

constructions: Queer Dance as Embodied Abolitionist

Praxis

Portia Wells

Alone in a studio, I bring my attention inwards. I sit with my legs crossed and adjust my posture. *I need to work on that*. I close my eyes and face the sun pouring into the space. I am surrounded by dark oak. The edges of my bare feet and ankles sink into the shockingly soft wooden floor. I can feel age in this space. I can feel wear and use here. We always joke about feeling the ghost of Martha Graham in this studio. I don't know if that's true, but I know that thousands of dancers have danced here and their blood, sweat, and tears have an invisible presence. The taste of coffee lingers in my mouth. I hear the faint whir of heaters and cars on the West Side highway. *I should put some music on*. Suddenly, I feel alive and awake again. I burst into movement, undulating my spine, twisting my femurs in their sockets, curving my body around to keep my face in the warm sunlight. I hum along to the music, vibrating the caverns inside my flesh. My task for myself is to expand my awareness and sensitivity to sensation, to acknowledge my body, its experience, my experience, and to connect them. *I feel therefore I can be free*. I feel my sadness and loss, reminded by the studio of what it felt like to dance big and a lot and with my friends everyday. I feel my body. This is the dancer's work. This is the choreographer's work. This is the philosopher's work. This is poetry.

Audre Lorde wrote, “the white father told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free” (38).

This aphorism captures what Black queer folks have known and written poetry about for

generations and what phenomenological philosophers have sought to concretize in books and essays since Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology, literally defined as the study of “phenomena,” seeks to establish experience as the basis and orientation for consciousness. A phenomenological approach to queer dance making can contribute to and support understandings and conversations around queer, trans, and feminist theory. Queer dance making is an embodied philosophical practice and holds academic value.

Though many of the widely recognized phenomenologists including Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre are in fact cis white men, the framework opposes the hegemony of white, cis, male, western, I-think-therefore-I-am philosophy (Fraleigh 11). Feminist assertions surrounding the role of the gendered body in society have deeply rooted connections to a philosophical framework that values experience and perspective first. In my work, I seek to draw upon phenomenology’s “formulation of the existential concept of ‘the lived body,’ to mend the subject/object (mind/body) split in Western attitudes toward the body” (Fraleigh 13). I seek to center the reality of personal, lived experience and that which arrives with the dancers participating in my creative process. Existential phenomenology and abolitionist poetics, grown from Augusto Boal’s Aristotle-resistant “poetics of the oppressed,” provide the foundation for sensitive communication on behalf of (and in dissolution of) the dancer and audience division.

The poet, as well as the dancer, brings into existence something new, fashioned and crafted from themselves and their being in the world. When we invoke the poet, the poem, and by extension poetics we open space for newness, creation, and therefore abolition. For many, the word “abolition” elicits images of fire, destruction, chaos far before images of creation and imagination. However, an abolitionist lens is intrinsically an imaginative and creative one. It is a

daring call to ask and radically imagine a future of *what could life be?* In a panel discussion of a poetics of abolition, Saidiya Hartman presents “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” as a basis. She explains, “Poesis is the most foundational notion of making and creating and building, and what is I think exciting about this moment is we are....trying to enact those blueprints for the otherwise, we’re trying to build and to create and to let what we can’t yet imagine, or what we are struggling to articulate, to have that really shape the skeleton architecture of our lives.” Hartman establishes the work of building, of constructing anew, as a present concern. She makes the world building by, for, and of the marginalized artist part of the work of justice on a broader scale.

Clare Croft, editor of *Queer Dance: Meanings & Makings*, a landmark work on the subject of queer dance, introduces its value as a poetic tool in a similar way:

Dance has potential to have a particular power within queer work because dance emphasizes how public, physical action can be a force of social change. Dance, as it is taken up by artists, teachers, administrators, and scholars, produced a field for discussing and imagining how bodies in motion offer alternative meanings and ways of being. Some dance makers, audiences, and thinkers have long embraced queer possibilities of coalition, anti-normative critique, and social disruption. In other realms, more could be done to imagine how queer dance might productively challenge conservative arenas.

(Croft 2).

Croft’s consideration of dance as a disruptor to existing norms is also matched by an active use of “queer dance” as not simple proxy for LGBTQ. On the continuum of representation, my usage of queer dance recognizes and grows into the language of abolitionist poetics. With queer dance, I challenge the myriad supremacist structures and dominant regimes that encompass the

classroom, studio, page, stage and city I travel as I build my creative thesis work, a web of screendance works called *constructions*.¹

“Poetry Is Not A Luxury” offers an affirmation that poetry is the necessary mode to “give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde 36). Lorde’s poetics are a path to creation, a realizable way to transfigure experience into action, especially to put language and image to those who are marginalized by oppressive systems. Aristotle, in his conception of poetics, had proposed a poetics for the segregated classes which has become the dogma of the performing arts, affirming a divide between the one who acts and the one who watches action. Augusto Boal offered a reclamation in his “poetics of the oppressed” where the spectator instead “assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change” and in doing so considers the creation of theater (and its kin, concert dance) to be “surely a rehearsal for the revolution” (122). Continuing from Boal, we wield the abolitionist weapon of the *could be* that is written from “the first word of the theatrical vocabulary” and is embedded in our very bodies (125).

Rehearsal. I start by walking in big, winding nonsense circles. Valentina (they/he/she) follows me here and there, stopping to get out the kinks. We mutter various noticings about our bodies to each other, *this hurts, that’s tight, I’ve been having this weird thing in my hip, oh you get that too.* He watches me setting up background working music as he continues fidgeting and loosening. We are two trans non-binary dancers, we are best friends. “I want some kind of shape to start, something low and crumpled up,” I say. We giggle while contorting ourselves into various shapes, trying to find something interesting. Perched on the balls of their feet with their right knee pressed into the curve of the bottom of their left calf muscle, their upper body folds over and they rest their chin on their left knee. It is nearly an upright fetal position. It is precarious, but doable. There is something about transness in that balance, *precarious but doable.* With some practice it will be easier to support herself and to hover despite the temptation to fall.

¹ *constructions* will premiere on April 30, 2021 at www.hunterdances.com

As dancer, choreographer, director, and project manager, I am both the poet and the word of the poet. I am the means of production, the product, and the producer. I am that which is felt first and given name and form later. For me, art making is puberty, it is the multiple puberties of transness. It is messy and confusing and unexpected, no matter how much planning. It is the constant renegotiation of *what feels like me?* and searching for *this feels right*. It is the attempt and the trial and error of creating, creating a world, and creating a self. *constructions* has been incubating since before I really knew my queerness and definitely before I knew I was trans, but has only really taken shape in the last 10 months during a time I refer to as my second puberty.

In the past five years of dreaming up *constructions*, I never once considered I would be making it under the conditions of a pandemic that has killed half a million Americans and millions more globally—a pandemic that would send us all into isolation, grief, and loss en masse. Earlier iterations and explorations of *constructions* began with clarity and came together relatively easily. *constructions: part one* was a piece for five dancers and was based on clear compositional images, segmented vignettes that reflected passing interactions, and movement sourced largely from people-watching. I was interested in public and private spheres of identity, how we edit them in interactions with others, and the blurring of their boundaries. I knew essentially what I wanted the piece to “do” and I was able to use drawings, schematics, and timelines to build patterns and plan how to produce the work. Beginning the process for *part two* was also clear; I would explore notions of sexiness, social expectations associated with sexuality, particularly for non-men, and ownership and agency of the sexual body. Just a few weeks before the piece was set to premier at The Kaye Playhouse, I had to completely abandon the work I had put in with the seven dancers I was working with. I was kicked out of the dorm where I was

living with three days' notice and forced to return to my hometown in rural upstate New York. I was, as we all were, isolated.

My classmates and I changed course entirely from live, in-person performance to creating dance film and virtual performance within weeks which led me to produce a dance film called "Softly Shedding and Undressing," essentially *part three*. This film was my first attempt at screendance and served as an invitation for an unguarded view of softness, tenderness, and intimacy. The film sought to simulate a moment the audience shouldn't be seeing, though the gaze was in fact welcomed and desired, asking the viewer to bear witness to an intentional act of shared vulnerability. It was an exploration in romance with myself and taking time and care for delicacy and weightedness. After several weeks of dressing and undressing myself alone in front of my camera, I began to question womanhood. I recall vividly the first time I consciously experienced what I now know as gender dysphoria. Sitting at my dining room table listening to an Art History lecture, I looked down at my body and realized I didn't feel like it was mine and to call it a woman's body felt wrong. My body and my mind had drifted so far from one another that when they swung back into alignment, they didn't fit each other anymore.

Alishanee's Apartment. Valentina and I laze in the hot August afternoon sun that streams into the Lower East Side apartment where Alishanee (she/her) grew up. We groan about the oppressive heat that takes over New York City in the summertime. We talk about the Black Lives Matter protests, communism, abolition, dance and the frustrations of trying to make dance during a pandemic; we talk about love. We talk for hours; we can always talk for hours. As the sun drifts west and the apartment cools off slightly, Valentina pours the second glass of red wine for each of us. We eat and we laugh into the evening, dreaming and imagining what a future might look like. I lace my shoes, drink the last sip of wine, and sigh, feeling the prickly orange velvet chair beneath my bare legs. "I am nonbinary," I finally say out loud for the first time in a shaky voice. I begin to cry while Valentina kneels by my side to embrace me. *I am nonbinary*. I cry because I am scared to accept this truth. I cry because I know it will be so hard to exist as a trans person in this world. I cry because I don't know how my parents will react when I tell them. I cry because I don't know what comes next. I cry because I know that to live fully in my identity is *precarious but doable*.

This sense of precarity, of being on the edge, though perhaps comfortable for dancers used to testing their limits of balance, is queer in its own right. For queer folks, existing publicly comes with the opportunity for danger. When we hold hands with and kiss our lovers, when we wear clothing that makes us feel authentic, when we walk with confidence, when we demand respect for our names and pronouns, when we do not submit to the tyranny of the status quo, we are at risk. This risk, though, is because queerness is a threat to the flimsy structures that bind people into strict cis-hetero identity categories. The precarity of queerness is constant, but it is within queer community and kinship ties that we might momentarily take a breath of freedom when we are seen for who we are.

Those queer spaces (at the club, on the dancefloor, at Stonewall on Thursdays) offer an alternate reality, an oasis, a possible future in the now because of the people and community that builds them, largely trans and queer people of color. Because of how vital chosen family and community is for queer folks, I knew that I wanted to make *constructions* with only queer and questioning collaborators. The cast includes Alishanee Chafe-Hearmon (she/her), Anakeiry Cruz (she/her), Jeerond Mussu (he/they/she), Justine Farhi (she/her), Katherine De La Cruz (she/her), SarahIsoke (she/her), Valentina Baché Rodriguez (they/he/she), and myself (they/them). The crew/collaborators include Damali O’Keefe (she/her), Emiliano Baché Rodriguez (he/him), and Emily Mata-Collantes (she/they). In order to explore queerness and transness, specifically personal identity, I had to work with people who could perform their own lived experiences. I cast my friends and collaboratively created each section as informed by guiding questions for discussion and improvisation.

constructions is made up of six dance films: Jeerond’s monologue, Valentina and Alishanee’s duet, my solo, Sarah and Anakeiry’s duet, Katherine’s solo, and the group section.

These pieces, which currently exist mostly in the limbo phase of unedited raw footage, yet to reach their final shape, will all live on an interactive website that will lead viewers through a randomized, non-linear, choose-your-own-adventure experience. Each section was developed from a different intention and conversation surrounding queer identity including intimacy, questioning, womanhood, race, community, poetry, and gender. My goal was and is to make something that feels personal and true to the people dancing it.

Rehearsal. 8ish pm in the Nancy Meehan studios on the West Side, Valentina, Alishanee, and I giggle through choreographing intimacy. *Am I queer enough to be choreographing this?* We play around with perching, who can support whom, what the limits of balance are. The first phrase we make begins with their right hands holding each other's neck as they gently lean away from one another. There is a comfort between them, they know how the other moves, how they carry their weight, how they are able to share it. *This should be in a bedroom.* Standing with their faces close enough to kiss, Alishanee slithers to her knees and dives between Valentina's legs. In one swift, smooth motion, Valentina rolls over Alishanee, pulling Alishanee to be poised over him. With the end of the short phrase, they kiss through smiles.

The first section that shifted into focus during the creative process was Valentina and Alishanee's duet. This duet, from its inception, felt so important to *constructions* as a whole because of its truth. By chance, two of my friends/collaborators are a couple which was more than a gift to the dance, but a necessity. I could not have asked two cis, straight dancers to perform queer love and intimacy, especially in the way that I have; I knew that the reality of a couple's connection in all aspects was integral to making that section viscerally sensual.

This dance became a film, shot in one long take, that depicts a couple teasing, touching, wrestling, licking, breathing, feeling, and undressing. They share weight and saliva in a visceral exchange that flows between dynamics, always returning to tenderness. It is provocative and sensorial in its eroticism which sits in perfect conversation with Audre Lorde's incisive essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." This duet is not pornography by Lorde's definition (but it is by YouTube's) because "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic for it

represents the suppression of true feeling.” The genuine connection, made clear through smiles and giggles while their bodies collide with one another and a bed exemplifies that true feeling. Lorde explains that “one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone” is because the erotic is precisely the deeply felt insight that poetry will one day put language to.

Audre Lorde is not often considered a phenomenological icon, but she is a model of poetic resonance. In her poetry, as in her teaching, Lorde revealed how often the experiment of form was the primary effort, not the literal transmission of the content even when the point was blatant injustice or intimate detail. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” makes a feminist, phenomenological argument in its call to believe in the body—not the body as controlled and consumed by a white, cis, hetero society but the *my body* that trusts “that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge” (Lorde 53). The *my body* that experiments and listens to itself over the dominant songs of our domains is the *my body* that sits in the studio, asks other bodies to dance in radical conditions, and that sits here at this writing table and types these words.

Each time I sit down to write, I feel immense pressure to produce some kind of sweeping, yet impossibly precise statement or all-encompassing metaphor to accurately describe dance, queer dance, and the web of philosophical concepts we might employ to understand, describe, and make queer dance. Each time I sit down to write, I fail to concoct such a statement or metaphor. I have asked myself more times than I can count during this process, *am I queer enough to make this?* I ask this because I do not have the answers and I do not wish to pretend I do. I have been approaching this all the wrong way. I have been trying to write about “the body” because I feel like I need to somehow serve as a representative for queer dance. I cannot do that,

nor should I. Adrienne Rich writes in “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” “Perhaps we need a moratorium on saying ‘the body.’ For it’s also possible to abstract ‘the’ body. When I write ‘the body,’ I see nothing in particular. To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience, particularity. . . . To say ‘the body’ lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say ‘my body’ reduces the temptation to make grandiose assertions” (215). I am only able to understand the writing table from one perspective, my own.

Queer theorist, Sara Ahmed, offers a queer framing of phenomenology based largely on a reevaluation or rather reorientation of Husserl’s phenomenological understanding of “the writing table” through queer possibilities and ponderings. Ahmed proposes that “phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (544). Ahmed reminds us that Husserl emphasizes the writing table as the “zero point of orientation,” and explains “the familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in the room: we can name the room as Husserl’s study, as the room in which he writes. It is *here* that the world unfolds...We are reminded that what we can see in the first place depends on which way he is facing” (Ahmed 546). Ahmed flips this and suggests that a queer phenomenology may look behind the viewer, may dissolve the gendered assumptions of what objects (the table) do, may center the bidirectionality of touch and sensation. Perhaps a queer phenomenology can situate itself into the creative process of dance making.

Sondra Fraleigh has written extensively about the connections and possibilities of utilizing phenomenology to describe and define dance. She argues for the value of the dual methodology of phenomenology as an approach to dance writing and theorizing:

“Phenomenology develops unpredictably, according to the contents of consciousness. . . [and] develops philosophical perspectives from the seed of consciousness” (Fraleigh 11). The process of dance making itself then operates through the same modes as phenomenology as Maurice Merleau-Ponty states, “philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being” (Fraleigh 11). As in Hartman’s poetics of abolition, when we let what “we can’t yet imagine” come into a physical world and even guide us through the making, the development and creation of dance is the embodiment of theory that creates language from that seed of consciousness. Though Fraleigh acknowledges the feminist connections to phenomenology, there is room to develop the entanglements of queer phenomenology with experimental dance making.

Experiential understandings are fundamental to dance making and performance, as is the highly fraught practice of experimenting, of undertaking an action for which the outcome is unknown². Through experimental practices such as improvisation, collaborative movement generation, choreographic scores, and the task of making dance during a pandemic, *constructions* has begun and continues to swirl into a realized form. Experimentation, of course, is not always successful, but it is a valuable place for development and “bringing truth into being.” These modes of creation allow for the excavation of internal sites, to crack into what is known deeply and not yet accessed. Sometimes things need to break apart for the truly new to emerge.

First day of shooting. It is a frigid, yet sunny day in February when I meet Sarah, Justine, and the filmmakers at a bridge over a set of train tracks on the edge of Williamsburg. Valentina, Alishanee, and Fox arrive together soon after with the best cart coffee I could ask for. It is snowy and icy and not at all what we had anticipated. I am overwhelmed and wearing too many hats: director, choreographer, dancer, costume designer, make-up artist, friend. Everything is taking

² Robert Ellis Dunn was influenced by experimental music pioneer John Cage's definition, "an experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen." He applied Cage's musical theory to movement composition classes which led to the birth of the postmodern dance scene of the 1960s (Dunn). Movement Research, the organization I interned for and study at still, carries this ethos on today.

too long. I realize I never learned how to direct a film in my dance education and am barely scraping it together. A bottle of whiskey arrives on set and I soon have several drunk and extremely cold dancers on my hands. We end the shoot several hours early with very little, if any, usable footage. Crying and on the edge of a panic attack in the Uber to Manhattan with Valentina and Alishanee, I seriously consider quitting and scraping the project all together. *This is part of the process, it always is.*

The production of *constructions* has come with innumerable obstacles: a new medium for making, injured dancers, a pandemic, remote rehearsals, immigration status, forgotten cameras, skipped rehearsals, extreme cold, drunken dancers, insecurity, loneliness, isolation, depression, identity crises, and more. Failure, though unintentional, has been inextricably entangled with the process of making. Jack Halberstam's essay and book by the same title, *The Queer Art of Failure*, reminds us that failure is in fact a queer aesthetic. At each step of the way, something has been disruptive, forcing me to come to terms with the innate queerness and non-normativity of the project itself.

Initially intended for live, in-person immersive performance, the mode of witnessing *constructions* is vital to the work itself. Thomas DeFrantz³ suggests, “queer dance emerges from *being* and *doing*, perhaps, but its contents are brought into focus by the *making* of its various audiences who can narrate the queerness at hand” (178). What does it mean to make an audience when they cannot be in the same room as the dance? I intended *constructions* to be shown in a black box theater with tennis court style seating, blurring the lines between audience space and performance space. While seated on opposite sides of the dance, I wanted the audience to witness other viewers as well as the dancers. The witness would become a performer and the performer also a witness. I wanted people to feel like they were sharing an experience in the

³ Thomas F. DeFrantz is a professor of African and African American Studies at Duke University and is a prolific dancer/choreographer/director. In January 2021, I was able to participate in his workshop “Making*Queering*Dancing” offered through Movement Research’s Winter MELT; this workshop was highly informative to the work of this paper and of *constructions* itself.

moment and in the act of witnessing. I fear that I cannot do that now; I know that I cannot do that now.

Instead of orienting the audience physically in queer space through a non-normative relationship to the place where dance is viewed, I shifted my focus to orienting the viewer in queer time. To do this, I devised a website, which is still in progress at the time of writing this paper, that will randomize the chronology of the dance films. When the viewer opens the website, they will have a randomly ordered selection to begin watching the work. While each section plays, the viewer will have the option to stop watching with an “I’m done” selection or to continue watching another section. Through this viewing platform, there is no singular or linear timeline and it is pretty unlikely that two viewers will watch the same order of films as there are 720 distinct pathways. Though it is not possible to physically or collectively situate audience members in queer space, perhaps the virtual landscape is a queering of space in and of itself.

When creating dance within a virtual landscape (via Zoom rehearsals) the challenge of orientation is heightened. It is not as simple as gazing at the writing table from a singular perspective. As the choreographer, my view of multiple dancers on Zoom includes individual perspectives as determined by each dancer and entirely dependent on where they may be able to place their computer and angle their camera. Each individual dancer must work within the confines of their space, my view of which is then restricted by the harsh Zoom rectangles. Personally, I am able to move only so much in my twelve square feet of dance-able space, and so I request dancers to develop their own material within the confines of their space and to share their choreography with the group. When I ask the dancers to develop material, often several gestures to build a larger phrase, I invite them to turn off their camera. I do this to free them of my gaze as they work and to invite the freedom to not orient themselves toward the computer

screen. This is the challenge of dance making at this moment which is then compounded with the “Zoom anxiety” that feeds the racing *Am I muted? Is my camera on or off? Is my brother walking through the frame? Can they see my dirty laundry?*

Rehearsal. On Zoom, Katherine and I chit-chat while she clears her living room for rehearsal. I ask her to write about her identity. *Is there an order to the layers of identity? Does it change depending on the situation/audience? Do these categories feel like a home to you? Do you become aware of the performative aspects of any of the pieces of your identity? What does that awareness feel like or do?* We laugh together when she takes Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble off her bookshelf to show me through the camera. After a few minutes of writing I ask her to begin an improvisation. *What might it look like or feel like to be home in your identity?* Through mostly soft movements I watch Katherine in her Zoom box hug, reach, release, dive, spin, and ripple. I have her let go of that prompt so we can talk about what came up for her in the writing and moving. She explains that she orders her identity labels as Black, woman, queer, Dominican. She feels at home in her Blackness and in her womanhood. She explains that her queerness feels private because it is not widely perceived, because nobody has to know her sexuality.

For several rehearsals I asked her to improvise, from which I would select moments, movements, and shapes that were artistically interesting to me. In maintaining the integrity of individual and personal truth, it is important to me not to arrive with set material that I ask her to mold herself into, but rather create from the basis of Katherine. Katherine’s “lived body” is hers and it would be irresponsible for me, a white, non-binary choreographer, to try to tell Katherine’s story for her. Instead, I invite her into a collaborative process to facilitate her telling her own story. Together we built to develop and distil movement patterns, images, and sensations that pushed her to break into learned patterns (movement and thought), shake loose some freedom, and explore her deeper understanding. It is abolitionist to ask her to represent herself in her own space and to build a world for the dance created from her personal knowledge.

Feminist, anti-racist, trans narrative and world building within dance production can be a mode of radical imagination, a way to build a future collaboratively. *constructions*, as it is a queer dance film project, comes into conversation with feminist film making practices. Teresa De

Lauretis asserts in the essay “Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer” that the contradiction of feminist film making is that while feminists understand gender as a social ideological construct and therefore politicized, the feminized subject that is the focus of feminism exists both as the subject and object in film. “Woman is inside the rectangle, women are outside; the female subject of feminism is in both places at once” (de Lauretis 114). The task, then, is to interrogate the gaze that may objectify the subject. This contradiction of placement in filmic narratives is further complicated by the intersection of queer and racialized identities of the subjects appearing in the film.

This complex ignites the imperative of sharing real representation and, through creative development, orienting toward lived, embodied experience. From her phenomenological frame, Ahmed offers “an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon” (543). What is nearer to hand or more reachable than our own bodies? The simultaneous arrival of the philosopher and their table produces the opportunity for the philosopher’s work, but before the choreographer stands the dancer (that is when I do not serve as both) in place of the writing table. Before the dancer stands themselves, reflected in the mirror of the studio or in the video feed on Zoom. The dancer, however, is not simply an object defined by what we are able to do with it. What, then, does it mean to arrive as a queer dancer? How does the queer dance and the queer dancer shift the orientation of dance making and dance viewing? The dancer is a person who arrives with their own “living body,” their own experiences, thoughts, feelings, being-in-the-world-ness. I do not ask my dancers to leave their life at the door as we have heard from teachers for years, but instead carry it with them, create and live poetry with it.

Zoom Rehearsal with Katherine. Katherine, this is supposed to be fun! Part of what I’m trying to do is show that gay doesn’t have to be sad, everybody dies at the end. Because that’s

like the only story that we get. . . It's not what we're told that it is. *Do you want me to make it sweeter?* I don't want it to be romanticized or sickeningly sweet. What I'm seeing is. . . I'm seeing performance and I want less performance. *You want me to do less?* Not necessarily do less as in don't be as full, but do less in the. . . I'm sure you do little dancey dances around the house, right? Yeah. Do that. Make it that. *But it'll be ugly.* Great! I would love that! Be ugly! Please! That's why we're in your house. This is about you. This is about you. I don't want ballet Katherine, I don't want I'm-on-stage-Katherine, I want you. *That is somehow much more pressure.*

To be *you* as a queer person is a complicated task that requires the unravelling of white, cis, hetero, normative expectations. When I ask the dancer, the queer dancer, to arrive as themselves, by extension I invite into the room the anxieties they carry. When I ask the dancer, the trans dancer, to arrive as myself, I challenge the reduction of queerness to gay cis men as I swim through dysphoria and negotiate the task of theorizing my reality. Despite the reality of the swirling questions of queerness, the academic intellectualized packaging of gay, cis-male queerness arrives with confidence. It asserts a queer ontology within neat and well defined bounds, lead with elequent vocabulary and metaphor with hints of the messy truth. However, this is the demand of academia and doesn't necessarily reflect the varied realities and experiences of queerness. Queerness and dance both operate in the realms of phenomenology and poetics, beyond the literal and the objective; they thrive in the *et cetera*, in the not explicitly mentioned, in the invitation for more, in the imagination of the witness, in the primacy of experience, and the call to build the world anew.

When we engage queer dance from a radically imaginative frame, we are active in abolitionist world making, or what Clare Croft had called "a force of social change." Queer dance, as with poetry, goes beyond the momentary act of protest to activate the non-rational knowledge Lorde refers to and construct something new from it. Though ephemeral in its physical embodiment and performance, the life of a new world created inside the queer screen

dance exists indefinitely (as long as I pay for the domain name). That new world is possible when we orient ourselves from the basis of the rich, internal knowledge that Lorde calls the erotic and allow the world to unfold from there.

It is possible when we start from what is deeply felt and trust the poem, trust the dance, trust our bodies. As I strive to mend the subject/object, mind/body, us/them, performer/viewer divisions through a phenomenological centering of sensate experience, I continue to build *constructions*. At the moment of this writing, as I complete these final sentences in this linear form, I recognize, I am still deeply in the unfolding of *constructions* and the work of constructing the next world. This work the continuous process of experimentation, development, failure, and creation in the attempt to make queer dance, can serve as a container for abolitionist constructions in order to realize a new paradigm and build the future that answers the daring question of *what can life be?*

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