ourselves and our imagination through water. Because this writing exercise felt so vast, we came back to it to add and shift our interpretations as we moved through the rehearsal process.

From there, I offered improvisational scores that both pulled from all of the watery-self brainstorming as inspiration and explored existing phrase material based on ideas and physicalities of our watery selves. I go into more detail on how I consider and utilize improvisation in general and in this process in a later chapter, but here it was a specific way to be imaginative about ourselves, each other, and the way we could inhabit and perform the work. With so many iterations of our watery selves surfacing in the improvisations, it became an underlying and ongoing consideration throughout the process, constantly shifting how we thought about the movement material and ourselves inside of it.

Heart Monster: Generating Tone and Touch

It is not only that the emphasis on imagining accessed multiplicities of ourselves, but that these transformations necessarily changed the ways we interacted with each other. As we shifted inside the work, so did our connections. The way water interacts with its surroundings inspired many improvisational prompts that led to exploring different qualities of touch and tone. One example, early on in the rehearsal process, I started a section of the dance I was calling “heart monster.” Vaguely inspired by the wild forms of deep-sea creatures and the constantly morphing shapes of jellyfish, I wanted to create a being of all of our bodies intertwined. The “heart” in heart monster came from our first exploration having to do with these group shapes starting with touches of care or tenderness: a hand to the cheek, holding a hand, a forehead to forehead. From there, we would fold and wrap and condense together as one clump of bodies. However, these original clumps still felt too individual and rigid when what I wanted was an image of this ongoing, almost amorphous shape that was made of all of us. I developed an improvisational score that we called the *perc score*. Taken from environmental science, a perc, or percolation test determines how a substance, usually soil, absorbs moisture. At the most basic level, fill a hole with water and measure the water level over time to indicate the quality of drainage. We used this image of water filling into something porous and absorbent and the speed and quality of which it moved to guide the way we were interacting with each other. Starting in contact, we would gradually fill empty spaces between us and imagine the boundaries of our bodies softening with saturation allowing for more absorption into each other. This kind of connection and imagery allowed us to imagine the softening of the edges of our bodies to become not only intertwined, but intermingled with each other.

Originally, I imagined heart monster would be its own section of the dance. Watching an alive shape, this tri-person monster, morph, breath, and eventually unfurl into parts, but soon it doesn't feel necessary. Rather than a section of the dance, heart monster became an integral way in which we interacted with each other. It was the tonality of touch and care that we carried throughout the piece. We were constantly being reabsorbed and redistributed through our connection to each other as the dance continued. The anatomy of us as a unit was constantly shape shifting, but the porousness that we had cultivated carried through both the tenderness and the intercorporeality that I had originally intended. This is one clear example of how moving with water led to a hyperphysical way of being in performance. We developed a heightened awareness of being in contact and sensing the space in between our bodies that led to an interpersonal responsiveness. This allowed us to continuously reestablish and redefine our connection to each other throughout the dance, even out of contact.



During Bruno's solo, Rose and I slowly traveled across upstage while gently shifting positions of holding each other. This was the first time the three of us were not on the same trajectory in the work. Even though we were almost always facing upstage away from Bruno, unable to see them, the contents of the space behind us that they were stirring, filled with their transformation and experience were still intensely palpable. The intensity of sweaty, heavy breathing, and weight bearing touch between Rose and I was compounded by the sensed weight and emotionality of Bruno moving behind us. We spent the first half of the dance weaving ourselves in and around each other and settling into our porous, absorbent relationship so that when Bruno leaves, we were still intimately connected through this watery tether. Rose and I were in almost complete darkness upstage, so on the surface, it may seem not to have mattered how this connection affected us during the solo. However, compositionally, it gave us a reason to be on stage and performatively, it kept us fording through the work together. I chose to make that section a solo for the specific kind of intimacy it offers, in hopes that it felt like zooming in on a singular experience, but I didn't want it to feel like Bruno had left us behind or vice versa, especially when we came back together. Spending their solo continuing to sense the ways we had interacted and built our relationship over the first third of the dance allowed all three of us to move into the next section of the work on a comparable plane.

Water Time

I also employ water as a mechanism to consider a non-linear representation of time in choreography. In the chapter titled "Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics, in *Thinking with Water*, contributors Chandler and Neimanis write, "[t]he watery materiality of each watery entity has been somewhere, sometime before, cycling through its various

articulations for millennia.”⁶² There is a ‘simultaneous age and newness of water.’⁶³ One way this manifested in the work was building moments into the choreography that played with multiple relationships to time. For example, while Rose and I moved slowly through one movement, Bruno had a nine second solo that was both a preview and a remembering of their larger solo section. This condensed version came before their solo section in the chronology of the performance, but the movement was based on whatever snapshot of previous solos they drew from each time. Rose and I moving in slow motion in the present, while Bruno sped up referencing both the past and the future, imagining an approximately nine second representation of four minutes. Bruno’s timing of nine seconds was not precise or tied to any musical cue, so their sensing of what nine seconds of quick, continuous movement was each time also dictated the time that Rose and I had to complete our one slow task.

Another way water’s relationship to time showed up in the work was how I thought about choreographic concepts like repetition and sequencing of movement. While altering a repeated movement is not a new choreographic tool to me or the field, using the regenerative and cyclical nature of water as inspiration helped me to consider how a movement existed in multiple relationships to time in both process and performance. For example, if the second variation of a movement becomes the only one not edited out of the choreography for performance, then it becomes the first and last one seen (by the audience, even if they don’t recognize that) and the second one made (known only to the performers). Is this sequencing important? Initially, when considering this concept, it felt like a pedantic way to look at a basic choreographic tool. However, the more I started to intentionally look at the timeline of making and editing material

⁶²Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis. “Water and Gestationality: What Flows beneath Ethics.” In *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, 74.

⁶³MacLeod, 41.

the more I was interested in exploring how that can influence the intricacies of choreographic arc and performance. While the sequence of the piece that was seen onstage was not unimportant to me, because we had crafted so many versions and orders each with different relationships to each other in time, the order the audience saw was not the final one, but just one section of a larger multidirectional timeline of the work.



Watery Work

“Watery” became a shorthand term for the properties of water or for “moving with water” across various choreographic prompts. In its onstage presentation, the performance environment was *watery*, not because it took place in an imaginary body of water or that there was water on stage, but the space and the state of being that we built for the dance to exist inside of had “a deeper attentiveness to the flows that surround”⁶⁴ and run through us. Watery, in this sense,

⁶⁴Andrew Biro. “River-Adaptiveness in a Globalized World.” In *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, 166.

means “making imaginative use of [water’s] material characteristics to formulate ideas about flow, permeation, movement, ...change,”⁶⁵ relationship, and touch. The goal is to increase sensitivity, awareness, and responsiveness—hyperphysicality—between performers and to the movement, a non-linear sense of time, and performance that is an extension of process is both practice and play.

⁶⁵Veronica Strang. “Conceptual Relations: Water, Ideologies, and Theoretical Subversions.” In *Thinking with Water*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013, 186.

Chapter Three: Transforming Gestures

He draws his wrists in and shakes them as if whisking water from his hands, pulls his fists to his face, knocking gently against his temples, cantilevers one arm back and forth in a horizontal, chest-level pointing motion. These gestures, discrete, contained, and close to the body, slowly expand, spreading to the arms and hips, erupting into spins and jumps, and eventually infecting his entire body, giving way to a rapturous smile as he lip-synchs the song and takes over the small, industrial space with sinuous, dazzling dancing.⁶⁶

-Candace Feck

This is a movement analysis by dance scholar Candace Feck of the gestures from a solo danced by Rowan Thorpe in physical theatre company, DV8's dance film *The Cost of Living*.⁶⁷ The film premiered in 2005, and my mom took me, at 11 years old, to see it at a local movie theater. In the 20 years since I've seen this film, it creeps into my memory periodically, partially because of the dancer's infectious joy Feck describes, but I think more so because of the gestures. The gesture sequence is short and not overly complex, but it's so captivating, to me at 11 years old and to me now. Some of the movements are known – pointing a finger, shaking water off the hands – but in the context of an initially stone-faced, stationary dancer to Cher's *You Believe in Life After Love*, they become unknowable. The mundane made intriguing. Some of the movements represent without communicating explicitly, thumbs on each temple, fingers spread with palms forward, making almost moose-like antlers. The association is conjured, but then abandoned. The parts (each gesture) are a sum total of something odd, indirect, and personal that slowly develop into, in Feck's words, “expand[ing], infect[ing], and erupt[ing] with joy. The gestures continue to be present throughout the rest of the solo, and they morph into full body movement that flings Thorpe around the parking lot.

⁶⁶Candace Feck. Review of *Gloss, Grit, Dance/Story*, by Lloyd Newson. *Dance Research Journal* 39, no. 2 (2007): 77–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20444701>.

⁶⁷The Cost of Living is a dance film made in 2004 by DV8 Films Ltd. and Channel 4 directed by Lloyd Newson, the founder of DV8 Physical Theatre company.

Maybe Thorpe's Cher-scored journey from matter of fact to infectious joy was the beginning of my love for gesture in choreography or maybe it is retrospective appreciation. Either way, an emphasis on gestures appears often in my choreography and in my favorite dances. While early definitions of gesture referred to "the general carriage of the body,"⁶⁸ it has evolved to refer more specifically to movement of the limbs or hands that "express or emphasize an idea, sentiment, or attitude."⁶⁹ The way I consider gesture in choreography carries both the latter and former definitions, and then some. It is a movement's emphasis on articulating a something rather than a moving through that defines gesture inside of dance. This something does not need to be quantifiable; it is the sense of communication that is most important rather than an explicit message itself. When the whole body, or the "general carriage" is minutely attending to a specific articulation or communication, even of an abstract or non-lexical meaning, it is gesture. I often emphasize the hands in my gestural work, but as affective on the rest of the body rather than separate extensions. Because of the deftness, agility, and expressiveness of the hands, I can be even more particular about layering in rhythms, shapes, and accent with gestures. They function as oddities and accents that help me define the way the whole body moves.

Past Work

Gestures are an essential component to my body of choreographic work. In my past work, there is often a gesture section, one part of the dance where gestures are core to the vocabulary of the work. In my work *Delta Blue*,⁷⁰ the group came together in the final section to perform a series of 12 gestures. Starting in unison, grouped close together, the group completes four rounds

⁶⁸Jan N Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg. 1992. *A Cultural History of Gesture*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2.

⁶⁹*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "gesture," accessed November, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gesture>.

⁷⁰*Delta Blue* premiered in December 2024 at The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center as part of the Experimental Performance Series at The University of Maryland.

of the sequence. With each round, each dancer has a new order of the gestures and a different facing. The synchronicity lines up and falls away as one dancer comes into unison with another just in time to turn away and link up with someone else. While the gestures are repeated and recognizable, the pattern becomes harder to perceive. I love this kind of complexity or design of movement. Returning to sousing, the density of information—the intricate, varied, and structured logic—is even more satisfying on a focused scale.

Aside from my love of complex patterning, I've realized that the way I approach the gesture section is representative of how I build the rest of the work. Oftentimes gestures are some of the first things I create in the choreographic process, and refining my approach to them often gives me information about the larger work I want to make. It feels like a key to a map of the dance. It's not a literal representation of the whole, but it guides and helps me to understand it. In *Delta Blue*, layering patterns where the dancers come together and apart was one aspect of the work. Additionally, the rhythmic structure of the gestures represented how I was thinking about musicality as a whole: starting off square on the beat, then taking time to loft and swoop before being interrupted by bubbling syncopation. In my work *Made of Stars*⁷¹, the gestures were not only the first thing I choreographed, but also occurred within the first 30 seconds of the dance. Accompanied by a walking pattern, the gestures were bold and awkward: a hand wrapping behind the back palm facing out, heel of the hand under the chin to support the neck jutting out, arms and palms flexed as if supporting something heavy just too far behind the body. Even though each gesture could be done on the beat, the micro timing of some of them taking a little bit longer left them accenting either the front end of the beat, if the dancer tried to anticipate the movement, or the back end in order to complete the movement. This sense of a little bit off

⁷¹*Made of Stars* premiered in March 2020 at Hobart William Smith College.

combined with very particular and angular walking patterns set the tone for the work of being bold in both mess and precision. My interest in gesture is multi-faceted, but the direction I chose to take it in tells me a lot about the work I am making.

Arriving to a Gestural Language

For this research, I didn't start with a gesture section, but I knew early on that the gestural vocabulary would be more interspersed throughout the work. The gestures showcased in a short promotional video of Lucy Guerin's upcoming piece *The Forest*⁷² were largely inspirational in the early research phases of rehearsal. In Guerin's work, standing together in a clump, the dancers have their arms extended above their heads, fingers twitching asymmetrically, almost like each digit is its own little creature. While DV8's gestures in *Cost of Living* traveled from apathetic to joyous, Guerin's gestures transform the dancers into more than human bodies. The gestures are mostly performed at shoulder level and above, which serves to replicate the shape of a tree's trunk and branches, but also to keep the gestures in and around the head allowing for obstruction and abstraction of the face. Still in the clump of bodies, each dancer crosses their arms at the wrists and cups their hands, palms facing towards each other. This shape is placed directly onto their face, almost mimicking the whorl of a tree trunk covering their eyes, nose, and mouth. Many of the gestures change the shape or add new forms to the face. This simple facial embellishment transforms the whole body in relationship. A simple walking pattern or leg swivel is molded by the reimagining of the whole body with a simple gesture.

Doing a movement analysis of the short video of *The Forest* gave me language for the realm of gestures – odd, slightly mystical, and transformative – I was interested in and that made sense in the world of this piece. This odd abstraction was one of the ideas I was searching for in

⁷²*The Forest* is currently a work in progress by Lucy Guerin and will premiere in 2026, date and location not yet publicized.

this work. Early on in the process there was a choreographic focus of movement moving in and around the headspace, both gestural and otherwise. Witnessing and naming the transformation that Guerin's gestures around the face manifested led me to understand the the framing, ornamenting, and touching the face in my work as a possibility for imaging and warping of personhood. Like Guerin's work, there is the possibility and agency of transformation that happens with a stark manipulation of identifiable facial features. I wasn't specifically looking for transformation into something more than human, but that we could transform according to our imagining of ourselves in real time. With the mysterious, vast, and intercorporeal nature of water fueling the dance there was a fluidity in the consideration of our bodies and ourselves inside of this work. Continuously and intentionally shapeshifting who and what we were inside of the dance. I hoped the gestures would hide, reveal, share, and transpose the multiplicities of what we could imagine ourselves to be, especially in relationship to water.

Standing upstage clumped together, Bruno and I each put one of Rose's hands on her face, and our hands on top of her, covering her forehead and part of her eyes. Slowly, I dripped my hand off of Rose's and her hands follow falling off her face. Almost immediately, Bruno followed, dripping off of Rose's other hand. It was a simple gesture, but the repetition of four hands being revealed while pulling and obscuring the face from different angles abstracted not only Rose's anatomy, but our anatomy as a group. Mine and Bruno's faces were obscured by our own arms reaching across, making the tracking and attributing of limbs to specific bodies even more challenging. With elbows out and fingers trailing across each other, we collectively and intentionally warped our collective anatomy. Additionally, this gesture includes the consideration of haptics, or touch during communication as a kind of gesture.⁷³ Covering Rose's hands with

⁷³Bremmer and Roodenburg, 3.

ours, then using both to cover her forehead and eyes, there was a tenderness, a weightedness, and an insistence. Our gesture served to puppet Rose's, our limbs moving hers, but the combination of the ways that we had been moving in and around each other and the texture of the touch gave it a quality of intercorporeality rather than the sense of a lack of agency on Rose's part.

Another version of this gesture is repeated when I'm behind Bruno, folding forward to bring my forehead to their mid back and reach around to place my hand on their forehead before slowly dragging it off. Rather than holding their head or wiping away sweat, I imagine this gesture as gently leaving the impression of my hand behind on them, like finger trails in clay. This gesture is intended to alter them, while it is happening and after, in any way we are free to imagine in the performing.

The basis of gestures is communication. It is the specificity of articulation in a multitude of ways that draws me to gesture. Across my work, they serve to accent, highlight, define rhythm, create specific shapes and images that stand on their own, but also frame the body in new ways. In this research specifically, where imagination and transformation are so essential, the gestures informed the ways that we envisioned and manipulated our bodies both individually and collectively.

Chapter Four: Improvisation: A Practice of Trust

I often use improvisation in my choreographic process to generate movement material and to give space for the performers to adjust or embellish the choreography. However, I rarely have durational improvisations inside of the live performance. Choreographer Joe Goode, who often derives movement vocabulary and quality from improvisation in process,⁷⁴ “do[esn’t] trust it for the duration of a performance.”⁷⁵ For so long, I thought I did not trust it in performance either. So much of my choreography is elaborately detailed and planned that improvisation inside of it felt antithetical. I didn’t trust that I was supporting my collaborators with enough choreographic information and intention with improvisation inside of performance. But more and more, as improvisation became a tool for me to understand my choreographic intentions, I was itching for less control and to invite the “creative magic that occurs in the moment.”⁷⁶ This was heightened even further by coming to understand how much I value working with collaborators that are not only generous and smart, but whom I care about deeply. I loved the choices and moments of magic that we created in improvisations in rehearsals, but I didn’t know how to sustain them through performance as the choreographer or how to bring the moments of magic of improvisation into my choreography without losing the quality that made them so striking. Choreographer Trisha Brown moved away from improvisation in her work because “it began to break [her] heart that absolutely miraculous events were not repeatable.”⁷⁷ While Brown was talking specifically about improvisation in performance, my heart broke when I couldn’t share the miraculous events that happened in the studio because I couldn’t choreograph or recreate

⁷⁴Kent De Spain. “Lost in the Footlights: The Secret Life of Improvisation in Contemporary American Concert Dance.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, edited by Vida L. Midgelow. Oxford University Press, 2019, 702. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199396986.013.26>.

⁷⁵De Spain, 702.

⁷⁶De Spain, 693.

⁷⁷De Spain, 693.

them on stage. In previous creative processes I have never had the time to sit with and fully cultivate an improvisational section that felt relevant and supportive of the larger work. But with such a small and intimate cast with maturity and skill, we were already deeply inside of improvisational scores to explore the possibilities of the work and could keep cultivating what was possible for improvisation inside of the performance.

In this chapter, I discuss a myriad of ways I utilize improvisation in the two solos in *this far, all rivers*. In Bruno's solo, the improvisation is the solo itself, a live, agential, and responsive score. In mine, improvisation is a choreographic and performative tool to generate movement vocabulary and qualitative shifts. In both, it is an exercise in trust.

A Duet of Solos



In the first rehearsal for Bruno's solo, I came in with a few broad improvisational scores, mostly imagistic, to play with the direction and tone of the section: *gradually change color*,

experience the sensation of weighted, gentle scrubbing or washing of the skin. I had a sense of what I wanted this solo to do inside of the work—to be a quieter, reflective moment where the individual reverberations of the group material could synthesize and settle—but I didn’t have specific expectations of what that movement vocabulary should look like. However, I had thought that it would be loosely set material that Bruno had agency to play with and adjust each time.

We tried a few of these different prompts and eventually began to overlap pieces of each of them. As we continued to explore, we set some specific movements, or signposts, that encapsulated the essence of the solo: a long pause in a squat slowly scanning the horizon, rotating while unsteadily alternating between kneeling and standing, or catching the back of the head in a lean back towards the audience. We mapped out a trajectory for the solo, around where in the sequence each of these key moments happened and the energetic and imagistic ideas that shifted slowly as the solo continued. The beginning started with an expansive peel away from the group that led into self-tactile, slow movement until a shift into folding in and expanding out of the self. We mapped this way from beginning to end of the solo.

While these beautiful moments all felt of the world of the solo, eventually they started to restrict its vitality. What was originally so impactful about the scores was both the surprise of what the ongoing negotiation manifested and that Bruno only had to be in the present. This was being dulled by trying to come back to these signposts, and the improvised movement in between felt restricted and distanced from Bruno. When I sat down to look at each of the sections of the work individually to figure out the purposes they served and the ways they interacted with each other, I realized that Bruno’s solo felt like the opposite side of the same coin to mine. Both solos felt like a kind of transformation. However, while mine felt like an inner world gradually being

drawn out, Bruno's was pulling the outside in to fuel their inner world. Choreographer Bebe Miller attributes the power of improvisation "to allow[ing] the viewer into the creative body/mind of the performer in the now, to experience [their] encountering what is present in the moment and being forced to choose how and when and where to move."⁷⁸ This is what I wanted the solo to be, a window into a moment of Bruno just being after experiencing the first part of the dance and responding to the environment we created. Whereas my solo was full of choreographic and performative challenges I gave myself, I realized I wanted Bruno's to have the same intentional and specific crafting, but of the space and tone they got to play inside of rather than the choreography itself. Miller also discusses the need for specificity, "but rather than crafting the specifics...trying to hone in on what the essence of the intention was."⁷⁹ In all of the scores and creating signpost movements, Bruno and I had collaboratively built a pool of intentions for the solo to exist inside of. There was an exploratory, tactile, curious, almost reverent sensibility that defined all the ways Bruno had been dancing.

In our next rehearsal, I showed Bruno an aerial photo of a person alone in a vast body of water. Their only prompt now was to imagine the solo in that space. I asked them to let all the signpost movements, conversations about arc, and improvisational prompts that had built the solo continue to inform it, but none of it needed to be explicitly, physically present in the improvisation. There was so much information, crafting, and collaboration to pull from and trust. All of the scores, as well as the movement in the rest of the piece that they had done up until that point were tributaries feeding their choice making, and I asked them to allow it to freely change every time. Soused with information, whatever images, emotions, or narratives came up each time, they could follow it without any worry for how different it might be from one performance

⁷⁸DeSpain, 703.

⁷⁹De Spain, 702.

to the next. I also decided to have the music be cued off of their ending so they did not need to track time. The only (loosely) set moments that remained were a burst of energy and speed towards the end and ending in the same place facing upstage. Because we had spent rehearsals crafting the tone of the solo, discussing how it functioned in relation to the larger work, and establishing embodied memories of movements that lived inside this world, even this agential score felt so specific and choreographed. When Bruno tried this more open version for the first time, the original liveliness and tension from our exploratory scores returned, but was now grounded in the context of the work.

As we worked in the studio, I also knew that the real weight of the section would come when we were on stage when the lights could better define their sense of isolation, the breath and sweat of dancing together preceded it, and their choice making shifted in response to having an audience witness their dancing. Once we moved into the theater, even though the solo was different each time, the world, the tone, and the vocabulary of it was so clear while continuing to grow and shift with each performance. In dance scholar Danielle Goldman's seminal text on improvisation, *I Want to Be Ready*, she describes improvisation as "incessant preparation, grounded in the present."⁸⁰ In the incessant preparation, the rehearsing of possibilities, I was able to find the choreographic specificity that I crave in my work and trust that the combination of agency and collaboration could sustain the improvisation for performance in service of the larger work.

⁸⁰Danielle Goldman. *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. The University of Michigan Press, 2010, 142.



My solo began as a way for me to reflect and experiment with this web of interrelated theories and ideas about voice and water in my own body. It soon also became a craving to confront large choreographic and performative questions and challenges I have for myself. Early in the research process, my thesis chair, Kendra Portier⁸¹ asked what I wanted water to do for me; what did I want from it? I almost was asking for as much of water as I was asking of myself, for it to be a conduit, representation, and theory of intense sensation, connection and relationship, and expansive personal and artistic practices. Somewhere in that vast answer and in addition to all of the ways I discuss above, I came to my interest in the myth that uncharted waters in old maps were illustrated with sea monsters or the words “Here Be Monsters” or “Here Be

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Dragons.” The monsters were a way for me to imagine and confront my large choreographic and performative questions and challenges. I wanted to find a way to be self-possessed inside of uncertainty and experimentation, and to claim the time and the space that the solo took up. I started rehearsing and running the material I had with my hair down. I normally can’t stand the feeling of my hair on my neck or in my face so it is tied back within an inch of its life, but letting an extension of me go free, to float, splay, and whip, to lightly drive me wild, and hide my eyes felt integral to the transformation of the solo. I wanted uncertainty to become strength and power, and to find the commanding, promiscuous power that existed in the dark waters inside of the movement I created for myself. The more I dug into this solo, and on reflection the thesis as a whole, the more I was moving into uncharted waters of process and craving monsters to tear apart the ways I move and make work. While this solo research is connected to the group research, more directly considering myself and my individual performativity intensified the vulnerability. There be monsters, in the uncharted waters of this choreographic process that loomed large.

A significant portion of the movement material from this section of the work comes from improvisational explorations I started in an independent choreography study I did in the Fall of 2024. One of the explorations was creating movement vocabulary based on the physical experience of singing. I wanted the movement and the thought process to come from an internal initiation and emphasize a really guttural way of thinking about breath and movement. I chose to focus on the experience of singing one particular song so I could deeply consider and attune to that experience through repetition, rather than a wider, more surface level range of sensation across multiple songs. I chose the song *People* from the musical, *Funny Girl*⁸² not for the

⁸²Funny Girl is a film from 1968 directed by William Wyler based on the 1964 Broadway Musical of the same name starring Barbara Streisand.

narrative or lyrics, but because it requires a lot of physicality, breath, power, and internal attuning. Its range is massive, it asks for a lot of control, play, groundedness, and subtle, but specific movement. I also chose it because it is one of my favorite songs to sing because of the way it feels in my body, and it allows me to be loud in a way that I find challenging in dancing. I hoped to claim the loud, boldness of the song in my movement and my performance.

Through many repetitions of singing and watching myself sing in a mirror and on video, I noticed, named, and improvised with the movement happening both internally and externally to produce or improve my sound. A catch breath during a small pause, a sense of rebounding from my diaphragm to the crown of my head, or an energetic drive forward. Eventually, as the solo developed, the material became distanced from the song that inspired it, but the breath pattern, accents, and buoyancy remained as traces. I'm curious what overlaps and divergences would happen in the material if I had used another song. Would I experience the same bursting through that starts from grounding the soles of the feet and drives up and forward with the pelvis with a different song that also required belting? But with this song that takes everything I have to sing and is personal to me, I could access a bold movement vocabulary with more confidence.

In addition to these combined vocal and physical scores, I came back to improvisation to keep the solo headed in the choreographic direction I intended. As the solo developed in this direction, it started to diverge from the rest of the piece. I had the opportunity to perform a version of the solo on its own as part of the NextDance Festival at The University of Maryland. Without the rest of the dance, the solo could be dark and brooding. I alternated between facing the deep-water monsters and inhabiting them. Coming back to the solo inside this larger thesis work, this dark and brooding tone didn't work and felt tacked onto the ending in a way I couldn't settle into or understand. It felt isolated from the growth that everything else in the piece was

experiencing. While the rest of the work had been cultivated through deep listening, care, and the kind of deliberate, loving relationship building that I value in dance making and the rest of my life, the solo I kept in the dark waters by myself and felt like I was drowning there with a heavy, almost nine minute solo that couldn't respond to where the rest of the dance had been. Especially as the solo came after my witnessing and vocally scoring an almost desperate tenderness inside of a duet between Rose and Bruno, I couldn't jump into something so isolated and unresponsive.

I knew there needed to be a large shift in my solo, but so much of the movement was successful and related to the work in so many ways, so it had to be my performance. At this point, I had been alternating between two similar sound scores for the solo, both fairly sparse and ominous. I decided to try dancing the solo to a variety of pieces of music and improvising with movement quality, intention, and timing. In improvising, I found that my focus had become so internal in the solo. I was still referencing an inner world, but had stopped drawing it out into the space. In the thoughtful and methodical process of choreography, I had inadvertently shrunk it and lost track of taking up space. Additionally, in this experimentation I came across the song “Gelís” by Flako.⁸³ I was immediately drawn to it because of its driving percussion and a synth that alternated between sounding like a chorus of voices and something that made me imagine giant pulsing orbs. It offered both directness and expansiveness. Still bold and intense, but warm and inviting. Improvising to this track, I felt like I could carry qualities of the original solo through, but create its counterpoint where my surety and force was fed by being in relationship with my collaborators and witnessing the space we had stirred up together. It seems like an obvious choice and connection to make after the fact, but until I was able to feel it improvising with new music, I couldn't find a way in. Improvisation was a way to reveal to myself how much

⁸³“Gelís” was released on the 2015 album *Natureboy*, by Flako, aka Natureboy Flako.

embodied information I had about the movement itself and my choreographic intentions. I could reset my intuition on a more even playing field with my analysis. This shift not only fit the pieces together compositionally, but it created one of my favorite moments of the dance as a performer. Facing away from Bruno and Rose, I jump to change direction, spiraling to the floor and land kneeling, facing them. I stayed there for a moment to just see them and notice how tethered I feel to them both, all paused together, before they moved again to send me back into motion.

Improvisation was essential to this work, in its generation and performance. It was a way not only for us to co-create the culture and atmosphere of the dance and ourselves inside of it, but it kept the dance alive and shifting in response to any small changes in ourselves and the way the work unfolded each night. I believe this liveness could be achieved through other set choreographic means, but this new way of working with improvisation was integrally woven with my consideration of voice and water in this particular research. While focusing on crafting the intention and tone allowed me to think as specifically about the improvisation as the set material, learning to trust was challenging. Luckily, the way we were working so intimately with ideas of voice and water and, like Goode, because of the trust I have with my collaborators, I knew “an investigation that feels honest and real”⁸⁴ was possible.

⁸⁴De Spain, 702.

Conclusion: Somewhere in the Middle

Weaving explorations of water and vocalization into my choreographic practice led me to a hyperphysical density of sensation. Cultivating deeply embodied attention and responsiveness, this heightening of sensorial information, paradoxically, allowed me to identify methods to sit with and move through uncertainty in choreographic process and performance. In improvisation, that method is a continuous, collaborative practice of trust. This renegotiation and expansion of how I make work reinforced the value system that drives it—prioritizing amplifying embodied experience and cultivating empathetic connection—while elucidating and transforming my relationship to familiar methodologies of making.

In the weeks and now months following the performance of *this far, all rivers*, I waited for some sense of completion. My thesis was done, performed and witnessed. But I had to give up waiting when I realized that I am in fact, still right in the middle. The foundation of this research—both the performance and the writing—is about how I want to engage in dancing and dance making. Seeking connection and transformation through collaboration and movement didn't end when the final curtain closed on *this far, all rivers*. While this research was extensive, the conclusion is that I have just scratched the surface.

A friend in the audience sent me a message after the show with congratulations and reflections on the work. She viewed the dance as “such a crucial reminder of the importance to keep breathing together even when it feels like we are underwater.”⁸⁵ Reflecting on her experience, I am grateful that this labor of love is ongoing. Now, more than ever, this breathing, listening, and moving together keeps me from feeling underwater, where be the monsters.

⁸⁵Personal correspondence from Mina Kawahara, October 1, 2025.

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